

# Improving quality – a developed methodology for UKÄ's reviews



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# A developed methodology

## **The developed methodology has the same basic principles as before**

As before, the national quality assurance system for higher education and research consists of four components: institutional review of education and research, programme evaluation, appraisal of degree-awarding powers and thematic evaluation<sup>1</sup>.

The method is based on peer review and has been developed in consultation with higher education institutions (HEIs), the Swedish National Union of Students and representatives of the working world.

A key aspect of the system is that both UKÄ<sup>2</sup> and the HEIs are responsible for the quality assurance of higher education and research. The purpose of the reviews is both to monitor and contribute to quality enhancement.

The reviews are based on the ESG 2015<sup>3</sup>, the Higher Education Act (1992:1434), the Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100), the Government communication *Quality assurance in higher education* (2015/16:76) and national and international guidelines for research<sup>4</sup>.

## **Why do we need a developed methodology?**

The national quality assurance system 2017–2022 was a quality driver for the activities of HEIs and met the European standards for quality assurance in higher education. In 2020, Sweden became a member of ENQA<sup>5</sup> again through the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ).

But the system needed to be made more precise, flexible and resource-efficient.<sup>6</sup> An important overarching aim of the revised method has therefore been to develop UKÄ's reviews and analyses based on the experiences of the 2017–2022 cycle, so that they are both resource-

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<sup>1</sup> Each component is described in detail in a guide at [www.uka.se](http://www.uka.se).

<sup>2</sup> Provisions on the Swedish Higher Education Authority's (UKÄ) responsibility for quality assurance of the activities of HEIs are found in Sections 1 and 2 of Regulation (2012:810) with instructions for UKÄ.

<sup>3</sup> *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*, 2015. See also UKÄ's translation into Swedish: *Standarder och riktlinjer för kvalitetssäkring inom det europeiska området för högre utbildning (ESG)*.

<sup>4</sup> *The European Charter for Researchers, Guidelines for the Recruitment of Researchers* and the national framework for quality assurance of research developed by the Association of Swedish Higher Education Institutions.

<sup>5</sup> ENQA stands for *European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education*.

<sup>6</sup> See the section "Lessons learned from the 2017–2022 cycle" below.

efficient and even more quality-driving. The HEIs have now also had time to develop their quality systems and should be able to take greater responsibility for the quality of their activities. There is therefore reason to expect that the quality systems have been fully implemented before UKÄ's upcoming reviews.

In this brief description of the revised national quality assurance system, we first present lessons learned from the 2017–2022 cycle. We then go on to describe what is new.

## Lessons learned from the 2017–2022 cycle

The results of the 2017-2022 cycle reviews showed that most HEIs have education quality systems that are generally working well (for 21 per cent, the quality assurance processes were approved, and for 69 per cent they were approved with reservations). The results of institutional reviews<sup>7</sup> of research were also broadly positive. At the same time, ensuring that students achieve the qualitative targets was found to be a challenge in both the programme evaluations and the appraisals of degree-awarding powers. This has often been linked to a lack of academic competence in the reviewed programmes that were given the assessment *under review*. In the institutional reviews, the implementation of the HEIs' own programme evaluations had not always progressed far enough to be assessed. Deficiencies were also common in other parts of the education-related improvement work, such as the course evaluation process.

Overall, two external evaluations<sup>8</sup> and our own follow-up work showed that UKÄ's reviews were quality-driving, but too resource-intensive. The methodological work that UKÄ started in 2021 for future reviews was therefore based on making the reviews more precise, flexible and less burdensome for HEIs, assessors and UKÄ.

## What is new?

### More efficient reviews

To be more resource-efficient and precise, we refined the four components of UKÄ's quality assurance system so that they better complement each other. This has resulted in fewer assessment criteria<sup>9</sup> and the elimination of a superstructure with assessment areas. With

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<sup>7</sup> Translator's remark: The term 'institutional review' is used for 'review of quality assurance processes' at higher education institutions.

<sup>8</sup> One evaluation was carried out by ENQA in connection with UKÄ's application for membership, and the other by Faugert & Co Utvärdering (reg. no. 111-00570-19).

<sup>9</sup> For appraisals of degree-awarding powers, the number of assessment criteria has been maintained, with the exception of perspectives. This is because the requirements for degree-awarding powers are regulated by law to a greater extent than other components.

regard to the perspectives, i.e. gender equality, student and doctoral student perspectives, and working life and collaboration, gender equality has been deemed better suited to thematic evaluations. But, the student, doctoral student and working life perspectives have now been integrated and can be assessed in several of the assessment criteria where the assessors consider the perspectives relevant.<sup>10</sup> The gender equality perspective remains an element in the institutional reviews of research.<sup>11</sup>

## **Programme evaluations – flexibility increases precision**

The programme evaluations focus to a greater extent than before on programmes and areas where the need for improvement and development is judged to be greatest. The reviews focus on assessing staff resources and ensuring that students meet their qualitative targets. For the evaluation of doctoral programmes, the doctoral education environment is also included as an assessment criterion because the environment in which the doctoral students work is, in a broad sense, an important part of the preconditions ensuring the doctoral programme is of high quality. Among other things, the environment creates preconditions for seminar activities, access to networks and different research perspectives.

Before beginning an evaluation, UKÄ will conduct a prestudy, the results of which will be reported to the assessment panel as well as to representatives of the HEIs, students and working life. The prestudy builds on the knowledge of the programme that UKÄ has prior to selecting the programmes to be evaluated.

Based on the prestudy, UKÄ organises an initial dialogue meeting with the assessors and the representatives of the HEIs, students and working life. The dialogue is held to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the programme at an overarching level, and how the assessors should adapt the focus and implementation of the evaluation. The aim is to best meet the development needs of the programme and to ensure that the evaluation is fit for purpose. To this end, the dialogue meeting will discuss which qualitative targets or target components should be evaluated and why.<sup>12</sup> The meeting will also discuss whether there is anything else that should be considered in the implementation of a specific programme evaluation and what other information should be considered in addition to the self-evaluations and interviews.

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<sup>10</sup> The student and doctoral student input will continue to be included as part of the assessment data in the institutional reviews.

<sup>11</sup> As gender equality is included in the qualitative targets of some vocational education and training programmes, it may also be relevant to evaluate it in programme evaluations.

<sup>12</sup> For the evaluation of doctoral programmes, UKÄ has decided that the qualitative targets included in the review should be the same for the various subjects included in the evaluation.

After the evaluation, UKÄ may initiate a workshop together with the assessment panel and in dialogue with the HEIs. The aim is to identify the challenges and make it possible to exchange experiences and solutions.

## **Institutional reviews – precise and resource-efficient**

The institutional reviews for education and research have been restructured to reduce overlap. There are now fewer assessment criteria for both education and research, and these have been harmonised to be more precise and resource-efficient. As a result, HEIs can write one self-evaluation instead of two, which also facilitates the assessment process. Another new element is that HEIs can choose how they want to structure their self-evaluation, provided that it explicitly addresses all assessment criteria. To minimise the workload for all parties, the total number of audit trails (in-depth focus areas) covering both education and research has been limited to a maximum of three. Another change will be a greater focus on the actual quality processes, i.e. that the HEI works systematically to follow up and evaluate its activities. The HEI uses these results to achieve high quality in its programmes and research.

To achieve greater flexibility, we are introducing a new approach to meetings with the HEI. Open digital information meetings are held twice a year to provide general information about the review process, while detailed information about the timetable and approach for each specific review is provided at a meeting between UKÄ's project management, representatives from the HEI and the student and doctoral student unions. This is followed by an initial meeting with the assessment panel following submission of the self-evaluation. The HEI presents its quality system and its objectives and preconditions, so that the assessors gain an overall understanding of the HEI's quality assurance work. After the review, UKÄ organises a meeting for mutual feedback on the review. The HEI may also be invited to conferences for the exchange of experience, where the aim is to deepen and develop knowledge.

The interviews conducted by assessors are more flexible and efficient. They conduct only one site visit with interviews at the HEI, but additional interviews can be conducted if necessary, primarily digitally.

A change in the follow-up process is that even the HEIs whose quality assurance processes were approved are followed up via a dialogue about one year after the decision. Another new element is that the HEIs whose quality assurance work has been assessed as under review must submit a report on the measures they have implemented after only two years.

## **Appraisals of degree-awarding powers – stricter requirements**

With regard to appraisals of degree-awarding powers, there is now a stricter requirement that the application must be complete before an assessment panel is appointed. Requiring complete applications should make the work of the assessment panels more efficient, thereby shortening the process from application to decision. There are also increased requirements for the education provider to justify the need to provide education for the degree in question. Also, reporting of resources and intended collaborations and how policy documents are quality assured are emphasised more, as this is something that has often been deficient in previous applications. The overall requirement for the application has been tightened so that all assessment criteria must now be met for the application to be approved.

## **Thematic evaluations – more relevant with prestudy and dialogue**

For the thematic evaluations, a new guidance document is drawn up for each evaluation. The differences in methodology may be very significant, so it is not presented here. However, the approach is knowledge-based, including the involvement of an advisory group in the initial development work, which results in a prestudy report.

## **The reviews are intended to increase added value**

In addition to reviews and evaluations, UKÄ also conducts thematic analyses, i.e. meta-analyses of what has emerged from the reviews. However, it is not only the reviews, thematic evaluations and analyses that will increase the added value, but also the review processes. This includes more flexible self-evaluations that can be more easily adapted to the activities of HEIs and thus act more as quality drivers, as well as workshops that address topics that are particularly relevant to a programme.

## **Continuous methodological development and a knowledge-based approach**

The design of our approach is, to an even greater extent than before, based on existing data, analysis and dialogue. This relates both to our internal knowledge and knowledge from external monitoring and dialogue with the sector and other authorities. To identify areas where UKÄ can be of greatest benefit, UKÄ's operational planning has also been restructured to increase coordination in the selection process. Based on the collective knowledge base, we then choose which activity we should carry out, whether it should be a review, analysis, mapping or workshop, and which area should be in focus. This may also involve



coordinated reviews, when UKÄ's quality assurance, legal oversight and efficiency review activities are conducted in a coordinated process.

A knowledge-based approach also means that follow-up and subsequent development work must be carried out continuously. This will enable quality-improving adjustments to the review model to be implemented more quickly. A model and a system for continuous follow-up and improvement work must be developed and include dialogue with relevant stakeholders.

## **UKÄ strengthens international cooperation**

UKÄ believes that it is important to follow the latest developments for appropriate methods by actively participating in the development work taking place in Europe. There is also a rapid development towards international educational cooperation and an increased degree of transnational quality assurance. This is a development that UKÄ should not only participate in, but also take a proactive approach. We will therefore strengthen our international cooperation and continue to be active in various working groups on quality assurance, for example within the *Bologna Follow-up Group* and in ENQA's working group on research, which UKÄ leads together with a French quality assurance organisation.

## **Improving quality**

UKÄ has thus revised the methodology of the national quality assurance system to ensure our reviews are both resource-efficient and more quality-driven than before. But, as we wrote in the introduction, there are also reasons to raise the level of ambition and expectations in the reviews. Firstly, the HEIs are now – not least with the previous cycle behind them – well prepared to take greater responsibility for the quality of their activities, so that Sweden can continue to be a nation of knowledge with high quality in both its higher education programmes and its research. Secondly, the national quality assurance system needs to be able to contribute to further improving quality and promoting excellence in Swedish higher education.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> In its public service agreement for 2023, UKÄ was tasked with drawing up a proposal on how the national quality assurance system could be developed to further improve quality and promote excellence in Swedish higher education. The proposal is to be developed in dialogue with the higher education institutions and reported no later than 6 September 2024.



The Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ) shall contribute to strengthening Swedish higher education and Sweden as a knowledge society. We review the quality of higher education programmes, we analyse and follow up developments in higher education, and we ensure legal compliance for the protection of students.

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