

## **UNESCO National Commission Country Report Template**

Under the UNESCO World Higher Education Conference ([WHEC2022](#))

[Section for Higher Education](#) | Division for Education 2030

### **Higher Education Report: Sweden**

UNESCO National Commission in Sweden

Stockholm, 01/04/2022

#### **Abstract**

This report has been prepared by the Swedish National Commission for UNESCO, and briefly describes the Swedish higher education system focusing on enrolment and graduation rates, higher education institutions in Sweden, as well as the legal and institutional framework of higher education. Global challenges and recommendations have also been identified.

## Content

Abstract .....	1
Content.....	2
Presentation.....	3
Current situation of higher education.....	3
1.1 Historical enrolment and graduation rates.....	3
1.2 Quantity and types of higher education institutions .....	4
1.3 Legal and institutional framework of higher education.....	4
Current challenges in higher education .....	5
Tackling wicked problems .....	5
Maintaining relevance in an interconnected world.....	5
Threats against academic freedom .....	6
Towards 2030 and beyond: recommendations for the future .....	6
Recommendation 1: Sustainable development.....	6
Recommendation 2: Lifelong learning .....	6
Recommendation 3: Open science .....	6
References.....	8

## Presentation

The present report was prepared by the Swedish National Commission for UNESCO for the World Higher Education conference 2022. The section on the current situation of higher education is based on existing reports from the Swedish Higher Education Authority. The current challenges for higher education and the recommendations for the future are not limited to the Swedish context, but apply to HEIs generally.

The report reflects the views of the National Commission.

## Current situation of higher education

The Swedish higher education system is relatively flexible compared to the higher education systems of many other countries. Educational offerings are largely course-based and most higher education institutions (HEIs) offer freestanding courses and programmes as distance courses, some of which can be completely online. This offers good opportunities for lifelong learning. Traditionally, Swedish higher education does not just involve educating youth after completing secondary education. It also includes education later in life, continuing development for professionals, and it is common to return to higher education after previous studies.

HEIs also provide third-cycle education and conduct most of the publicly funded research in Sweden. This means that Swedish higher education is relatively heavily focused on research. Measured in terms of monetary value, more than half of the activities at HEIs consists of research and third-cycle education.

Higher education is for the most part free-of-charge and the State allocates considerable resources for research conducted by the HEIs. The majority of students in Sweden finance their studies with the help of financial support from the State to cover their living expenses. All domestic students are entitled to financial support, but there are minimum performance requirements in terms of the number of credits achieved for continued financial support. In 2011, the Higher Education Act was changed to the effect that while higher education is free for Swedish citizens and for citizens of the EU/EEA countries and Switzerland, incoming students from other countries have to pay an application fee and tuition fees for first- and second-cycle studies, unless they are taking part in an exchange programme.

### 1.1 Historical enrolment and graduation rates

In the 1950s, fewer than 50,000 individuals attended higher education in Sweden. This number had increased to over 100 000 in the late 1960s. A higher education reform in the late 1970s which incorporated nearly all post-secondary education into higher education further increased the enrolment rate. Higher education was expanded in the 1990s and early 2000s, resulting in 340 000 enrolled individuals. In 2010, 365 000 students were enrolled, a number which temporarily decreased over the coming years, but which has increased again in recent years.<sup>1</sup>

In the 2020 autumn semester, there were just under 385 000 enrolled students in first- or second-cycle courses and programmes. This was a record high number, and a result from earmarked government funding to increase the number of students admitted to HEIs as part of Sweden's COVID 19 pandemic response. Of these students, 61 % were women, and 39 % men. During the academic year 2020/21, the number of incoming international students fell to 33 300, compared with 39 600 the year before. The number of exchange students dropped

---

<sup>1</sup> Swedish Higher Education Authority, 2020.

with almost 50 %. In total, international students made up 7 % of the total number of students, compared to 8-9 % in the years prior to the pandemic.

The transition to higher education among individuals with a foreign background was 41 per cent, compared with 46 per cent among those with a Swedish background. The transition rate for foreign-born individuals who immigrated between the ages of 7 and 18 was much lower: 28 per cent, which is the lowest transition rate for this group over the last decade. The single largest subject area in the 2019/20 academic year, as in previous years, was law and social sciences with 218,000 students. The fine, applied and performing arts had the fewest students. This division of students among subjects has been similar over recent academic years.<sup>2</sup>

Turning to graduation rates, the number of graduates has increased over the last 10-year period. In 2009/10, there were just under 66 000 graduates from first and second-cycle programmes. This number reached an all-time high in 2014-16, with just over 68 000 graduating each year. This high number can be explained with the increase in new HE entrants a few years earlier and that the option of requesting a degree certificate according to older academic curriculum was restricted significantly after 30 June 2015.<sup>3</sup>

In the 2019/20 academic year, there were just under 72,000 graduating first- and second-cycle students (an increase by 9 % from the previous year). Of these graduates, 65 % were women, and 35 % men. The increase in graduates can be attributed to changes in the labour market increasing the tendency to request a degree certificate, as well as administrative changes in the documentation system streamlining the process of requests. Many graduates receive more than one degree certificate in the same academic year.

In 2020, the Swedish Council for Higher Education issued nearly 7,000 certificates on what a foreign degree is equivalent to in Sweden. The majority of assessed educations were the equivalent of a bachelor's degree.<sup>4</sup>

## **1.2 Quantity and types of higher education institutions**

In Sweden, there are universities, university colleges, as well as independent education providers. In all, there are 50 higher education providers in Sweden, of which 31 are public-sector higher education institutions. The largest university had more than 50 000 students in 2020/21, while the smallest higher education institution has less than 50 students.

Universities and university colleges both provide higher education and conduct research but differ in how much focus is given to research, with the older universities having more extensive research. Furthermore, universities have been granted general degree-awarding powers by the government, whereas university colleges apply for degree-awarding powers in specific areas for third-cycle levels. However, all public and independent higher education providers must apply for entitlement to award professional qualifications and qualifications in the fine, applied and performing arts.<sup>5</sup>

## **1.3 Legal and institutional framework of higher education**

Higher education in Sweden is governed by the Higher Education Act (SFS 1992:1434) and the Higher Education Ordinance (SFS 1993:100). Overall responsibility for higher education and

---

<sup>2</sup> Swedish Higher Education Authority, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Swedish Higher Education Authority, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Swedish Higher Education Authority, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Swedish Higher Education Authority, 2021.

research rests with the Swedish Parliament (Riksdag) and the Government, which decide on regulations applying to the sector and allocate resources to the HEIs. Public-sector HEIs have considerable autonomy and exist within a system of management by objective.

The Higher Education Act, enacted by the Riksdag, provides a framework for the organisation and governance of the HEIs. It sets out what should characterise courses and programmes at different levels and stipulates academic freedom, freedom of research, and contains regulations about the duties of teachers as well as provisions about student influence. In addition, it states that HEIs must promote equality of opportunity and widening recruitment.

The Higher Education Ordinance is issued by the government and specifies further provisions, such as regulations on entrance qualifications and selection for courses and programmes, as well as the appointment of teachers and doctoral students. It also includes regulations on what the course and programme syllabus should indicate, as well as grades and qualifications. Annex 2 of the Ordinance contains a System of Qualifications, which includes descriptions of and outcomes for all degrees.

HEIs also are governed by the Government's annual public service agreements, which specify that educational offerings must correspond to demand from students and the needs of the labour market, specifies the size of state funding, as well as any specific assignments to HEIs from the government.<sup>6</sup>

## Current challenges in higher education

### Tackling wicked problems

The world is facing challenges that are complex in their definitions, conflict-laden and dependant on their context. Climate change is the most pressing challenge of our time, and society needs to respond to it effectively. Raising sea levels, loss of biodiversity, increased poverty and conflict are all interconnected problems which need to be handled in connection to each other.

At the same time, disinformation and misinformation can undermine these crucial efforts. Misunderstanding research results and processes can lead to a weakened trust in HEIs themselves. In times of rapid information exchange, a further understanding of the research process is needed in order to ensure that scientific breakthroughs are used as foundation by decisionmakers.

### Maintaining relevance in an interconnected world

Technological, economic, and social changes in our societies in turn affect the demands placed on the education system. HEIs must respond to these needs of the labour market, both present and future. Technological advances, robotization and AI will have ground-breaking effects on which knowledge, skills and competences are wanted.

Digitalization, concurrently, opens up new ways of teaching and learning. Students expect a high degree of digitalization, and often possess a high digital competence. Information and communications technology requires digital competences, not just from the teaching staff, but also from the increasingly heterogonous student body, coming from different background and,

---

<sup>6</sup> Swedish Higher Education Authority, 2021.

perhaps, different nations. The large increase of students and the increasing internationalization of higher education places great demands on functional systems to promote mobility, international cooperation, transparency and global development.

Distance learning has increased rapidly during the Covid 19 pandemic, but knowledge is still needed regarding its long-term effects and consequences, not just on learning but also student wellbeing, as well as other factors.

### **Threats against academic freedom**

Academic freedom is a right in itself, and a precondition to produce good quality research and education. The possibility to seek and disseminate knowledge is also a fundamental part of the democratic process. Threats against academic freedom can come from many different sources, including states, civil society, individuals, and even from within the higher education sector itself. These threats can be directed against entire areas of research, individual courses, teachers or researchers.

## **Towards 2030 and beyond: recommendations for the future**

### **Recommendation 1: Sustainable development**

Education is one of the most effective tools to achieve a long-term sustainable development, through promoting relevant values, knowledge and skills. This needs to be done comprehensively and include economic, social and ecological aspects as well as pedagogy, didactics and sustainability competencies.

Education for sustainable development cannot be something which is treated in only certain courses or by certain teachers, but instead needs to be integrated into the core operations of HEIs. To ensure lifelong learning for sustainable development, and achieve a transition to a sustainable society, education for sustainable development must be a fundamental part of formal, informal and non-formal education.

### **Recommendation 2: Lifelong learning**

Learning is a process which continues throughout life. Education should promote the development and learning of all children, as well as a lifelong desire to learn. Education and lifelong learning are also essential for reducing inequalities.

National education systems should be organised so that transitions between different levels and parts are facilitated, as well as the transition between education and working life. Good opportunities should also exist for those who wish and need to supplement in different ways their earlier studies in order to progress to a higher level or change orientation.

### **Recommendation 3: Open science**

A transition to responsible and secure open science is a matter of democracy. A benchmark for the transition should be to improve the quality, impact and innovativeness of research by ensuring that more elements of the research process are opened up, for collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders, including civil society. To do this, research integrity and quality must be on the front line combined with enhanced scientific literacy.

Quality control must be maintained in all principles of openness, and the principle “as open as possible, as closed as necessary” should be a guiding principle. Clear incentives and reward mechanisms are needed in order to encourage researchers to publish their research output openly.

## **References**

Swedish Higher Education Authority, 2021. AN OVERVIEW OF SWEDISH HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH 2021. Report 2021:22. [An Overview of Swedish Higher Education and Research 2021 - Swedish Higher Education Authority \(uka.se\)](#)

Swedish Higher Education Authority, 2020. HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN SWEDEN - 2020 STATUS REPORT. Report 2020:11. [Higher education institutions in Sweden - 2020 status report - Swedish Higher Education Authority \(uka.se\)](#)