

# Guidelines for reviewing the HEIs' quality assurance processes

for education and research





# Content

Introduction .....	4
Review of the HEIs' quality assurance processes .....	6
Purpose and focus .....	6
Main principles .....	6
Assessment criteria .....	7
The review process .....	12
Assessment materials .....	12
Other documentation .....	14
Key elements of the review process .....	15
Follow-up .....	18
Annex 1. Guide to student and doctoral student unions when writing the student report .....	20

# Introduction

These guidelines describe how the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ) reviews the quality assurance processes that higher education institutions (HEIs) have in place for education and research. The guidelines describe the purpose, starting points and content of the review and the various stages of the process.

Universities and HEIs in Sweden are responsible for ensuring that education and research are of high quality. UKÄ's role is to ensure that the universities and HEIs fulfil their responsibility for quality and therefore conduct various types of reviews. The overall goal of UKÄ's reviews is to help to ensure that the education and research conducted at universities and HEIs in Sweden maintains a high quality. Provisions on UKÄ's responsibility for quality assurance of the activities of universities and HEIs are found in Sections 1 and 2 of Regulation (2012:810) with instructions for the Swedish Higher Education Authority.

UKÄ conducts the following reviews:

- appraisals of applications for degree-awarding powers
- reviews of HEIs' quality assurance processes
- programme evaluations
- thematic evaluations.

UKÄ's reviews are based on the Higher Education Act (1992:1434), the Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100), the Government's communication *Quality Assurance in Higher Education* (2015/16:76) and *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*<sup>1</sup> as well as national and international guidelines for research<sup>2</sup>.

The method for the reviews has been developed in dialogue with representatives of universities and HEIs, the Swedish National Union of Students (SFS) and labour market representatives, as well as in dialogue

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<sup>1</sup> Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), 2015. See also UKÄ's translation of the ESG, Standarder och riktlinjer för kvalitetssäkring inom det europeiska området för högre utbildning (ESG) Översättning av Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). 2015.

<sup>2</sup> European Charter for Researchers and Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers, as well as the national framework for quality assurance of research developed by the Swedish Association of Higher Education Institutions (SUHF).

with UKÄ's reference groups and a selection of quality assurance organisations within the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

# Review of the HEIs' quality assurance processes

## Purpose and focus

The aim of UKA's review of HEIs' quality assurance processes is both to verify that HEIs achieve high quality in their activities and to contribute to HEIs' quality development.

The review focuses on whether the HEIs' quality assurance processes contribute to ensuring and developing the quality of education and research in a systematic and appropriate manner.

The term quality system, which is used in UKA's review, refers to the systematic nature of the HEIs' quality assurance processes. By quality system, we mean the structure or framework that the HEI has for its quality assurance processes. The quality system includes both the documented conditions, in the form of organisation, distribution of responsibilities and policy documents, and the procedures and working methods used to work with both quality assurance and quality development. A quality system can clarify the relationship between different parts of the organisation (e.g. how goals, policy documents and activities are related).

An effective quality system includes an effective continuous improvement process. By an effective improvement process, we mean that the HEI works systematically to monitor and evaluate its activities, and uses the results to achieve high quality in education and research.

The HEI must be able to demonstrate that it organises the quality assurance processes and applies the quality system in an effective manner, and that the HEI in practice changes what does not work effectively.

## Main principles

The reviews of HEIs' quality assurance work are based on assessment criteria. The assessment criteria are based on Swedish law and regulations as well as national and international principles and agreements.

The review of HEIs' quality assurance processes for education is based on the international principles for quality assurance of higher education formulated in *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG). The ESG deal with the internal

quality assurance processes of the HEIs, external quality assurance of the HEIs' educational activities and the requirements that the quality assurance bodies must fulfil. To fulfil the agreements in the ESG, both the HEIs and UKÄ need to ensure compliance with the international principles for quality assurance. The Higher Education Act (1992:1434) and the Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100) are also starting points in the reviews conducted by UKÄ. They contain several provisions with a bearing on the HEIs' quality work and their responsibility to ensure high quality in education and research. All assessment criteria for quality assurance of education are based on the quality requirements in the Act and Ordinance or in the principles of the ESG.

The review of HEIs' quality assurance processes for research is based on the Higher Education Act and the Higher Education Ordinance. National and international frameworks and guidelines for research and the Act on Responsibility for Good Research Practice and Investigation of Misconduct in Research (2019:504) also play an important role. The international guidelines for reviewing the quality assurance of research that are particularly relevant are the *European Charter for Researchers* and the *Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers* (Charter and Code). In Sweden, the Swedish Association of Higher Education Institutions (SUHF) has also developed a national framework of overarching principles for the quality assurance of research.<sup>3</sup> The framework has played an important role in the UKÄ's work to formulate assessment criteria for reviewing the quality assurance processes for research at HEIs.

## Assessment criteria

The assessment criteria are the benchmarks for the assessment panel's evaluation. The assessment panel evaluates the HEI's quality assurance processes in relation to each individual assessment criterion.

The assessment criteria deal with the structure and function of the quality system and the different areas that the HEI's quality system should be able to address. Some assessment criteria specify basic elements that should be present in a quality system, while others capture the HEI's capacity to monitor and develop specific areas through the system.

### Assessment criteria for reviewing HEIs' quality assurance processes for research

The assessment panel uses eight assessment criteria in their review of the HEI's quality assurance processes for research.

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<sup>3</sup> *Swedish Association of Higher Education Institutions, Joint framework for HEIs' research quality assurance and enhancement systems. 2019, ISBN: 978-91-983359-7-2.*

For all assessment criteria, the assessment panel evaluates whether the HEI's quality assurance processes contribute to ensuring and developing the quality of research in a systematic and appropriate manner. This includes the existence of a functioning improvement cycle that helps the HEI to identify development needs and ensure and develop research quality, and that the HEI has knowledge of whether it organises the quality assurance processes and applies the quality system in an effective manner.

All in all, the assessment panel evaluates how well the HEI's quality assurance processes are described, reasoned and work in practice.

### **Assessment criteria for research:**

#### **Established procedure and quality culture**

1. The HEI has an established and publicly available description of the HEI's quality system, which sets out the division of responsibilities, principles and concrete working methods for ensuring and developing quality in research. The quality assurance processes involve management and staff as well as external stakeholders when appropriate, and support the quality culture and strategic work at all levels of the organisation.

#### **Continuous monitoring**

2. The HEI ensures that it regularly collects, analyses and uses appropriate information with a bearing on the quality and relevance of research. The information is used as a basis for strategic decisions, prioritisation and quality development. The information is made available to relevant stakeholders and is used as a basis for research development, strategic and prioritisation.

#### **Periodic reviews**

3. The HEI ensures that its research or research environments undergo regular peer reviews from a national and international perspective. The reviews are conducted in a way that is appropriate for the HEI. The HEI systematically captures and addresses the recommendations arising from such reviews.

#### **Research development and renewal**

4. The HEI works systematically to create favourable conditions for the development and renewal of research and research environments.



**Support activities and research infrastructure**

5. The HEI works systematically to provide fit for purpose support for research and has appropriate processes for the prioritisation and long-term renewal of research infrastructures.

**Competence supply, professional development and career support**

6. The HEI works systematically to ensure a long-term competence supply for the development and renewal of research. The HEI also works systematically to create good conditions for professional development and offers well-functioning career support for researchers at all stages of their careers, regardless of the form of employment.

**Gender equality**

7. The HEI works systematically to promote gender equality in the preconditions for research.

**Good research practice**

8. The HEI works systematically to promote good research practice and to prevent and address misconduct in research.

**Assessment criteria for reviewing HEIs' quality assurance processes for education**

The assessment panel uses eight assessment criteria in their review of the HEI's quality assurance processes for education.

For all assessment criteria, the assessment panel evaluates whether the HEI's quality assurance processes contribute to ensuring and developing the quality of education in a systematic and appropriate manner. This includes the existence of a functioning improvement cycle that helps the HEI to identify development needs and ensure and develop education quality, and that the HEI has knowledge of whether it organises the quality assurance processes and applies the quality system in an effective manner.

In the review of the HEI's quality assurance processes for education, both the student/doctoral student perspective and the labour market perspective are important.<sup>4</sup> These perspectives may be included in several assessment criteria and are evaluated by the assessors where they consider this relevant.

All in all, the assessment panel evaluates how well the HEI's quality assurance processes are described, reasoned and work in practice.

### **Assessment criteria for education:**

#### **Established procedure and quality culture**

1. The HEI has an established and publicly available description of its quality system, which sets out the division of responsibilities, principles and concrete working methods for ensuring and developing quality in education. The quality assurance processes involve management, staff and students as well as external stakeholders when appropriate, and support the quality culture and strategic work at all levels of the organisation.

#### **Continuous monitoring**

2. The HEI ensures that it regularly monitors and continuously collects, analyses and uses appropriate information with a bearing on the quality and relevance of education. The information is made available to relevant stakeholders and is used as a basis for development of education, strategic decisions and prioritisation.

#### **Periodic reviews**

3. The HEI's programmes undergo regular peer reviews to ensure that they are of high quality, are designed to provide students with the conditions necessary to achieve set goals, and meet the needs of students and society. The reviews lead to continuous improvement of the programmes. Results and actions are communicated in an appropriate manner.

#### **Establishment and discontinuation**

4. The HEI ensures that there is a clear division of responsibilities, and appropriate processes and procedures for the establishment and discontinuation of courses and study programmes.

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<sup>4</sup> Government communication 2015/16:76 Quality Assurance in Higher Education

**Student support, learning resources and infrastructure**

5. The HEI works systematically to ensure that infrastructure, student support and learning resources are appropriate for students' and doctoral students' learning.

**Competence supply and professional development**

6. The HEI works systematically to ensure a long-term competence supply to satisfy the needs of education and enable renewal. The HEI works systematically to create favourable conditions for the professional development of teaching staff.

**Connection between research and education**

7. The HEI works systematically to ensure that there is a close link between research and education in the organisation.

**Student-centred learning**

8. The HEI works systematically to ensure student-centred learning.

# The review process

The HEI's quality assurance processes for education and research are reviewed at the same time. The HEI submits a single self-evaluation and chooses how much of the quality assurance processes for education and research is described jointly and how much is described separately. UKÄ makes separate decisions for the quality assurance processes for education and research. The decisions are based on two separate reports from the assessors.

## Assessment materials

The assessment materials for the respective review include the following:

- a self-evaluation report from the HEI, including annexes
- a student report from the student and doctoral student unions
- information from interviews
- documentation from selected audit trails.

All assessment materials are considered in the assessment.

In good time, UKÄ provides the HEI and the student and doctoral student unions with information on how to submit the assessment materials.

## The HEI writes a self-evaluation report

As part of the self-evaluation, the HEI must describe its quality system. The HEI must explain how the system is applied, analyse the strengths and challenges of the quality assurance processes, and support the analysis with documented examples.

The HEI writes a self-evaluation that addresses the quality assurance processes related to both education and research. How much is described jointly and how much is described separately should be adapted to how the HEI has organised its quality assurance processes. However, it is important that it is clear to the assessors which descriptions relate to education, to research or to both.

The self-evaluation may be structured as the HEI sees fit, but must explicitly address all assessment criteria. The HEI must show how it works to fulfil all the assessment criteria and evaluate how well the processes work.

In addition to describing and evaluating the quality assurance processes in relation to the assessment criteria, the HEI should provide an overview of the quality system, the objectives and strategies that guide the work, and the strengths and challenges that the HEI views as being associated with the chosen way of designing the quality system. It should state the main procedures and processes through which the HEI assesses that the organisation maintains high quality and the quality assurance processes work as intended. Valuable information is also the extent to which there is written documentation linked to the procedures and processes.

If the HEI's quality assurance processes were reviewed by UKÄ previously, the HEI must relate to the previous review in the self-evaluation. The description should be comprehensive and give the assessment panel a picture of how the quality assurance processes have evolved since the previous review.

The HEI is welcome to provide examples of how the HEI has identified and acted on deficiencies or development areas with the help of the quality assurance system. Examples of how the quality assurance processes work as intended help the assessment panel to understand how the processes work in practice.

The HEI is welcome to make reference to documents in the text to illustrate and support the analysis, but the self-evaluation should be able to stand on its own. This means that the information in the self-evaluation should be sufficient for the assessment panel to gain a basic understanding of the supporting material provided, without having to read the documents referenced by the HEI.

In the review of the HEI's quality assurance processes for education, both the student/doctoral student perspective and the labour market perspective are important.<sup>5</sup> The HEI must describe the processes through which the different perspectives are addressed and the assessment criteria to which they are linked.

The self-evaluation shall comprise a maximum of 80 pages, font size 12. The following must be attached to the self-evaluation:

- an official description of the HEI's quality system
- organisational chart
- rules of procedure and delegation
- a list of the most crucial policy documents for quality assurance processes for education and research.

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<sup>5</sup> Government communication 2015/16:76 Quality Assurance in Higher Education

## **The students and doctoral students write a report**

In the reviews of the HEIs' quality work, UKÄ invites the student union, together with the doctoral student section or other doctoral student organisation at the HEI, to submit a written document to UKÄ, referred to as a *student report*. The purpose of the report is to give the student unions, or equivalent bodies, the opportunity to present their views and experiences of the HEI's quality assurance processes. UKÄ has created a guide for the student union, see Annex 1.

It is important to point out that the HEI's quality work is a common concern for the HEI's staff, students and doctoral students, and that a student report should not affect the students' and doctoral students' opportunities to participate in the HEI's self-evaluation work.

## **The HEI submits documentation from audit trails**

In addition to the descriptions and evidence provided in the HEI's self-evaluation, material from audit trails is also included as part of the overall assessment material of the review.

During the review process, the assessment panel chooses a maximum of three audit trails to explore the HEI's quality work in more detail.

The purpose of the audit trails is to examine how well the HEI's quality assurance processes work in practice by examining the HEI's quality assurance processes in one or two specific areas.

The design and orientation of the audit trails may vary, but they should always be linked to the assessment criteria.

Examples of documentation that can be requested are the HEI's own evaluations, follow-up and development plans for a particular area of quality assurance work or documentation from preparatory or decision-making bodies. Documents requested in the audit trails must be those that already exist at the HEI; the HEI is not expected to create new documents as a result of the review.

## **Other documentation**

Leading up to the reviews, UKÄ compiles background information about the HEI. The information may, for example, consist of the results of UKÄ's reviews, statistics showing student completion and establishment rates, and information about the HEI's finances, staff and scientific/artistic production. The background information is not considered assessment material. However, the assessors can use it as a starting point for questions during site visits and it can also be used as a basis for choosing audit trails.

The material is also made available to the HEI in connection with the review.

## **Key elements of the review process**

### **The HEI participates in online information meetings**

Each year, UKÄ organises open digital information meetings for HEIs and student and doctoral student unions. The HEIs and student and doctoral student unions can choose which of these meetings they want to attend and which people should attend. Before an HEI starts its review process, it is assumed that they have participated in one of these meetings. The information meeting aims to provide general information about the structure and content of the review process. UKÄ does not provide any detailed information about the timetable or answer any other specific questions about individual reviews at this meeting

### **UKÄ recruits assessors**

The reviews are conducted through peer review by assessment panels. The assessment panels shall be made up of external, independent experts from the higher education sector, student or doctoral student representatives, and labour market representatives.

UKÄ assembles the assessment panels through a nomination procedure in which HEIs, student and doctoral student unions (via SFS) and labour market organisations can propose assessors. As a quality assurance measure, the HEI is offered the opportunity to comment on the composition of the assessment panel, for example based on possible conflicts of interest or any need for additional expertise, before UKÄ confirms the composition of the assessment panel.

Overall, an assessment panel must have such broad and deep expertise that it can evaluate the assessment criteria included in the review. At least one of the assessors should be currently or previously active abroad.

The assessment panel shall have good knowledge of the Swedish higher education system and international higher education systems. The assessors should also have good knowledge and experience of quality assurance work in education and research at different levels.

The assessors' assignment begins with training in UKÄ's review and working method. The training aims to ensure that the assignment and expectations are clear.

## **UKÄ holds a meeting to discuss the timetable and organisation of the individual review**

At the start of the review, a meeting is held with project management from UKÄ, along with representatives from the HEI and the student and doctoral student unions. At the meeting, UKÄ presents the timetable for the individual review and goes through practicalities. Meeting participants are also given the opportunity to ask questions about the individual review.

## **The HEI has an initial meeting with the assessment panel about the quality system**

After the HEI has submitted the self-evaluation, UKÄ organises an initial meeting between the assessment panel and the HEI, including representatives from the student and doctoral student union. At the initial meeting, the HEI may present its quality system and its specific goals, conditions and context. The meeting aims to give the assessment panel an initial, general understanding of the HEI they will be reviewing.

## **The assessment panel chooses audit trails**

During the review process, the assessment panel chooses a maximum of three audit trails to explore the HEI's quality assurance processes in more detail. The responsible investigator at UKÄ informs the HEI of the assessment panel's choice of audit trails and enters into a dialogue with the HEI about the documentation that the HEI must submit.

## **The assessment panel conducts interviews**

The assessment panel conducts an on-site visit to the HEI. During the site visit, the assessors interview people from different parts of the HEI.

Prior to the interviews and after consultation with the HEI, UKÄ sends a list of the functions that the assessment panel would like to meet and a proposed schedule. No later than two weeks before the interview, the HEI and the student and doctoral student unions notify the responsible investigator at UKÄ of the persons they propose to participate in the interview sessions.

The students or doctoral students who participate in the site visit interviews shall primarily be appointed by a student and doctoral student organisation that either belongs to a student and doctoral student union or has union status at the HEI. If the student and doctoral student unions are unable to recruit students and doctoral students for the interviews, UKÄ can ask the HEI for help with recruitment.



The HEI and the student and doctoral student union are responsible for ensuring that the persons appointed to participate in the interviews receive all necessary information.

The assessment panel may conduct additional interviews, if necessary. These should preferably be conducted digitally.

## **The assessment panel submits its report and UKÄ makes a decision**

The assessment panel's report specifies whether the HEI fulfils the assessment criteria. The assessment panel's assessments and reasoning must be presented in a clear and concise manner, so that it is clear what the assessors deem to be deficient in the event of a negative outcome. In order for the reports to contribute to the HEIs' quality development, the assessors must also highlight strengths and examples of good practice.

Before UKÄ makes a decision, the assessment panel's preliminary report is sent to the HEI. The purpose of this distribution is to give the HEIs the opportunity to point out any factual errors in the report. The distribution period is four weeks. The assessors take note of the HEI's response and make changes to the report, where relevant. The HEI's written response to the distributed document is attached to the report.

The overall assessment of the HEI's quality assurance processes is given on a three-point scale. UKÄ decides whether to approve the quality assurance processes, to approve the quality assurance processes with reservations or to decide that the quality assurance processes at the HEI will be under review. The final report from the assessment panel forms the basis for UKÄ's decision.

### **Decision**

#### **Approved quality assurance processes**

An overall assessment of "approved quality assurance processes" means the HEI's quality assurance processes are well described, well reasoned and well functioning in practice. They are systematic and effective at all levels of the HEI, from leadership level to departmental level.

#### **Approved quality assurance processes with reservations**

An overall assessment of "approved quality assurance processes with reservations" means the HEI's quality assurance processes are fairly well described, well reasoned and well functioning in practice. The decision clarifies which assessment criteria have not been fulfilled. The HEI is then to follow up on these and take action to remedy them within a specific period of time.

### **Quality assurance processes under review**

With the overall assessment “quality assurance processes under review”, there are several significant deficiencies in the HEI’s quality assurance processes in terms of how they are described, reasoned and function in practice. The deficiencies are extensive. The decision clarifies which assessment criteria have not been fulfilled. The HEI is then to follow up on these and take action to remedy them within a specific period of time.

## **UKÄ holds a meeting for feedback and discussion**

After the review has been completed, UKÄ will hold a meeting at which the HEI, the student union and representatives of the assessment panel, together with UKÄ, provide feedback and discuss the review process.

UKÄ may also invite the HEI to participate in conferences for the exchange of experience with the aim of delving deeper and help the HEI to further develop.

## **Follow-up**

UKÄ follows up all HEIs, regardless of the review results, after the review.

### **When the quality assurance processes are approved**

The HEIs whose quality assurance processes for education and/or research are approved are followed up with a dialogue on the recommendations and development areas described by the assessment panel in their report. The follow-up takes place approximately one year after the decision.

### **When the quality assurance processes are approved with reservations**

The HEIs whose quality assurance processes for education and/or research are approved with reservations are followed up with respect to the assessment criteria that have not been assessed as fulfilled. The HEI must submit a report on the measures implemented no later than two years after the decision. UKÄ will appoint an assessment panel to follow up the measures. The follow-up will include supplementary documentation and interviews, if necessary.

During the follow-up, UKÄ may decide to give the HEI the rating of *approved quality assurance processes* or to leave the rating of *approved quality assurance processes with reservations* in place. The assessment panel's report forms the basis for UKÄ's decision. No further follow-up

of the HEI's quality assurance processes will be performed until the next regular review.

### **When the quality assurance processes are under review**

The HEIs whose quality assurance processes for education and/or research are under review are followed up with respect to the assessment criteria that have been assessed as not fulfilled. The HEI must submit a report on the measures implemented no later than two years after the decision. An assessment panel is appointed to review the account of measures. The follow-up review will include supplementary documentation and interviews, if necessary.

# Annex 1. Guide to student and doctoral student unions when writing the student report

In the reviews of the HEIs' quality assurance processes, UKÄ invites the student union, together with the doctoral student section or any other doctoral student organisation at the HEI, to submit a written document referred to as a student report.

The student report shall contain the students' and doctoral students' views on how the HEI works to ensure and develop the quality of its education and research, and how the students and doctoral students are involved in this work. The student report does not need to contain views on all assessment criteria, but can focus on a few selected areas that they consider particularly important. The purpose of the report is to give the student unions the opportunity to present their views on the HEI's quality assurance processes.

UKÄ does not itself review the quality of the HEI's education or research. The review instead concerns the processes and procedures that the HEI has in place to know whether or not its programmes and research are of good quality. Equally important is whether the HEI implements measures and strengthens the quality if it is deficient.

UKÄ wishes to stress that a student report does not replace the participation of students and doctoral students in the HEI's self-evaluation work.

## **Scope of the student report**

The student report should not exceed 10 pages. The font size should be 12 point.

## **Some practical advice and tips**

It is a good idea to let different groups discuss and anchor the content of the student report before the student and doctoral student union makes a decision about it. One example of how the union can work to develop the report is to send out drafts to various student and doctoral student groups for commenting. In this way, the union can obtain views on the content before making a decision on the report and sending it to UKÄ.

If there are several student unions and doctoral student sections, or equivalent bodies, at the HEI, UKÄ recommends that the unions collaborate on a joint student report. Should this not be possible, the unions can submit separate reports or write some parts jointly and others separately.

**The report is a public document**

The student report becomes an official document in the review of the HEI's quality assurance processes. The HEI and the students will have the opportunity to comment on the student report during the interviews conducted by the assessment panel.

The Swedish Higher Education Authority (Universitetskanslersämbetet – UKÄ) is to 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 trends within higher education and we monitor the rights of students.

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