

Promoting quality enhancement through joint evaluation

A case study of the implementation of the second cycle in three Swedish universities with a view to quality enhancement and benchmarking.

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Developing internal quality assurance has been high on the agenda of European higher education policy in the past ten years, but it has mainly been developed with a focus on processes in individual institutions. "The Swedish Master Project" has enlarged the scope of internal quality assurance in a unique collaboration between Gothenburg, Lund and Uppsala universities to jointly initiate comparative internal quality assurance. The paper will discuss the challenges encountered and the benefits of the co-operation in the area of joint internal quality assurance, especially the introduction of new degrees.

The presentation will particularly address questions related to:

- The collection and use of key figures and the problems that they raise especially when used for benchmarking;
- The challenges and benefits of joint institutional collaboration in internal quality assurance.

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1. Background

Sweden introduced the Bologna structural reforms rather late in 2007, and the introduction meant the creation of a new cycle (the second cycle) that had not been in use for several decades. The new degree structure was principally introduced in order to develop the international competitiveness of the Swedish higher education system. The reforms created what has been called “master-mania”. A great number of master programmes were established, about 680 new programmes in the first year. Only 460 master programmes attracted sufficient a number of students to start in year 2007/2008. Swedish higher education did not charge tuition fee at that time and the new two-year master degree attracted a great number of international students. 61% in the academic year 2007/2008 and 63% in 2008/2009 of all newly enrolled master programme students at Swedish universities and colleges were international students.

Against this background of rapid radical change, Gothenburg, Lund and Uppsala universities decided in 2009 to establish a closer collaboration by creating a forum for the three pro-rectors and members of the university leadership to discuss the challenges and benefits of implementing the different reforms and legislations that coincided with the introduction of the Bologna structural reforms, and to try to develop joint ways to evaluate the implementation in the decentralised structures of the universities.

The first project in this collaborative framework was an early joint evaluation of the introduction of the second cycle. “The Swedish master project” started in 2009, two years after the introduction of the second cycle and used a methodology inspired by the European University Association (EUA) projects on quality culture, the EUA methodology used for the Trends reports on the Bologna Process and the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG). The methodology was a mixture of collecting quantitative data (key figures) and qualitative data by interviewing faculty programme co-ordinators, programme directors, teachers, student counsellors and students in 13 different programmes.

The questions used in the site visits were directly related to the implementation of the two-year master programmes. Questions were posed on: the conceptual phase, access, content, retention and employability and used in interviews with all the different groups of actors; students, professors, student counsellors, programme directors and faculty representatives in order to reach a more in-depth understanding of the different challenges for the two-year master programmes. The method allowed for a quantitative view of the implementation of the second cycle combined with a more qualitative perspective from the individual two-year master programmes.

The project has been governed by a Steering Committee consisting of the three pro-rectors and directors for quality assurance, supported by a national co-ordination group with three institutional project leaders and a national project leader.

The Swedish Master Project had a number of objectives, but of particular interest was:

- To jointly “evaluate” the implementation of the master level degrees and the relationship that the degrees have to the bachelor level and the doctorate level (access, retention and employability).
- To assess to what extent employability had been central in the creation of the two-year master – and if that is being done by trying to follow the new graduates earlier than commonly practiced in alumni surveys.
- To investigate if there are key characteristics for the master; relationship between theory and practice – what is the added-value of the two-year master? Is transparency equal to quality/accountability?
- To make an early “investigation” into the introduction of student-centred learning with three main indicators in mind; relevance of the degree, employability and international outlook.
- To support the institutional preparation work on the new HSV quality evaluations. The project will not look at the academic quality of the master, but rather the supporting framework the master has created for the academic success (collection of key figures, student-centred learning, definition of learning outcomes and examination goals, reflections on new teaching methods, etc).
- To develop further cooperation and benchmarking between the participating universities.

In particular for the 13 selected master programmes:

- To assist in the development of the advanced level by collecting clear and targeted information about the profiling and differentiation of the Swedish master degree; both the master provided in English and in Swedish
- To assess how the Bologna tools are utilized and work as quality assurance mechanisms.

The project also took into consideration the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), especially by looking at:

- Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards
- Assessment of students
- Learning resources and student support
- Information systems
- Public information.

The overall project had a clear quality-enhancing aim with benchmarking aspects. The project defined and collected relevant key figures related to the introduction of the two-year master and carried out site-visits to the three universities in order to enable joint analysis, benchmarking and to identify key aspects of the new degree level. The

project was devised in the spirit of student-centred learning and reaching the aims of the Bologna Process of quality and accountability.

The project had three phases. In the first phase, key figures were identified and collected at each institution on the two-year master programmes and their students. In the second phase, site visits were carried out and the results of the two phases were analysed in order to identify achievements and potential problems with a view to benchmark the implementation of the two-year master. In the third phase, the results were communicated to a wider academic audience as a joint quality enhancement project in order to help raise the public awareness of the new graduates.

2. The first phase: definition and collection of key figures

The introduction of the second cycle in 2007 was quite revolutionary in Sweden and presented great opportunities for the universities to create entirely new degrees and subject combinations often with a view to upgrade prior qualifications, and to create internationally competitive two-year master degrees. The rapid introduction and development of the new degrees raised questions on how to ensure the qualitative development of the new qualifications. This paper is based on the report: “The Swedish Master Project: The introduction of the second cycle at three Swedish universities” where the conclusions on the structure and the content of the new two-year master degree is described in detail, with material used included in the annexes.

The first phase of the project was to identify which key figures to collect and how to collect them. In principle a straight-forward research process, but collecting comparable data that could be used jointly turned out to be a major stumbling block. The key figures collected nationally quickly turned out not to compare to the data collected at the institutional level and could only be used as indicators of national trends. The problems were identified at an early stage and it was decided to collect only a limited number of key figures, directly related to the number of programmes divided by university and faculty on applicants, registered students, retention rates and graduates. Even so, the collection of key figures turned out to be a major challenge for several reasons:

1. To identify what qualifies as a programme, what should the criteria be? Is a programme one where a call for applicants had been issued that year, or where there were registered students in the year? In the case of shell-programmes is it the individual sub-programmes or the “mother”-programme – the list goes on...;
2. Key figures had not been collected at the institutional level with a view to be able to follow the implementation of the second cycle from 2007, neither when it came to programmes nor applicants (national and international);
3. The institutional data systems were not easily comparable although in principle they were based on the same national data base, because each database was tailor-made;
4. The application procedures changed over time and therefore it turned out to be impossible to collect and compare the applicants who in some cases had applied

directly to a programme without any data procedures attached and in other cases had applied through a national system – or indeed a combination of the two.

5. Key figures did not always reveal the complexity of a student's progress through the system, especially when it came to retention rates in a system where the flexibility of the system is adapted to the student.

One of the challenges: what is a programme?

The first phase triggered a major discussion on the concept and use of key figures. A key figure, as such, gives the impression of being precise and objective. There is a danger in this since measurability and comparability are dependent on the definition of the key figures. There are many considerations to be made when a key figure is created. It has to do with delineation, for instance, and the date when the data was gathered. Or it may be, for example, an apparently simple question about how many master programmes there are at a university, or to add further complication; how many of them are international? To answer these questions, it is first necessary to determine what should be counted as a programme. Programme structures were also complex, which meant that it was not simply a matter of counting programmes. In this study a programme is the same as a programme code, regardless of how many specializations the programme offers. One example of the complexity of defining what then constitutes an international programme;

- That the language of instruction is English?
- That there are foreign students taking the programme?
- That teaching is done also by visiting teachers?
- That there is course literature in foreign languages?

The definitions affected the outcome. Even though the three institutions retrieved their data from the same database, there were variations in praxis regarding when key figures were gathered. Therefore, a major part of this project dealt with definitions of key figures. In comparing key figures among universities it has always be kept in mind that there are many pitfalls. The final data presented in the project was subject to comprehensive analyses and discussions. The key figures, however revealing, did not give a picture of the programme content and quality or if the goal of introducing student-centred learning through establishing flexible and transparent learning paths had been achieved.

Benefits and challenges

When these challenges - mainly of common definitions - had been overcome, one of the major benefits of the project has been a focus on the importance for the leadership to have access to key figures and of being able to discuss and interpret these not only together with the faculties and the programmes, but also for benchmarking with the

other two universities. The general picture at one university turned out to be remarkably similar to the other universities, and raised other questions when it came to benchmarking. What is the benefit of benchmarking key figures, when the key data show such similar development between three quite different universities? At this early stage of the introduction of the second cycle, the benefit has been that the universities know that in comparison they have done well, but that in order to grow and improve they have defined the starting-point with which to benchmark both at the institutional level, but also as a comparison in the future. Thus, the key figures have been used both as a quality assurance tool and as a strategic tool.

The challenge for joint definition and collection of key figures will be to keep ensuring comparability, definition and regular collection. Universities have not traditionally been used to have access to direct comparisons between themselves with quality enhancement in mind. To ensure future comparability a closer cooperation will be needed between those responsible for collecting data at the three universities.

3. The second phase: the site visits

In the second phase, the universities identified 13 different master programmes that differed in content, structure and target groups, in order to be able to get a picture of the complexity of the new degree. The different groups were interviewed by the national and the local project leader and thus all site visits had a similar structure. The groups of questions posed reflected and evaluated the implementation of student-centred learning, but also included questions that reflected the internal quality assurance issues from the ESG on approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards, assessment of students, learning resources and student support, information systems and public information. The site visits gave a much more qualitative overall picture, but also had a quality enhancing effect for the programmes themselves by highlighting new areas of interest to the programme directors, that they had not considered from the outset. One such area was employability, tracking of students and alumni activities. In these areas, it was not possible so far to obtain key figures due to the fact that there had been very few graduates, but it would potentially have a qualitative impact both on the content of the programmes but also on the competitiveness of the programme by indicating to potential students where other students had found employment.

One example: progress on student-centred learning

The Swedish higher education system has traditionally been flexible and transparent to the extent that it would be possible to argue that it could have been a role model for the Bologna Process. Therefore it was not surprising that there was a consensus among the interviewees that the Bologna tools were useful. The Bologna tools were defined as the parts of the Bologna Process that support student-centred learning and comparability; e.g. learning outcomes, ECTS, the Diploma Supplement (DS). All programmes had defined learning outcomes for all courses and some had already begun revising them, either because they had been too specific or too general. There was an

awareness of the potential of the Bologna tools, and the programmes were constantly being developed with an eye to enhancing their competitiveness. For example, there is more modularisation now than previously in order to facilitate not only mobility and exchange, but also to accommodate lifelong learning students. In several master programmes reviews were already underway, for example in terms of the relationship between the learning outcomes and examination. Even though the Bologna tools were considered by many to be important, it was also pointed out that developmental work has only begun and much remains to be done. In some programmes new examination forms were in use, but among the interviewees there was uncertainty regarding whether students read or are well versed in the curriculum and the use of learning outcomes. The students had not really grown accustomed to making use of the learning outcomes, apart from the group of LLL students who were highly purposeful and prepared themselves to achieve the objectives of the course. The students still relied on the information provided by previous students that had already attended the course.

All programmes used (traditional) student evaluation procedures and these were highly valued by staff as they clearly saw the results as not only quality assurance, but also as quality development that would support adjustments to the structure and content of the new programmes. The involvement of students was highly valued by staff, but students were not always content with the impact of the evaluations that they made.

The issue of learning resources and student support was another aspect of student-centred learning that the site visits touched upon. While the learning resources were perceived as adequate, the student support service was an area where more resources were needed especially for international students.

4. The third phase: bringing the results together

The third phase of the project was the communication phase. It has been as important as the other two phases, and it is during this phase that the different strands of the project have come together and where promoting quality enhancement through joint evaluation became a reality. The first activity was an evaluation seminar where the Steering Committee, the national coordination group and students and staff from the different involved programmes came together to evaluate the methodology and the results.

The seminar validated the conclusions of the report during different exercises and discussions and there was clear consensus that the methodology of the project was useful for making an early investigation into the new master degrees with a view to quality enhancement. The findings and the conclusions of the report reached through discussions in the national coordination group and the Steering Committee were perceived as to the point, both when seen from the level of the leadership and from the staff and students at programme level. It became clear that staff and students did not necessarily perceive the difficulties for the introduction of the two-year master programme in the same way. The programme directors who had not participated in the joint meetings of the Steering Committee and the national coordination group

expressed a wish for more joint discussions between programmes of similar nature, as many common challenges were identified. The conclusions of the seminar on joint evaluations were:

- Key figures collected at the programme level and the institutional level can be used for the strategic development and quality assurance both at programme and institutional level, especially figures on retention and graduation rates. These figures have gained importance now that the programmes in the future will have to be internationally competitive;
- commonly defined key figures make it possible to benchmark with other programmes and with other universities;
- a number of good practices were identified through the project and the seminar – a need for the programme directors to discuss with peers both at the institutional level and the national level;
- tracking graduates can facilitate the inclusion of employability aspects and be used in recruitment of potential students – this aspect had not previously been clear to the programmes;
- the timing was good, the first two years would have been too chaotic to discuss results;
- the process has been interesting and it has in itself been useful to be asked to explain concepts and practices, but it would have had been an added benefit to get more direct feedback from the site visits;
- The two-year master programmes and especially the internationally competitive programmes have a specific need for the university brand and the central services for students.

5. Conclusions: benefits and challenges of the methodology

The Swedish Master project was conceived as an innovative project that would promote closer cooperation and collaboration between the three participating universities by jointly evaluating the introduction of a new degree structure. It has been a first attempt by Swedish universities to develop new ways of internal quality assurance with external aspects by using European experiences and concepts in an institutional context. In this process the participating universities had to overcome the barrier of “exposing” strengths and weaknesses. As the results have shown, there was a surprisingly high degree of equal development in the three universities despite diverse university profiles and leadership style.

The three universities are at the initial stages of using key figures strategically at the institutional level and at the programme level with a view to more closely monitor and assess the progress in a quality context. In one of the three universities, the key figures are already being used internally in the preparation for the introduction of tuition fees and in discussions with the faculties in their work on quality assurance of the programmes. In the other two universities the project has sparked off new studies that will evaluate all master programmes using a similar methodology, thus expanding the

range of quality assurance methods. The advantages and the limitations of using key figures outside a context became clear in the project.

The overall increased dialogue and exchange of experiences and practices between the three universities in this closely defined project has also sparked a wave of different evaluations of the educations offered at the three universities in the coming year with varying levels of ambitions. Full scale evaluations will be launched and here the common questions identified will play a central role, making it possible to make direct comparisons between the three universities. Where before high importance had been attached to developing individual internal quality assurance, the importance of being able to benchmark has gained importance. The project has also helped to pinpoint a number of content issues for the new master degree, that although being part of the Bologna context, they were not yet high on the agenda, i.e. employability, working with alumni in an international context, showing quality and accountability by using key figures and the further developments of student counselling and career guidance.

The European Standards and Guidelines were one of the European backdrops of the project, and here one of the conclusions was that the introduction of the second cycle had not been supported by sufficient public information neither at the institutional level nor the national level. In the project, it was discovered that the ESG seem to lack a particular dimension for the issues closely related to internationalisation that had a high visibility in the project. The Steering Committee pointed out the importance of having a European/international perspective together with the local and institutional view on the Swedish Master.

Thus, the Swedish Master project has been a catalyst for a number of new projects and developments and has established a network or a forum that will continue its cooperation after the end of the project. The next project will be to benchmark the three large internal evaluations of the degrees offered at the three universities that are under way. Another will be to look at doctoral education and the implications that the introduction of the second cycle has had. Collaboration and competitiveness now go hand in hand at the Gothenburg, Lund and Uppsala universities.

The presenters will particularly like to promote a discussion on:

- The collection and use of key figures and the problems that they raise especially when used for benchmarking;
- The challenges and benefits of joint institutional collaboration in internal quality assurance.

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