

Quality of Higher Education in Sweden. Is the quality too low?

Physical Education Teacher Education Programs in Sweden

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Introduction

The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education continually evaluates the quality of higher education. They do evaluations of subjects and programmes offered in Sweden leading to vocational qualifications and also evaluating the quality of all programmes that lead to a bachelor's or master's degree. These evaluations are supplemented by special thematic studies as well as evaluations based on students and their experiences of higher education (HSV, The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education).

Focus in this study is Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) Programs in Sweden. Nearly 600 PETE-students are engaged in various programs all over Sweden, from Luleå in the North to Malmö in the South, in total at 16 places. People responsible for PETE-programs have their own network and meet regularly. A few years ago the question of knowing more about the students accepted at the 16 departments was raised. As a first step GIH, The Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences, made such diagnostic measurements on students accepted at GIH (Meckbach & Wedman, 2007). As a next step the present study was planned for all PETE-students in Sweden.

About 400 questionnaires from PETE-students were collected during May 2006. The questionnaires included:

1. Background
2. Knowledge related to sports, and physical activity
3. Experiences from education in physical activity and health

Most of the items in the questionnaire are of a multiple-choice type.

Results

This paper centers on the quality of higher education in Sweden. The results are based on PETE-students and are illustrated through some parts from the questionnaire. The focus is on aspects associated with study demands, time for working, and free time activities.

Student achievement

Associated with the results presented the understanding might benefit from knowing about skills and competencies experienced by the students at elementary and secondary school level.

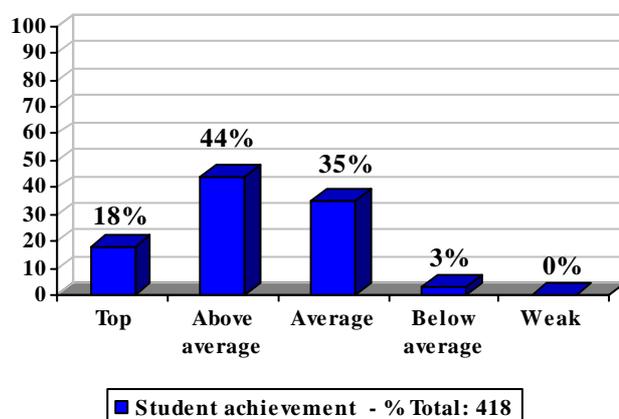


Figure 1. Self rated experiences of student achievement at elementary and secondary school level.

The figure clearly shows that almost all students rate their own achievements rather high and mostly above the average.

Study demands

Study demands can be approached in many ways. Here we have asked the students if the demands associated with their studies are proper according to their attitudes concerning university studies. The data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Do you think the demands associated with your study program are reasonable?

Opinion	Frequency	Per cent
Yes	317	76,8
No	47	11,4
Don't know	49	11,9
Total	413	100,0

About three out of four have the opinion that the demands are reasonable. About 10 per cent think that the demands are not reasonable.

Table 2. Is it easy to manage the studies in sport and health at your department?

Opinion	Frequency	Per cent
Yes	167	41,1
No	111	27,3
Don't know	128	31,5
Total	406	100,0

A majority of the students have the opinion that it is easy to manage their studies. About one third of the students are hesitant concerning how easy their studies are to manage.

The following cross table combines the question about how easy the studies are to manage with the question concerning skills and competencies at elementary and secondary school level.

Table 3. Cross table concerning student's self rated achievement at elementary and secondary school level and easiness to manage studies.

		Opinion			Total
		Yes	No	Don't know	
Student achievement	Top	37	15	23	75
	Above average	80	44	50	174
	Average	45	44	54	143
	Below average	3	8	1	12
	Total	165	111	128	404

The table illustrates that students that find their own skills and competencies high also find it easier to manage their own studies at university level.

Time for working

Table 4. Is it possible to combine work with PETE-studies?

Opinion	Frequency	Per cent
Yes	226	54,7
No	132	32,0
Don't know	55	13,3
Total	413	100,0

Most students, about 55 per cent of the cohort, find it possible to combine work with PETE-studies. About 30 per cent find it not possible to combine work with PETE-studies.

If we combine skills and competencies at elementary and secondary school level with the possibility to work, the following cross table will be obtained.

Table 5. Cross table concerning students self rated achievement at elementary and secondary level with possibilities to work.

		Opinion			Total
		Yes	No	Don't know	
Student achievement	Top	37	24	14	75
	Above average	107	50	22	179
	Average	78	49	18	145
	Below average	3	8	1	12
	Total	225	131	55	411

There seems to be an association between high self rated student achievement and the possibility to work.

Free time activities

Table 6. Do you, as a student, have an interest in exercise on your free time? (1=Almost never – 5=Very frequent).

Exercise	Frequency	Per cent
1.	2	0,5
2.	3	0,7
3.	44	10,5
4.	132	31,4
5.	239	56,9
Total	420	100,0

Free time activities are a central part during studying at universities. As can be seen, students are very active concerning their own exercise and sport. Another question concerning exercise and sport in the questionnaire shows that about 90 per cent do exercise or sport today.

Discussion

Perhaps the most interesting result from this study is the presence of work beside the education which in effect might imply less time for studying. It seems to be a reasonable estimation that many students, including PETE-students, spend 20-25 hours a week studying (see also Studentspegeln, 2002; Studentspegeln 2007; both reports in Swedish). PETE-students spend much of their free time exercising and/or practicing sports. Both activities, work and exercise, have been shown to take up significant parts of the time labelled as study time by other studies (Studentspegeln, 2002; Studentspegeln, 2007; Löfgren, 2001; Brandell, 2003; Meckbach & Wedman, 2007). PETE-students have the opinion that exercising and practicing sports are favourite free time activities. This free time, however, could be seen as time for studying and education.

In this respect, it is obvious that higher education in general have to deal with *part-time studies* for many students even if the studies themselves are labelled as full-time studies. As a consequence the expectation is lower examination results than if the studies in reality had been full-time studies. Less time for studies might imply lower achievements. That is, however, not the case. There are no data that support the claim that study results have decreased. However, there are results showing that teacher students are recruited from a broader base than before. In turn, that should result in further difficulties to manage university studies, or it should be noted in the examination results as a decreased level.

According to the ambition by the Swedish Government about 50 percent of students should be recruited from groups of people with an average or below average income level. The National Agency of Higher Education reports in 2007 that the majority of students still are recruited from home with parents that have an average income or an income above average. However, students from low income families have increased over a 10 years period. This increase is well documented at teacher education (HSV, 2007).

A majority of students applying for teacher education as a first alternative has a middle or lower level income background (Holm, 2001; Kroksmark mfl., 2004; Meckbach & Wedman, 2007, Börjesson & Broady, 2004). According to The National Agency for Higher Education students from lower level income background study at local universities in Sweden. A study from a small local university in Sweden proves this statement showing that 40 per cent of the students come from a low level income background (Kroksmark mfl., 2004).

A broader recruitment will have consequences for being accepted as a student. The application for being accepted as a student has decreased over the last years and in comparison to other education alternatives it is low today (Börjesson, 2004). That situation is to a great deal different from a similar situation in Ireland, where teacher education has a high status and where the application for being accepted is high for becoming a teacher student. "Teaching as a career in Ireland has traditionally enjoyed high status with keen competitiveness for entry to all categories of teaching" (Coolahan, 2003, p. 21). Academic performance is of high standard and demand for places on teacher education programmes continues to rise in contrast to many other degree programmes. The entrants to the physical education teaching degree course 2006 at the University of Limerick had the third highest point total entering the university (O'Sullivan, et. al., 2007).

There is a close connection between time for studies, time for work and results on examinations. The logical conclusion is that less time for studies should imply a decrease in examination achievements. Such results are not at hand. However, a closer look at the examination situation in Sweden leads to the following (Wedman, Wahlgren & Frake-Wikberg, 2006):

- There seems to be a problem connected with pass and fail on the examinations. If there is a policy on this matter (which we do not believe) the examination process seems to guarantee a pass decision, a final pass. After two or sometimes three re-examination most students seem to pass the course examination, no matter what.
- In Sweden, there is a positive relationship between passing an examination and getting a loan for further studies. The departments also receive money from the state when students pass a course examination. There is a risk that the present system reinforces

the task of passing the student irrespective of the reasons for it. By passing a student there is a win-win situation for departments and for students.

A lowering of standards in higher education might go unnoticed if the situation is the same in other countries, i.e. if there is a general lowering of examination achievement. At least we know from one study in Scotland (Lankshear, 2005) that the examination situation might be similar to the one in Sweden.

In conclusion, there is a risk of a decreasing quality standard in higher education in Sweden. In many study programs there is about 20-25 hours per week for studies, i.e. *part-time studies*. There seems to be room for both work and free time activities. Many students spent several hours per week working. Generally, this low amount of studying time should lead to a lower level of study achievement compared to more hours per week spent studying. However, there is no data pointing in this direction. Perhaps this can be explained by the fact that the examination process is more or less free from quality control. This means, among other things, that level of study achievement is seldom or never discussed. The reason for the lacking of quality control can be that students and departments both win on passing the students on examinations. In a four and a half-year program concerning PETE-students there is at GIH more than 150 separate exams (Meckbach, not published). This should give room for discussions about the quality of higher education teaching concerning sport and health. The situation is similar in other subjects.

One of the questions we started with, namely is the quality of higher education too low is still with us. In spite of the fact that there is room and possibilities to answer the questions, at least to some extent, the present examination situation does not invite to an accurate answer to the question.

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