

SFS position:

Higher education: Scope, range, financing and admission

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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 on specific issues. The standpoint shall constitute guidance for SFS's elected representatives and office. SFS's position: Higher education: Scope, range, financing and admission. SFS opinions on the dimensioning of higher education, which includes the scope and range of education, and how the dimensioning is controlled and financed. The document also contains SFS's views regarding access to higher education. In the document, student refers to students in education at the undergraduate and advanced level as well as postgraduate education, unless otherwise stated.

2. Scope

This section deals with the scope of higher education, which includes how large the total number of places of education is. The document uses the place of education as a synonym for the official term "place of study" to describe how many students can be admitted to an education. The section also describes the boundaries between higher education and other forms of education.

2.1 Quantity and quality of higher education

SFS believes that the number of places of study in higher education should be controlled so that all applicants who are qualified can have a place to study at undergraduate and advanced level. This means that the total number of study places for all programs must correspond to the number of qualified applicants, provided that the programs are of high quality. Everyone should therefore be able to get admitted, but not guaranteed on the first choice. The number of places of study at doctoral level must be adapted to both the academy's own needs and society's needs.

In order to be able to achieve that goal, long-term planning is required at both national level and at university level, which corresponds to the high degree of freedom that SFS believes the academy must have. Flexibility is required in the appropriations for higher education because places of study in different educations comes with differing costs. The total number of places of study should not be reduced just because more students choose an education that costs more. SFS believes that absolute quantitative goals, such as that there should be a certain number of places of education, or proportional goals, such as that a certain proportion of the population should study, should not govern the range of higher education. Instead, the education grant should be continuously adjusted to meet the total demand of those applying for higher education to the best extent possible.

SFS believes that all education should be of high quality, whether an education has a high or low number of places. A certain number of places within an education should not

be a prerequisite for the higher education institution to be able to provide a high-quality education, but it is how the education is structured in relation to the number of places that ensures that all educations, regardless of number of places, are high quality.

The exchange between education and research, so-called research affiliation, is central to academia and to the quality of education. SFS believes that a higher education institution should only be able to increase the number of study places within a requested education if a good research connection can still be guaranteed. It is therefore important that environments with a strong demand for education have the conditions for research to be conducted so that an imbalance does not arise between education and research and thereby risk the quality of education.

The education must also never be dimensioned so that other aspects of a high-quality education suffer. The pedagogical competence of practicing teachers and supervisors in higher education must never be classified as secondary to, for example, an individual teacher's research.

2.2 The academy's special nature and delimitation

The value of an education lies in the usefulness of the education for the individual. Some courses become more useful by being academic, while others do not. An academic education differs from other post-secondary educations in that an academic education provides knowledge, skills or abilities that rest solely on scientific or artistic basis and proven experience, and that develop in a close relationship with research. Higher education also always has a forming function in addition to the educational one, and always includes generic knowledge in addition to the subject-specific ones. The academy is unique because it provides society with a long-term and free supply of knowledge.

An education can be non-academic for two reasons: because it is not intended to be, or because it is not conducted in a way that makes it academic. The courses that are not intended to be academic include intro years and other preparatory programs that provide special qualifications. They are located at institutions of higher education because those courses or programs benefit from being arranged in the same environment as higher education. These courses or programs should not be included in the education budget but should preferably be conducted in collaboration with the academic education.

If an education is not carried out in a way that gives it academic qualities, it must either be changed or lifted away from the academy. The higher education institutions and the state must carefully weigh whether an education has an academic value or whether it should be conducted in another form of education, for example the polytechnic or 'folkbildning'. In the same way, courses or programs in other forms of education whose usefulness would increase if the added academic qualities were transferred to the academy.

Within the same subject area, there may be both academic and non-academic education. It is positive that individuals can choose different types of educational forms within a

certain subject area. In this way, it is clarified that different types of education (academic and non-academic) can be useful for different individuals, since the usefulness is based on the individual's needs.

Postgraduate education is the highest level of academic education. The principles that govern postgraduate education are in many ways similar to those that govern undergraduate and advanced education, but the focus of postgraduate education is always to train postgraduate students to become independent researchers. For a research degree to be regarded as academic the needs of the individual doctoral student's academic freedom should be as strongly protected as other researchers in academia.

3. Range

This section deals with the range of higher education, which includes the different types of education and which subject areas the higher education is to be divided into.

3.1 Overview of the range of education

It is important to have a holistic view of the national education range to be able to assess whether changes in the supply are needed. SFS believes that an authority should be tasked with creating a system for an overview of the range of education. Higher education institutions must be able to use the overview to take their national context into account when dimensioning their education. SFS also believes that there should be a national database for the courses that are arranged within the framework of the doctoral program at Sweden's higher education institutions.

3.2 Diversity in the range of education

It is of great value that there is a wide range of education. There must be a variety of subject areas as well as forms of education, including programs and independent courses. An education can have different purposes for different students, for example qualification for a job or assignment, further education or education as a result of interest. In the academic environment, there must be an opportunity for exchange between students who study different types of education with different purposes. It is important that prerequisites and study guidance are also designed in such a way that students' mobility is not unnecessarily restricted.

3.3 Principles for which educations are given where

It is important that higher education institutions can be self-governing in which education they choose to provide. Therefore, it is also important that the higher education institution takes responsibility for the education that is given being useful and relevant to the student based on the student's situation and interests.

In order for all people to have the opportunity for a free choice of education, the geographical spread of each education is important. SFS therefore believes that there should be a varied range of education throughout the country. While the higher education institutions' cooperation and collaboration is important for achieving a good regional supply of education, the state has a central role in guiding the higher education institutions to achieve this. This control must be based on the students' demand and the conditions for achieving high quality in the education. An analysis of students' demand should play a central role when higher education institutions require a degree permit. Such an analysis must also include the prerequisites for efficiency and quality in education.

Postgraduate education is a central part of higher education, just like education at the undergraduate and advanced level. For the quality of doctoral education, it is necessary that it is linked to a high-quality research environment, which, among other things, gives the doctoral student the opportunity to discuss his or her research with other junior and senior researchers in his or her area of research. There should be a broad access to postgraduate education throughout Sweden to ensure a strong connection between research, education and society, and to make postgraduate education widely available.

3.4 Financing of Massive Open Online Courses

SFS sees that Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have the potential to drive pedagogical development forward, but that it is not justified to take money from formal education to conduct such developmental work. Therefore, SFS believes that higher education institutions should not be allowed to finance MOOCs by taking money from education grants. SFS believes that a national strategy is needed to create a consensus on how MOOCs should be developed and financed.

4. Control of the range and supply of the education

This section deals with control of the supply and range of the education. Control can take place through direct decisions, through the design of rules and other systems, and through finances.

4.1 Government control of the range and supply of education

SFS believes that student demand should be the most important factor when controlling the range of Swedish higher education. This applies to both the control of the total scope of higher education and the scope of individual educations. It is the state's responsibility to enable higher education institutions to adapt their educational offerings to students' demand. The state must examine how great the demand for higher education is, and take into account how today's educational supply affects demand. The higher education institutions, in turn, must take into account the demand when they start up programs or courses and dimension them.

Dimensioning all education directly based on their corresponding application pressure is a good management principle but can be problematic for starting new educations or maintaining smaller educations. SFS thus considers that maintaining smaller educations, especially those linked to a specific industry or research area, can be valuable even if there is not always proportionate application pressure from the students. Starting new courses or programs based on the development of society or science can also be important. However, training should not expand or sometimes even be arranged if it does not turn out that there is sufficient interest or if the quality becomes poor. In order to expand an education or form it, 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 believes that the needs of the state and society are naturally met by students' demand in the vast majority of cases. In cases where this does not apply, SFS believes that measures should primarily be aimed at increasing the attractiveness of the education or its associated profession (s) in order to increase the number of applicants and restore the balance. This instead of, for example, lowering the training places in one program and then increasing them in another in a way that is not proportional to the programs' corresponding application pressure.

It is the responsibility of the higher education institutions to decide which doctoral places of study are to be advertised. The dimensioning of postgraduate education must be governed by the academy's and society's need for researchers. A particularly important aspect of this is the academy's long-term perspective, where the dimensioning of postgraduate education should satisfy the academy's need for postgraduates for a high-quality education at undergraduate and advanced level.

The state must finance higher education so that it can benefit everyone on equal terms. The state must be able to make demands on education and control the scope and range of

the education at an overall, national level. The governance must be made open, in dialogue with ministries and higher education institutions and with stated purposes. Student influence must be given insight into all forums where higher education institutions are governed, for example government dialogues. Management of the scope and range of education shall take place through regulations and financial frameworks to create predictability for higher education institutions and students. The management must be long-term so that the higher education institutions have good conditions for conducting their activities.

The state's control of the higher education institutions' range shall only take place through extended examinations of degree-awarding. The examination must not only be based on academic factors, but also assessments of the education's structural and social study conditions. This means, for example, that the academic environment's competence and resources, society's competence needs, access to compulsory internships and the student's study environment and communications must be taken into account in order to obtain a degree right for a new field of study.

4.2 The higher education institutions' control of the scope and range of education

The higher education institutions must offer education at the undergraduate and advanced level that the students demand as long as the education meets the criteria for academic education. The higher education institutions are responsible for ensuring that the educations they provide are academically relevant and of high quality. In order to be able to create good conditions for institutions and students to be able to plan for the future, and on the other hand to be able to offer students relevant educational alternatives, the higher education institution must continuously and with good grounding develop and reconsider its educational range. In this way, a balance between long-term and renewal is sought.

SFS believes that it is the higher education institutions' obligation to ensure student influence in the higher education institution's dimension and range. In addition to student influence, the higher education institutions have a responsibility to discuss dimensioning issues for all levels of education with a diversity of actors in society. This can include non-profit organizations, business and the public sector. With broad collaboration, the higher education institutions decide what belongs to higher education and what is left to other forms of education. The formal decision on the university's dimensioning and offer must always be made by the university itself so as not to risk threatening the academy's independence, freedom and scientific or artistic basis.

Higher education institutions must be very careful if they use forecasts of society's or special actors' needs as a basis for their dimensioning. Such forecasts should only be used for those educations where the need for competence has proved to be very easy to predict.

5. Resource allocation

This section deals with resource allocation, which includes how the dimensioning of higher education is to be financed. The allocation of resources is about how the educations are paid for and how much resources different educations should receive, but also about how the state gives universities higher education and how higher education institutions use the money.

5.1 Reimbursement of the cost requirements of education

SFS considers that the resource allocation system should be designed so that the remuneration for the education corresponds to the education's cost requirements in order for it to be of high quality. SFS supports a resource allocation that is largely participation-based rather than performance-based. In this way, the university and the student group as a whole within an education will not be affected if certain students were not approved for the education, and the university's compensation for the education corresponds better with the actual cost of educating a student. It would also reduce financial incentives for saturation. A performance-based system risks reducing the demands placed on students in the education examination over time, which in turn risks leading to less support for students because expectations of them are lower. This in turn leads to a reduced quality of education which risks further lowering the requirements, which leads to a vicious circle.

Existing education should not suffer from changes in the resource allocation system and for this reason transitional rules may be needed in the event of a change in the resource allocation system. Training that takes place in collaboration with external actors must not lead to the erosion of training funds. With regard to postgraduate education, higher education institutions must set aside so much funds that the postgraduate student's educational environment and education are secured for as long as the studies are ongoing.

For the funding of postgraduate education, it is central that the higher education institutions have the resources to dimension postgraduate education on the basis of the principles described in this position. The higher education institutions shall not be dependent on external funding to maintain the necessary scope of doctoral education.

5.2 A sustainable long-term resource allocation system

Higher education is dependent on economic longevity in order to put education quality at the center. Future erosion of appropriations must be prevented. There must therefore be no requirements for productivity increase and the price and wage recalculation must correspond to the actual cost increase. To further counteract the erosion of resources for higher education, state-owned companies and authorities whose main purpose is to provide goods and services to higher education institutions should primarily do so as a service to facilitate the higher education institutions' activities. This means that they must not be allowed to make an unreasonable surplus on the goods and services provided. In addition, a financing principle which means that the state cannot give higher education institutions new assignments without increasing the allocation of resources must cover all activities at the higher education institutions. In this way, new assignments can be given to the higher education institutions without jeopardizing their financial planning.

6. Admission to higher education

This section deals with admission, which includes how students are admitted to higher education. The access system distinguishes between questions about eligibility and questions about selection. Eligibility is about what qualifications a person must have in order to be admitted to an education. Selection is about which of the qualified applicants are admitted to the education. Within the selection system, there are various selection instruments such as grades, university entrance exams and alternative forms of admission.

6.1 Eligibility for higher education

The level of eligibility for higher education must be justified on the basis of what is required to be able to attain the education. The requirements for eligibility must be absolutely necessary, which means that they must be justified on the basis of the goals and content of the education. The requirements must be designed as achieved learning objectives, and be meaningful in relation to the content of the education. For example, requirements for a certain type of degree project or fees should not occur, as the form does not in itself constitute a competence. Work experience may only be used as a qualification requirement in specific cases. Suitability tests should not normally take place because they are not legally secure and risk preventing people with the right prior knowledge from studying. Instead, the selection should be made based on the applicant's knowledge and skills. The education must provide conditions for all eligible applicants to meet the education's goals based on the prerequisites.

Eligibility requirements must be described in terms of basic and special eligibility. The starting point is that all higher education requires basic eligibility, which means that a prospective student must have passed grades in a number of special upper secondary school courses or have been judged to possess corresponding competence. In addition to

basic qualifications, there may be programs or courses that require special qualifications, which are additional competence requirements in addition to the basic qualifications. Special qualifications must be described in the qualifications area so that applicants can easily get an overview of the qualification requirements.

SFS believes that everyone who has the right competence should have access to higher education, regardless of which education system one has studied in and regardless of whether one has had the opportunity to study in higher education. All applicants must have the right to have formal educational qualifications, such as foreign grades, validated to be eligible for Swedish higher education. All applicants must also be entitled to an assessment of their actual competence (ie competence from working life, non-formal education and informal learning) and whether the competence corresponds to basic or special qualifications. The assessments must be expressed so that they can be used to apply for various educations within the ordinary admission system. Therefore, there must also be legally secure national criteria and routines for assessing real competence.

The basic eligibility level must be harmonized with the degree objectives for all upper secondary school programs. SFS believes that it is the state's responsibility that the education chain is connected and that there is no gap between education at upper secondary level and higher education. Although not all upper secondary education needs to provide all qualifications adreas, all upper secondary school programs must provide basic eligibility. Otherwise, students' high school choices may exclude them from higher education with consequences for the academy's openness and representativeness.

SFS believes that the eligibility requirements at the advanced level should be designed so that applicants with different bachelor's programs can be accepted, unless specific prior knowledge is required. This means that a degree at the basic level should normally give eligibility for programs at the advanced level even in related subject areas where the students have sufficient prior knowledge to complete the education. Eligibility for the advanced level must reflect that knowledge and skills in higher education must be general.

SFS believes that a qualifying pre-education, for example a intro year, should be able to provide a guaranteed place in one of the educations to which the pre-education gives eligibility. Eligible pre-education is an important tool for broadening recruitment to certain educations.

6.2 Selection for higher education

The purpose of the selection system is to choose which students are accepted when there is competition for places of study in a course or program. It is important that the selection for higher education is perceived as legitimate by society, regardless of which admission system is used. Therefore, the system must be transparent, predictable and fair.

In order to be perceived as legitimate, the selection system must be competition-based and based on the students' merits. Separate admission quotas for paid students are something that SFS strongly opposes. In order to be able to adopt people with different backgrounds, experiences and types of qualifications, several different selection instruments are needed. The outcomes of a competition-based system with different selection instruments are not comparable. As the system cannot take into account the different conditions for individuals to create competitive advantages, all selection instruments must be free of charge for the applicant. This creates a predictability in the selection system.

Despite this, SFS believes that a competition-based system with several ways of measuring merits is the most reasonable to use given the large number of places of study, courses and programs as well as applicants. The selection process shall aim to adopt those with the best qualifications, but the training places shall be distributed between the selection groups in a way that promotes broadened recruitment.

Grades from upper secondary school must be an important selection instrument. The reliability of the grading merits is based on the grades being clearly goal-related and that the examination in upper secondary school is legally secure. Since the selection must be based on equal merits being valued equally, grades from supplementary upper secondary education, for example Komvux, must be valued equally as ordinary upper secondary school grades. All high school grades must have equal merit value to make the system transparent, efficient and to avoid unnecessarily controlling students' study choices. Therefore, SFS believes that there should be no credit point system.

SFS believes that the university entrance exam is an important instrument for broadening the selection to higher education, especially for people without competitive high school grades. The university entrance examination shall be a study skills test that tests the ability to study based on the student's knowledge. The test must be adapted to examine in a relevant way study skills for the large range in higher education. The university entrance exam needs to be an equal opportunity for everyone. This can be achieved by offering the same opportunities for pedagogical support measures at the university entrance examination that admitted students can receive. There should also be no fees attached to the university entrance examination.

In some educations, special tests, so-called alternative selection, are needed to measure relevant prior knowledge. Such tests must be made as legally secure as possible, for example by anonymising them. SFS believes that selection in the form of a lottery,

ongoing selection or open admission with selection later in the education is resource-efficient and unpredictable.

6.3 Admission to postgraduate education

Anyone who has completed a degree at advanced level or has equivalent qualifications must be eligible to apply for postgraduate education in their subject area.

Places for doctoral education must be announced publicly and assessment must be made against a clear description of the program and the position and be available to all prospective doctoral students. The application process must be transparent and legally secure. The decision as to who will be employed as a doctoral student should never lie with an individual. When announcing a doctoral student position, it must always be clear whether the position refers to a licentiate degree or doctoral degree. It is important that higher education institutions actively work to counteract the existence of so-called “shadow doctoral students”, individuals who are active as postgraduate students but who are not admitted to postgraduate education.

Admission criteria for doctoral programs must be clear, transparent and reasonable. For admission to postgraduate education, it must never be a requirement that the applicant must have conducted research together with the research group in which the postgraduate education is placed. Nor should it be a requirement that the applicant have published articles in scientific journals. However, this can be a merit.

Research students who are enrolled at a foreign university but who for a time act as visiting researchers at a Swedish university should be especially included in a research group. The higher education institution should be aware of these doctoral students, about the existence and be clear on mutual expectations that exist between them and the higher education institution. Even if these doctoral students are not admitted to a doctoral program at the higher education institution they are active at, they should, as far as possible, be treated in the same way as admitted doctoral students.