

# Nordic success – the case of Sweden

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Sweden is a country of 9 million people with 15 universities and 24 university colleges. There are about 340 000 undergraduate students and 25 000 PhD students.

In order to meet the increasing demands for and on higher education, a quality assurance system was established in 1995. It had three objectives: control (assurance), enhancement of higher education and information to stakeholders, including students, employers and government.

Since 1995, the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education has been responsible for quality assurance of higher education. Its main tasks are accreditation, institutional quality audit, programme and subject review and thematic evaluations. The methodology follows the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance, i.e. self-evaluation by the unit under review, peer review, site visit, a public report and follow-up.

*Accreditation* concerns primarily the right of university colleges to award master's degrees and the right of all institutions to award professional degrees (medicine, law etc.). In rare cases university colleges can also be accredited for university status.

*Institutional quality audits* evaluate the function of internal quality assurance systems their impact. They have had an impact primarily on leadership and organisation of institutions, but it has been difficult to ascertain the role of internal processes on the actual quality of the provision.

*Programme and subject* reviews cover all academic programmes and subjects at all higher education institutions leading to a degree. This has made it possible to evaluate both the general quality of a subject across the country and the quality at a given institution. These reviews have led to the questioning of degree-awarding rights in about 10 per cent of all cases. However, very few programmes have actually been closed down. Recent follow-ups show that the reviews have resulted in various kinds of improvement.

*Thematic evaluations* concern certain aspects of quality, not necessarily covered in the other three types. Examples of themes are gender quality, internationalisation and student influence.

In order to make sure that evaluations are of a consistently high standard, the Agency has developed its own quality assurance processes and procedures.

- Evidence-based evaluation of the HEIs' own systems for QA and enhancement
- An overall picture of subjects and programmes and review of a small number
- Thematic studies (study guidance etc)
- Excellence in teaching and learning
- Accreditation of certain degrees