

**The Sixth QHE Seminar – The End of Quality?
Chamberlain Tower Hotel and Conference Centre, Birmingham UK**

**From Audit to Assessment - A National Perspective on an
International Issue**

First of all let me thank professor Harvey and the Centre for Research into Quality for inviting me to this conference. It is especially interesting for me in my role of the Swedish University Chancellor to be given the opportunity to speak in this context, and address some of the challenging questions raised in the conference programme:

The End of Quality, question mark
Has external quality review had its day?
and
Does the development of mass education necessarily mean the end of quality?

It would be easy for me to just answer yes to each and every one of these questions and we could all step outside and gladly enjoy an extra break.

That would however involve me having to resign from my assignment as University Chancellor of Swedish Higher Education Institutions and head of the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education. Because in that role one of my foremost tasks is to make sure that the answer to these questions is still no!
Instead of the End of Quality being near I would like to argue that we are at the beginning of Quality.

Since I have no intention of resigning I'll stay up here and give you my arguments for answering no to the questions raised at this conference. I will do this by briefly presenting to you the development of the Swedish quality evaluation system, with special focus on the new system of Quality assessments that has just been introduced, and thereby give you a national perspective of these highly international questions.

First of all it is important to clarify that quality and quality improvement is first and foremost about what is going on in the lecture room, in the interaction between students and teachers, in the interaction between students and in the students personal development. Quality of the education system is created through the everyday work of the institutions concerned. It is dependent on a teaching staff that is familiar with the frontiers of research and development within their area of knowledge. It is equally dependent on the active participation of students and on a well-functioning working environment for students and staff. Students and staff are the inner strength that, on the basis of co-operation, is able to achieve a meaningful and enduring quality development.

So when I am describing an external force as a national evaluation system we have to bear in mind that such a system can only at the best be a supporter of the activities taking place in the educational process. However, in this respect I feel confident that external quality review still has an important role to fill.

At the same time I am fully aware of the risks of setting up, what can seem like, a bureaucratic system of evaluations. I will therefore come back to how we actively work with avoiding to do harm and instead being supportive to the positive processes taking place at the institutions. But let me first give you a background to where we are today.

Higher education in Sweden, like in many other countries, can be said to be moving towards a system of mass or majority education. During the 1990:s the number of students has just about doubled. The Government has recently set an objective of 50 per cent or more of an age cohort having begun higher education by the age of 25. The expansion has resulted in greater numbers of students, with greater variety of knowledge, experience, age, social and ethnic background and goals.

During the last decade a stronger emphasize has been put on Higher Education Institutions role to co-operate with business and industry as well as with the public sector and working life at large. In 1996 a community service requirement was introduced into the Higher Education Act, known as the third task in addition to education and research. The expectations of society on the higher education sector have increased considerably. Institutions are expected to fuel societal development and to contribute to increased prosperity.

The last decade has also seen an increase in international competition on the education market. And with the rapid growth of a global labour and education market Swedish qualifications framework must take into account questions of international comparability as well as national administrative needs. Also discussions on accreditation and comparable degrees have increased in Europe with the Sorbonne and Bologna declarations.

In Sweden, evaluation is not a feature of the nineties; education has been evaluated since the sixties and seventies. But it is clear that the trends I just mentioned together with the 1993 higher education reform, which to a great extent decentralised responsibility and authority, have increased the demands for accountability, follow-up and evaluation of higher education.

In the early 1990s, several arguments in favour of intensified demands in these respects were given. Of these, the concern for deteriorating national finances was considered especially important. There was also a concern that the results of higher education might not justify the costs. Several groups began demanding evidence of quality: politicians, taxpayers and students burdened with study loans. In what may seem a paradox, trust in higher education was failing while there were expectations that higher education and research would enable Sweden to keep up with ever more intense international competition.

With the higher education reform concerns were voiced that the change in governance and a system for allocating funds for undergraduate education based on enrolment and performance would result in education of lower quality. The government demanded reports of results. In addition, all higher education institutions were required to set up

a program of quality assurance, later changed to quality development. The institutions were given the responsibility of setting up a program for quality evaluation, and were obliged to report work progress of quality enhancement annually.

In 1995 a program of quality audits at institutional level was implemented. And by 1998 the National Agency for Higher Education had been audited all, then 39, institutions of higher education.

The idea with the program was that institutions of higher education were expected to develop their own quality evaluation systems and to step up the development of quality work; the audit was aimed at the top level or the institutional leadership.

Evaluative work was considered a learning process both for the individual university or University College and for the National Agency and its auditors. The motto “evaluation for improvement” and “quality is a journey, not a destination” marked the thrust and level of ambition. The intention was not to evaluate quality as judged by set criteria. Instead, the intention was to focus the specific conditions in each case and to assess the strategies, goals, approaches, plans, systems, methods, and the organisation used to secure and develop overall quality. Auditors were given a frame of reference including a number of aspects denoting “the good higher education institution”. Qualities that typify such excellence in the higher education institution were said to be: self-regulation and learning, long-range planning, an international perspective, incisive leadership, interaction with stakeholders, equality and focusing on the student.

The procedure of the audit was the following: a self-evaluation made by the institution of higher education, a visit to the institution by external auditors, and a follow-up meeting to discuss the findings of the auditors. The consultative roll of the auditors was stressed.

The National Agency’s quality audits received considerable attention within as well as outside of the Swedish academic world.

I was at the time vice-chancellor of the Umeå University and in retrospect I think the audits laid important ground for more systematic discussions on quality and quality improvement. However, the audit program had its problem in not reaching out in the institutions to the core of the activities at departmental level. Some also found the audits a bit “toothless”.

Simultaneously a considerable number of assessments of the right to award degrees, including an assessment of educational quality, were also made at the request of the institution wishing to award a degree. These assessments have constituted a large part of the work of the National Agency, from its inception in 1995, but started even earlier.

An assessment of the right to award a degree is a form of evaluation made at the request of an institution of higher education. The assessment or evaluation takes the form of an “accreditation”, with a peer group assessing the quality of the programme according to certain criteria and making a recommendation to the National Agency. Depending on the type of programme, different criteria can be stressed. The criteria

are continually developed and checked with teachers and scientists active in the field and are an interpretation of the Higher Education Act and Ordinance. The qualitative level is determined by all the criteria in conjunction.

When there were specific reasons, but not otherwise, a national evaluation of subjects, subject areas or entire education programmes was initiated. These national evaluations were not a great priority before 1995 but have since then successively increased in number.

Starting in 1998, the thrust of the National Agency's evaluations is assessment of quality rather than of quality management. The promotive function of evaluations has been toned down in favour of the approach that control and development are two sides of the same coin. More, and more varied, types of national evaluations were initiated and carried out.

This change of action can be seen in the light of external demands as well as internal experience. An increased demand for quality assessments came from the government, students, future employers, the media, and not least from the academic world itself.

The fact that I became University Chancellor in 1999 also changed the thrust of the evaluations somehow.

Besides studies of consequences of important reforms for the education system, I also initiated what you may call a thematic review of equality, student participation, social diversity, and ethnic diversity as aspects of quality.

One reason for this was an attempt to refute a simplified ranking of Swedish institutions of higher education, made by the journal *Moderna Tider* (Modern Times). Another reason was to develop quality management assessments to allow certain comparisons, something that had not been possible before, when a different audit team was used each time. This time, therefore, the same auditors were used throughout the country. The evaluation received considerable attention in the media and became known as Franking as a pun on my name. The development perspective was still important and was demonstrated by the publication of a book of examples of best practice how the institutions worked with these aspects of quality.

Stressing the importance of national and international trust in Swedish education the Government in December 1999 presented the bill "Student Influence and Quality in Higher Education". The Swedish parliament passed the bill last year and it introduces a comprehensive system of evaluation.

Starting this year the National Agency for Higher Education is to carry out quality assessments of all higher education that lead to general and professional degrees. These reviews of subjects and programmes will be periodically recurring in six-years cycles and will comprise undergraduate education as well as postgraduate studies. Educational quality and results of quality management are in focus.

The evaluation method will, as before, include self-assessments, external quality monitoring by peer-review teams, public reports and follow-ups.

The government declared four main **purposes** with the new system:

First and foremost Control; we are to make sure that students are offered equivalent education of good quality, regardless of which Higher Education Institution they choose to study at.

Secondly: The assessments should be improvement oriented. That is, the institutions concerned should find the assessment process useful in their own quality development work.

The **third** purpose is new and somehow difficult to fulfil: The evaluations should give students or prospective students information about the quality of different subjects and programmes.

The **last** purpose concerns comparisons: Students and other stakeholders should on the basis of the evaluation results be able to make comparisons of certain aspects between subjects or programs at different Higher education institutions. It should also be possible to some extent to make international comparisons.

When introducing an extensive evaluation system like this there is always a risk of doing more harm than good. Examples in other European countries have sometimes shown this to be true. Considering where we are at the moment I pass on giving you any examples. Instead I will now bring you up to date and describe some of the important distinctive features of the new Swedish system; features that will, I believe, ensure us making good rather than harm by contributing to a positive development in the higher education sector.

1. An extensive on-going **dialogue** between the agency and the Higher education institutions concerned has taken place before setting the system in action. The dialogue has concerned issues about method, criteria and time schedule. A trustful dialogue is essential to achieve a meaningful outcome of the evaluations. Therefore the dialogue with institutions is also of vital importance during the process, in selecting experts, discussing specific aspects etc. The dialogue continues after the evaluation is finished as well, for example in different follow-up activities to which I will come back. I am certain that the need for mutual trust is essential and I am equally certain that the dialogue we carry on helps establishing that trust.

2. The student perspective is highly emphasized in the new system and in all other tasks of The National Agency. Apart from students being one of the important groups the peer-review team meet with at the site-visit there is always students represented in the expert groups as well. We have over quite some years now had very good experiences of student participation in the evaluations. I believe their participation in these processes is one of the best guarantees to ensure and develop the quality of higher education.

The government bill also strengthens the students' participation in and influence over development in higher education. Their responsibility for the quality of education is

growing and they are to be seen more of co-actors and less as consumers of higher education.

3. The evaluations **cover all** education leading to a degree at all higher education institutions including postgraduate studies. This means that one and the same group at the same time evaluates both undergraduate and postgraduate studies. Considering the desirability of a close link between undergraduate and postgraduate education I find this attempt highly relevant and interesting. I very much favour the idea of taking a consorted view of the evaluation of higher education, something that is done too rarely.

4. Another characteristic is the choice of a **theory-oriented method**. Looking at the prerequisites as well as the process and results of education gives the experts the opportunity to take an explanatory approach to their evaluation and the report, making it, in my opinion more useful for everybody concerned.

5. When doing assessments of this kind especially with the size and scope we are undertaking there is always a risk for conformity and standardization. We are in several ways **actively striving to diminish the risk of conformity**. We do this primarily by keeping an open dialogue, by encouraging the institutions to show in their self-evaluations what's unique and especially characteristic about their programs and by doing so highlighting and disseminating examples of good practice. This is also an important aspect stressed in the training of the evaluators. (We are also avoiding to present quantitative or simplified measurements for comparisons.)

6. An important factor in this Swedish system that makes the control function clear is the **explicit sanction means** connected to the evaluations. If the expert group and the Agency find that the quality of a certain program doesn't meet sufficient standards a warning, or to use a football term in the home of football, a yellow card can be issued. The institution is then given some time, about a year, to take action. If the shortcomings remain in the follow-up assessment the institution gets a red card or loses its right to award degrees in the subject or program in question. This has been an effective tool for improvement shown in the follow-ups of the assessments of the right to award degrees among small and medium-sized universities that the National Agency has conducted for many years. Now the risk of having the right revoked is apparent throughout the whole sector including the old universities.

7. Follow-ups have always been an important part in evaluation procedures in Sweden, so also in the new system. I would like to stress the follow-up as equally important as the self-evaluation and the external monitoring, not only in the cases where warnings are issued. All evaluations will be followed up in seminars with the stakeholders to discuss the results and the implementation of the review. Moreover, about three years after an evaluation there will be a simplified follow-up to make sure there is a positive development. We will also, from time to time, follow-up the general results of evaluations with seminars and other activities in broader discussions with representatives from industry, politicians and others.

8. A final characteristic of the Swedish quality assessment system concerns the way we ourselves as an evaluation agency want to develop and improve. At the same time as we started out the new evaluations we also engaged independent researchers to follow the procedures and conduct **critical evaluations of the system**. We have also engaged an International Advisory Board of experts in the field to continuously discuss different issues of concern.

With the points I've made here I feel confident and quite excited about the huge task The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education is now facing. I also think that this will meet most of the demands for accountability and accreditation placed on higher education making other actors' simplified rankings merely a marginal phenomenon.

The final remark I would like to make is about the concern that the development of mass education could mean the end of quality. I would like to stress the opposite. First of all from a society's point of view it is obvious that more people taking part in higher education should lead to a "higher quality" in society at large. Not just in terms of economic growth and development but also hopefully in democratic and cultural terms.

I am also certain that education itself can benefit from expansion. More different groups of people entering higher education should not only be seen as something that is hard to handle, rather it should be regarded as an aspect of quality. Since an important part of the learning process is to exchange experiences and points of view it is important that all kinds of perspectives are represented.

With higher education becoming a concern for more and more people more and more different stakeholders want to be engaged in and discuss the education. This increased interaction and co-operation if properly managed will also be beneficial for the quality of higher education.

So, in conclusion, I am certain that external quality review has an important role to fulfil and still hasn't had its days and that the development of mass education doesn't mean the end of quality, rather the opposite!

The questions we are facing are interesting and challenging and if we meet these challenges in the right way, the quality of the higher education system as a whole will increase.

Thank You!