

SFS's position:

Scope, range, financing and admission in
higher education

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1. Introduction

This position is an opinion document subordinate to the Programme of Principles of Sweden's National Union of Students (SFS), with the aim of clarifying SFS's opinions in specific issues. The standpoint shall constitute guidance for SFS's elected representatives and office. SFS's position: scope, range, financing and admission in higher education presents SFS's opinions on the design of higher education, which includes the scope and range of courses and programmes, as well as how the design is governed and financed. The document also contains SFS's opinions concerning access to higher education. Unless indicated otherwise, in the document "student" refers to students within education at first-cycle and advanced level.

2. Scope

This section deals with the scope of higher education, which includes how large the total number of higher education places is. In the document, higher education place is used synonymously with the official designation "study place" to describe how many students can be admitted to a course of study. The section also describes the demarcation between higher education and other forms of education.

2.1 Quantity and quality of higher education

SFS considers that the number of places within higher education should be controlled so that all applicants who are qualified can be given a study place. This means that the total number of higher education places for all programmes should correspond to the number of qualified applicants, provided the programmes maintain high quality. Everybody should thus be offered a higher education place, but not guaranteed to be their first choice.

In order to achieve this aim, long-term planning at both national and university level is required, which lives up to the high level of freedom that SFS considers academia should have. Flexibility in the higher education appropriation is needed, as different higher education places within different programmes cost different amounts. The total number of higher education places should not be decreased merely because more students are choosing a programme or course that costs more. SFS considers that absolute quantitative goals, such as that a certain number of higher education places shall be provided, or proportional goals, such as a certain percentage of the population studying, shall not govern the supply of higher education. Instead, the higher education appropriation should

be adjusted in order to as far as possible track total demand from those applying for higher education.

SFS considers that all programmes should maintain a high level of quality whether they have a high or a low number of places. A certain number of places within a course of study should not be a prerequisite for the higher education institution to be able to deliver a high quality programme, rather it is how the programme is structured in relation to the number of places which ensures that all programmes, regardless of number of places, have the conditions to maintain high quality.

The exchange between first-cycle and third-cycle education, the so-called “research link”, is central to academia and to quality of education. SFS considers that a higher education institution should be able to increase the number of higher education places within a sought-after programme if a satisfactory research link can still be guaranteed. It is therefore important that environments with a strong demand for courses have the conditions to ensure that it shall still be possible to conduct research so that an imbalance does not arise between teaching and research and thus risk the quality of the education.

Neither should the programme ever be designed in such a way that other aspects of a high quality education suffer. The pedagogical expertise required for higher education among teachers must never be classed as secondary to, for example, an individual lecturer's research.

2.2 The distinction and delimitation of academia

The value of education lies in the usefulness of the education to the individual. Some educational programmes become more useful by being academic, while others do not. Academic education differs from other types of post-upper secondary education, as academic education provides knowledge, skills or abilities that rest only on scientific or artistic grounds and tried-and-tested experience, and has been developed in close relation to research. Higher education also always has a developmental function over and above its educational function, and always includes generic knowledge in addition to subject-specific knowledge. Academia is unique, as it provides society with long-term and free knowledge supply.

Education can be non-academic for two reasons: because it is not intended to be academic, or because it is not carried out in a way that makes it academic. Education programmes not intended to be academic include, for example, foundation years and other preparatory courses providing special access. They are located at higher education institutions, as these types of courses benefit from being arranged in the same environment as higher education. These course should not be included in the higher education budget, but can with advantage be carried out in cooperation with academic education.

If a course is not implemented in a way that ensures it has academic qualities, it must either be changed or removed from academia. Universities and the government must

consider carefully whether a course has any academic value, or whether it should be offered within another educational format, such as higher vocational education colleges or public adult education. In the same way, education courses within other educational formats, whose use would increase if they had academic qualities added, should be moved into academia.

There may be both academic and non-academic education programmes within the same subject area. It is positive that individuals can select different types of educational formats within a particular subject area. In this way, it is made clearer that different types of programmes (academic and non-academic) can be useful for different individuals, as the usefulness is based on the individual's needs.

3. Range

This section deals with the range within higher education, which includes the different types of courses and programmes and the subject areas into which higher education is divided up.

3.1 Overview of the range of courses and programmes

It is important to have a good overview of the national range of courses and programmes to be able to assess whether changes are necessary. SFS considers that an authority should be commissioned to create a system to survey the range of courses and programmes. Universities shall be able to use the survey to take into account their national context when dimensioning their courses and programmes. SFS also considers that there should be a national database for the courses organised within the framework of third-cycle education at Sweden's higher education institutions.

3.2 Diversity in the range of courses and programmes

It is of major value that there is a wide range of educational programmes. There must be variation in both the subject areas and forms of education, including programmes and free-standing courses. A course or programme may have different purposes for different students; for example qualification for a job or assignment, further education or education due to interest. In the academic environment, there shall be opportunities for exchanges between students reading different types of courses and programmes with varying purposes. It is important that prior knowledge requirements and educational guidance are also designed in such a way that the students' mobility is not unnecessarily restricted

3.3 Principles for where certain courses and programmes are offered

It is important that universities can be self-determining in terms of the courses and programmes they choose to offer. For this reason, it is also important that the higher education institution takes responsibility for the courses and programmes offered being useful and relevant to students, based on the students' situations and interests.

So that all people have the opportunity of a free educational choice, the geographic distribution of each course is important. SFS therefore considers that there must be a varied range of courses throughout the country. While collaboration and cooperation among the higher education institutions is important to achieve satisfactory regional access to courses and programmes, the government has a central roll in directing the higher education institutions to achieve this. This direction must be based on the students' demands and prerequisites to achieve a high quality education. An analysis of the students' demands must play a central role now that higher education institutions are demanding degree-awarding powers. Such an analysis must also include prerequisites for effectiveness and quality of education.

3.4 Financing of Massive Open Online Courses

SFS considers that Massive Open Online Courses have the potential to propel educational development forward, but there is no justification for removing funds from formal education in order to carry out such development work. SFS therefore considers that the higher education institutions shall not be allowed to finance MOOCs by using funds from the higher education appropriations. SFS considers that a national strategy is required to create a common approach to how MOOCs shall be developed and financed.

4. Governance of the scope and range of courses

This section deals with governance of the scope and range of courses. Governance may be effected through direct decisions, through the design of rules and other systems, and through financing.

4.1 Government direction of the scope and range of courses

SFS considers that student demand shall be the most important factor when deciding the scope of Swedish higher education. This applies both to the direction of the overall scope of higher education and the scope of individual programmes. It is the government's responsibility to enable the higher education institutions to adapt their range of courses to student demand. The state must investigate how great the demand is for higher education, and take into how the current supply of higher education affects demand. In turn, the higher education institution must take demand into account when they set up programmes and dimension them.

Designing all programmes directly based on the corresponding pressure placed on applications is a good principle for direction, but can be problematic when setting up new programmes or maintaining minor courses. SFS thus considers that maintaining minor courses, particularly those linked to a specific industry or research field, can be valuable even though there is not always proportional pressure from students applying. Starting new courses and programmes based on society's or science's development can also be

important. However, programmes should not expand or sometimes even be arranged if there is not sufficient interest or if there is a lack of quality. In expanding a programme or educational format, it thus seems better to first increase the number of applicants and then enable an expansion instead of first creating a disproportionate number of places.

Furthermore, SFS considers that the government's and society's needs are naturally met by the students' demand in the vast majority of cases. In cases where this does not apply, SFS feels that measures should be primarily targeted on increasing the attractiveness of the programme or its associated profession(s) in order to thus increase the number of applicants and restore the balance. This is instead of, for example, reducing the higher education places for a programme and then increasing them in another way that is not proportional to the corresponding pressure on places for the course.

The state shall finance higher education so that it is available to all on the same terms. The state shall be able to make demands on courses and programmes and direct the scope and offering of education at an overarching, national level. The direction shall be open, and carried out in dialogue with ministries and universities, and have express aims. Student influence must be given insight into all fora where universities are governed, such as dialogues with public authorities. The direction of the scope and offering of higher education shall be carried out through regulatory and financial frameworks in order to create predictability for universities and students. The direction must take a long-term view, so that the universities have good prerequisites for carrying on their activities.

Government direction of what the higher education institutions' offer shall only be carried out through extended assessment of degree-awarding powers. The assessment shall not just be based on academic factors, but also on assessments of the structural and student welfare prerequisites of the course or programme. This means, for example, that the competence and resources of the academic environment, society's need for competences, access to mandatory industrial placements and the students' study environment and communications shall be taken into account in order for degree-awarding powers to be granted for a new educational area.

4.2 Direction of the scope and range of what the higher education institutions offer

Universities shall offer the courses and programmes that students demand, as long as the education fulfils the criteria for academic education. Universities are responsible for ensuring the courses and programmes they offer are academically relevant and of high quality. In order to create good prerequisites for enabling institutions and students to plan for the future on the one hand, and on the other hand to be able to offer students relevant educational alternatives, universities shall develop and reassess their course and programme offering continuously and on good grounds. In this way, a balance between a long-term view and renewal can be striven for.

SFS considers that it is the higher education institutions' obligation to safeguard student influence in their design and range, as well as their responsibility to discuss design issues with a diverse range of actors in society. This can include non-profit organisations, the business world and the public sector. Broadly-based collaboration can determine for the higher education institution what belongs among higher education and what can be left to other forms of education. The formal decision on the design and range of higher education institutions must always be made by the higher education institution itself so as not to risk threatening academia's independence, freedom and scientific or artistic foundations.

Universities must be very careful if they use forecasts of the needs of society or specific actors as the basis for their dimensioning. Such forecasts shall only be used for the courses and programmes where the need for competence has proved to be very easy to predict.

5. Resource allocation

This section deals with allocation of resources, which includes how the design of higher education is to be financed. Resource allocation concerns how the programmes are paid for and the extent of the resources that different programmes shall receive, but also how the government gives higher education institutions money and how they use that money.

5.1 Remunerate the programme's cost requirements

SFS considers that the resource allocation system must be formulated in such a way that the remuneration for the programme is equivalent to the programme cost requirements so that it maintains a high level of quality. SFS supports an allocation of resources that is largely participation-based rather than performance-based. In this way, the higher education institution and the student group as a whole do not suffer if certain students should not pass their exams, and the university's remuneration for the education tallies better with the actual cost of educating a student. It would also reduce financial incentives for over-admission that exist today. A performance-based system risks reducing the requirements over time that are placed on the students within the programme's examination, which in turn risks leading to less support for the students as the expectations on them are lower. This leads in turn to reduced educational quality which risks further reducing the requirements set, which leads to a vicious circle.

Existing programmes must not suffer from any changes in the resource allocation system, and for this reason, transitional rules in connection with changes in the resource allocation system can be needed. Education carried out in collaboration with external actors must not lead to the funds for education becoming undermined. When it comes to third-cycle education, the higher education institutions must set aside sufficient funds that the educational environment and education of research students is secured for as long as the studies last.

5.2 A sustainable and long-term resource allocation system

Higher education is dependent on a long-term financial view in order to enable it to focus on educational quality. Any future undermining of appropriations must be prevented. There must consequently not be any requirements for productivity increases and price- and salary-based recalculation must correspond to the actual cost increase. To counteract any undermining of resources for higher education, publicly owned companies and public agencies whose prime purpose is to provide goods and services to universities shall do so primarily as a service to facilitate the activities of the universities. This means that they must not be permitted to make unreasonable profit from the goods and services supplied. Moreover, a financing principle that entails the state being unable to give universities new tasks without increasing resource allocation must cover all activities at universities. In this way, new assignments can be given to universities without jeopardizing their financial planning.

6. Access to higher education

This section deals with admission issues, which include how students are accepted into higher education. The admission system differentiates between issues of entry requirements and issues of selection. Entry requirements concerns the qualifications a person must have in order to be admitted to a course or programme. Selection is about which of the persons qualified are admitted to the course or programme. There are different instruments within the selection system, for example, grades, the Scholastic Aptitude Test and alternative admission formats.

6.1 Entry requirements for higher education

The entry requirements for higher education must be justifiable based on what is required in order to utilise the education. The requirements for entry must be absolutely necessary, which means that it must be possible to justify them on the basis of the programme's objectives and content. The requirements must be configured as learning objectives achieved, and be meaningful in relation to the programme's content. For example, requirements for a certain type of degree project or fees must not be included, as the format in itself does not constitute a competence. Work experience may only be used as an entry requirement in specific cases. Suitability tests shall not normally be used, as they are not legally safe, and risk preventing persons with the correct prior knowledge from studying. Instead, the selection shall be made based on the applicant's knowledge and skills. The programme shall give all qualified applicants the prerequisites to fulfil the objectives of the programme based on the prior knowledge requirements.

Entry requirements shall be described as general and specific. The point of departure is that all higher education has general requirements, which means that a prospective student must have passed a number of specific upper secondary courses or be judged to have equivalent competence. Alongside general requirements there can be programmes

which require specific entry requirements, which are additional skills requirements in addition to the general requirements. Specific entry requirements over and above general ones shall be described as area requirements, so that applicants can get a simple overview of the entry requirements.

SFS considers that all persons with the correct competence shall be admitted to higher education, irrespective of the educational system they have studied in, and irrespective of whether they have had the opportunity to study within higher education. All applicants should have the right to have formal educational merits, such as foreign grades, validated in order to satisfy the entry requirements for Swedish higher education. All applicants shall also be entitled to an assessment of their actual competence (i.e. competence from working life, non-formal education and informal learning), and whether the competence corresponding to general or specific entry requirements. The assessment shall be expressed in such a way that they can be used to apply to various courses and programmes within the ordinary entry system. For this reason, legally safe national criteria and procedures for assessment of actual competence shall be in place.

The level of general entry requirements must be harmonised with the examination objectives for all programmes at upper secondary school. SFS considers that it is the state's responsibility to ensure the educational chain is linked up and that no gap arises between education at upper secondary school level and higher education. Although not all upper secondary school programmes should provide entry requirements to all educational areas, all upper secondary school programmes shall satisfy general entry requirements. If this is not so, students' upper secondary school programme choices may exclude them from higher education, with consequences for the openness and representativeness of academia.

SFS considers that the entry requirements at second-cycle level shall be designed in such a way that all applicants with a Bachelor's degree shall be admitted, unless specific prior knowledge is required. This means that an exam at first-cycle level should normally satisfy the entry requirements at second-cycle level also within neighbouring subject areas, provided the students have sufficient prior knowledge to cope with the education. The entry requirements for second-cycle level studies shall reflect the fact that knowledge and skills taught by higher education shall be general.

A person who has completed a degree at second-cycle level or has the corresponding qualifications shall be qualified to apply for third-cycle education within his or her subject area. As third-cycle education is normally also an employed position and a person admitted to third-cycle education is normally employed, the admission must also test whether the applicant fulfils the requirements for doctoral student employment. Third-cycle study places must be advertised openly and an assessment be made against a clear description of the programme and the position. When advertising a third-cycle position, it shall always be clear whether the position refers to a licentiate exam or a doctoral exam.

SFS considers that an access programme, such as a foundation year, shall provide a guaranteed place at one of the courses or programmes for which the access programme fulfils the entry requirements. Access programmes are an important tool for widening recruitment to some courses and programmes.

6.2 Selection for higher education

The purpose of the selection system is to choose which students are admitted when there is competition for higher education places on a course or programme. It is important that the selection for higher education is perceived as legitimate by Swedish society, irrespective of what admission system is used. Therefore, the system must be transparent, predictable and fair.

In order to be perceived as legitimate, the selection system shall be based on competition and the students' merits. Separate selection quotas for fee-paying students is strongly opposed by SFS. In order to admit persons with varying backgrounds, experiences and types of merits, several different selection instruments are needed. The outcomes in a competition-based system using various selection instruments are not comparable. As the system cannot take into account the differing prerequisites of individuals to create competitive merits, all selection instruments shall be free of charge to the applicant. This creates predictability in the selection system.

Despite this, SFS considers that a competition-based system with several ways of measuring merits is the most reasonable system to use, given the large number of higher education places, study locations, courses and programmes, and applicants. The selection process shall aim to admit the persons with the best merits, but the higher education places shall be allocated between the selection groups in a way that promotes widened recruitment.

Grades from upper secondary school education shall be an important selection tool. The reliability of grades merits is based on grades being clearly goal-related, and that the examination in upper secondary schools is legally safe. As selection shall be based on the same merits being valued the same, grades from supplementary upper secondary education, such as Komvux, shall be valued the same as ordinary upper secondary school grades. All upper secondary grades shall have the same merit value in order to make the system transparent, efficient and avoid directing students' choice of studies unnecessarily. SFS therefore considers that there should not be a merit point system.

SFS believes that the Swedish Scholastic Aptitude Test is an important instrument for widening selection to higher education, in particular for persons without competitive upper secondary school grades. SweSAT shall be a test of readiness for studies, which tests the readiness for study based on the students' knowledge. The test shall be adapted so that it investigates readiness for the large range of courses and programmes offered by higher education. The Swedish Scholastic Aptitude Test (SweSAT) needs to be an opportunity for all. This can be achieved by offering the same opportunities for

educational support measures during SweSAT as those offered to admitted students. Nor shall any fee be linked to SweSAT.

For some courses and programmes, specific tests are required, so-called “alternative selection”, in order to measure relevant prior knowledge. Such tests must be made as legally safe as possible, for example by making them anonymous. SFS considers that selection in the form of drawing of lots, ongoing selection or open admission with selection later during the programme are resource-ineffective and unpredictable.