Organisation of Higher Education in Sweden

Higher education and research in Sweden take place at 15 state universities (universitet) and 16 state university colleges (högskolor). Parallel with the state institutions there are also a number of independent organisers with the right to award qualifications. The higher education institutions range from large ‘classic’ broad universities to specialised institutions of different sizes in e.g. fine arts or agricultural science.

Mainly as a result of the Bologna process, legislation for a three-cycle structure of higher education has been adopted and is applied since 2007. The degree system has been reformed and structured to fit the new three-cycle system, which is now the only structure for all higher education. This improves international comparability of Swedish education in accordance with the Bologna process. First and second cycle education is referred to as undergraduate education and the third cycle as postgraduate education.

The Ministry of Education and Research (Utbildningsdepartementet) is responsible for the system of higher education. Higher education is financed through state grants to the individual institutions based on the number of students and their achievements with varying amounts of remuneration for the various educational areas. Independent institutions that receive governmental grants cannot charge tuition fees. There are some independent institutions that do not receive governmental grants; hence they are free to charge tuition fees. These institutions are classified as private.

The Swedish Higher Education Authority (Universitetskanslersämbetet) manages quality control for higher education and degree authorisation of state universities. It is responsible for the legal oversight and the efficiency review, analysis and statistical monitoring of higher education. The Swedish Council of Higher Education (Universitets- och högskolverket) administers admission to study programmes on behalf of the higher education institutions. It also recognises qualifications from abroad and promotes participation in international collaboration. The National Board of Student Aid (Centrala studiestödsnämnden, CSN) is responsible for the allocation of financial support to students and the repayment of student loans.

Historical Overview

In 1977 higher education underwent comprehensive reforms. Nearly all post-secondary education was integrated into a single system governed by common legislation and ordinances. At the same time open admission was abolished by the Swedish parliament (riksdagen), which from now on each year decided on the dimensioning of educational study programmes and the scope of single-subject courses. The admission to education programmes was handled by a central authority that also managed the planning of the education provided, including general curricula for the national study programmes. The higher education institutions themselves handled admission to courses.

A new act and ordinance for the higher education sector was adopted in 1993. Planning and decisions on content of study programmes was transferred to the institutions for higher education, while the responsibility for the scope and goals of the degrees remained with the Swedish government (regeringen).
The main aim of the reform was to give higher education institutions greater freedom in decision making over courses and admission of students, who in their turn gained greater freedom of choice.

In July 2007, mainly as a result of the Bologna process, legislation for a three-cycle structure of higher education was adopted. The new structure replaced the former system and is today the only structure for all higher education.

In 2010, the Swedish parliament (riksdagen [3]) decided in accordance with the government bill (2009/10:149) "Academia for this day and age - greater freedom for universities and other higher education institutions", increasing the freedom of publicly funded universities and other higher education institutions regarding internal organisation and teaching positions.

Specific Legislative Framework

The Higher Education Act (Högskolelagen, SFS 1992:1434 [6]) was determined by the Swedish parliament (riksdagen [3]) in 1993 and contains provisions about the higher education institutions. The provisions are supplemented by regulations in the Higher Education Ordinance (Högskoleförordningen, SFS 1993:100 [6]), decided by the Swedish government (regeringen [3]) in 1993. An appendix to the Higher Education Ordinance contains the Qualifications Ordinance (Examensordningen [6]). It stipulates the qualifications that may be awarded in first, second and third cycle education and their requirements.

Grant-aided independent institutions base their work on an agreement with the government and are obliged, as well as state universities and state university colleges, to follow the statutes, ordinances and regulations relevant to the higher education sector.

General Objectives

Governed by the general regulations in the legislative framework, higher education institutions (universities and university colleges) are free to define their own goals and how the programmes are organised. Their main tasks are to:

- Provide education that is based on scientific or artistic grounds as well as on well-established experience
- Carry out research and artistic and other development work
- Co-operate with the surrounding society and inform the public about the institutions’ activities

In higher education there should be a close link between research and education. Scientific credibility and good practice are to be safeguarded. The higher education institutions must tailor their activities to attain high quality and make efficient use of available resources. Institutions of higher education should promote students influence over the education, as well as the understanding of other countries and international relations. Higher education institutions should work actively to broaden recruitment to higher education among groups that are currently underrepresented in higher education. No student is to be the subject of discrimination based on gender, age, ethnic origin, sexual orientation or disabilities.

General Objectives for First and Second Cycle Education

Students within first and second cycle (undergraduate) studies should develop:

- The ability to make independent and critical assessments
- The ability to identify, formulate and solve problems
A preparedness to deal with changes in working life

In addition to acquiring knowledge and skills in the field covered by the course, students should develop the ability to:

- Seek and evaluate knowledge at scientific level
- Follow developments in knowledge
- Exchange knowledge with people without special expertise in the field

Professional degrees have additional specific learning outcomes.

General Objectives for Third Cycle Education

Third cycle (post-graduate) studies shall, in addition to deepen and broaden the student's knowledge and skills as stipulated for first and second cycle (undergraduate) studies, provide the student with the knowledge and skills necessary to carry out independent research.

Financial Support for Students

Public higher education in Sweden is grant-aided and free of charge. State-funded institutions are not allowed to charge fees. This means that all Swedish students and students from the EU/EEA are educated free of charge. Parallel with the state-funded institutions for higher education there are a number of independent institutions, of which some are not grant-aided and therefore are allowed to charge fees.

The National Board of Student Aid (Centrala studiestödsnämnden, CSN) is responsible for the allocation of financial support to students for studies and its repayment. Students who have been accepted by a university, university college or another post-secondary education institution and fulfill certain basic criteria have a right to student aid if they study at least half time, for at least three weeks. If a grant-aided independent institution is authorized to award qualifications, its students are entitled to receive financial support for their studies.

Student aid consists of two parts: a grant and a repayable loan. A student can choose to apply only for the grant. Under certain conditions a student may be entitled to student aid for studies outside of Sweden. Under certain circumstances the student may also be eligible to a supplementary loan. For students with children there is a possibility to receive extra child allowance. The upper age limit for study support is 56 years.

Starting from the autumn term of 2011, citizens from outside the EU/EEA and Switzerland - 'third country students' - have to pay tuition fees for higher education in Sweden. In connection to this reform, a new programme of scholarships was established. The scholarships are intended for particularly well qualified students from countries outside the EU/EEA and Switzerland. They particularly target students from Sweden's partner countries in international development as well as developing countries (as defined by OECD/DAC). The scholarships are intended to pay all or part of the fees for studying at Swedish higher education institutions.

Organisation of the Academic Year

The higher education institutions decide how the school year is organised.

Courses are measured by a higher education credit system, where credits are equivalent to ECTC’s. The academic year is normally divided into two terms, each comprising 30 higher education credits. The
autumn term begins generally at the end of August or at the beginning of September and finishes in the middle of January. The spring term begins in the middle of January and finishes at the end of May or at the beginning of June. Additional courses are often offered during the summer months.

The institutions for higher education are usually open all year, except for national holidays. The timing of vacations, examination periods and other breaks vary between institutions and are decided upon by the higher education institutions themselves.