

# THE SWEDISH MODEL, STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN QUALITY PROCESSES

**Fredrik Hylerstedt**

Student at Linköping University, former head of educational affairs at LinTek, the student union of the technical faculty at Linköping University

**Johan Kvastad**

Student at the Royal Institute of Technology, former head of educational affairs at the student union, THS

## ABSTRACT

For a long time, Sweden has been in the forefront in involving students in quality improvement of higher education. In this paper two students who have been deeply involved in the student integrated and student driven quality processes of two of Sweden's major technical university give their view on a successful student participation in the educational quality work.

This paper offers details on how student driven quality work is organized and conducted in two major Swedish technical universities. It also offers an introduction to the possible gains and drawbacks of implementing a high degree of student driven quality work at an institution of higher learning. When you have read this paper you will have a better understanding of what it takes to make students perform 1000 appraisal meetings with faculty per year, have them suggest a new policy of pedagogical qualifications and be members of the university board of trustees.

## KEYWORDS

Student, participation, quality processes, higher education

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how the Swedish system of student integrated quality processes through student unions is built. We will discuss the foundations of the system and illustrate possible gains and drawbacks from integrating students into quality processes at institutions of higher learning.

The scope of this article is a descriptive account of the Swedish system of student integrated quality processes based on experiences from the system. It is not a review of the literature on student integration in quality processes nor is it an exhaustive study on the effects caused by such integration. For a deeper discussion on the theoretical framework of student involvement, see the work by Elassy [1].

When it comes to CDIO implementation, this paper is relevant to the implementation of standard 12, it is necessary to involve the students since they are major stakeholders. It is also relevant to standards 8 and 10 since a primary goal for the students in the quality organization is the enhancement of education, including enhancement of faculty teaching skills.

We begin by explaining the general structure of student organizations in Sweden's universities followed by a more detailed account of the student's quality organizations. We end by presenting some examples of topics addressed by student unions and a discussion of gains and drawbacks that we have experienced with a high degree of student driven quality work.

## **STUDENT UNIONS IN SWEDEN**

The primary purpose of a student union is to improve quality in education. Most student unions also work to improve future job prospects and improve study environment for the students. These goals are of course shared by the universities. However, a student union is run by students [2]. Thus the perception of what these goals mean, sometimes differ between the student union and the university.

A student union represents all or a specific population of students at a particular institution of learning [2]. A student union is governed by students elected through a democratic process [2]. Any student organization can apply for status as a student union for a three year term [3], and the organization with the highest number of members in the specific population will be granted the status of student union [4]. All the student union members have the right to vote in student union elections, membership being voluntary and usually costing about 15-40 USD per semester. Student unions are partly financed by the national government, but are also funded through membership fees, university funding and sponsorships.

Larger student unions are organized into student chapters and a central body. The idea of a student chapter is to better represent students locally within the university. For instance, a student union belonging to the faculty of natural sciences could have a physics chapter dedicated to the students of physics and a computer science chapter dedicated to the students of computer science. The chapters have their own governing body and hold elections, just like the student union. Their primary purpose is likewise the improvement of quality in education. Chapters effectively function as a miniature student union, although formally being an organizational part of the student union.

## **NATIONAL ORGANIZATION**

Individual student unions do not work on influencing national politics by themselves. Instead, the national student influence is coordinated through the Swedish National Union of Students (Sveriges förenade studentkårer, SFS). Membership for a student union in SFS is voluntary but about 80 percent of the students are represented by SFS through their local union membership. SFS is governed by a yearly convened council where each member union has a number of votes corresponding to its number of members.

## **SPECIFICALLY ABOUT STUDENT UNION WORK**

The work with quality in education is the highest priority for all student unions; it is also stated in law that to receive the status of a student union the main purpose of the organization has to be to increase the quality of education [2]. This is however not the only work done by a student union. Two other important areas of work are job prospects and student work environment. For instance, student unions arrange career fairs, acquire locales for studying and rent out student apartments.

The quality work of a student union is conducted in close cooperation with the university, decisions are made in a culture of consensus, making it very hard to identify individual contributions. We will thus focus the discussion on the organization and priorities of the student union, rather than try to determine some particular effects caused by student union work.

We will now go into detail about the student union educational work and thus restrict ourselves to our experiences at KTH and Linköping. However, the educational quality work is very similar at other technical universities [5]. The educational quality work is generally split into three parts: Central work which is done by full time employees of the student union, local work which is done voluntarily by student chapter representatives, and student representation work which is done voluntarily by individual students.

### ***Central educational quality work***

The central work is conducted by the full time employees of the student union. The work is focused on handling over-arching issues in the university that impacts a majority of the university's students. A head of educational affairs for a student union is elected and employed on a yearly basis and tasked with leading the educational quality work of the student union.

In Sweden, students (through the student union) have the right to participate in any decision making or preparation before a decision affecting the student's situation or education. This right is protected by law [2]. At the central level of quality work this means that student representatives partake in the governing of the university. The students have the right to three seats at any sort of decision making body that makes decisions that affects the students in any way, including the university board [3]. There might be fewer student representatives in a group if the total number of people in the decision making body is very low [3].

In practice this means that the representatives at the central level partake in decisions regarding recruitment, employment, university rules, quality processes, programs and courses, development projects and so on. This is done in a friendly and collaborative fashion between student representatives and faculty, recognizing student representatives as regular members of various councils and boards. For instance, faculty and student representatives might take time to privately discuss matters prior to important meetings. If the student representatives want to raise an issue on the next meeting they need simply call the secretary and ask for it to be included. When creating work groups for specific tasks, student representatives are invited and sometimes acquire leading roles.

### ***Local quality work***

The local quality work is conducted by student chapters. At this level there is a group of students working for local improvement of education at the program and course level. This group consists of student volunteers. These groups of students partake in meetings of program development, create course evaluations, point the program leadership to various problems and help fellow

students with lighter issues. To illustrate, a more detailed account of course evaluation and student activity in program development follows.

Program development meetings are held by the faculty on a regular basis and include student representatives from the relevant program. The representatives are typically members from the student chapter's educational committee. Here students partake in quality work regarding the program. For instance, which courses and parts of courses are to be included in the program and how they should be structured, creating and revising program learning outcomes and discussing various course developments.

A course evaluation is conducted in four steps: Information gathering, appraisal meeting, documentation and presentation of results on a program development meeting, each of them explained in further detail below:

#### *Information gathering*

Depending on what type of course is to be evaluated, the evaluation is conducted by one or two student representatives who are elected by their coursemates. These representatives are in turn supported by the local student chapter's educational committee. The representatives are tasked with gathering information from the other course participants. In Linköping the representatives use a standardized questionnaire, which is designed by the student union, whilst the representatives have a larger degree of freedom to create their own questions at KTH.

#### *Appraisal meeting*

The student representatives are also tasked with scheduling and chairing a short meeting with the course examiner where the result of the course questionnaire is presented and discussed. These meetings are primarily focused on discussing how the students experienced the course and, based on their experience, what can be done to improve it.

#### *Documentation*

The result of the course questionnaire and appraisal meeting are compiled by the students into a course evaluation report that emphasizes what students have appreciated in the course. It also includes suggested improvements for the next time the course will be given. The final document is archived for further reference. At KTH no centralized guidelines exist for how the student chapters should archive the evaluations and it is up to each student chapter how they arrange it, the evaluations are however always sent to the university for reference. In Linköping the student chapters submit all their evaluations to the student union as well as to the university.

#### *Presentation of results on a program development meeting*

The head of the local chapter's educational committee is tasked with summarizing important points from all course evaluations done and present them at a program development meetings attended by teachers and the head of program development. Examples of results obtained from these meetings include: moving courses in a program in order to allow students to benefit from previous courses, rearranging the workload of two parallel courses to get a higher student pass rate in both courses and adding additional unsupervised time to the course schedule to help students who are taking several courses to avoid scheduling conflicts and partake in group assignments.

For a more in depth discussion of student driven course evaluation see the work by Mannerbro et al. [6]

### ***Student representation***

Student representation is conducted by individual students that are recruited by the union centrally or locally for a specific task of representational nature. This might be participating in hiring and promotion committees, participating in a work environment question panel or participating in the disciplinary board. Once recruited, this representation is conducted fairly independently by the student but with regular reports to either a chapter or to union employees.

## **PERCEPTIONS OF THE QUALITY SYSTEM**

The students' involvement in the quality work at both Linköping and KTH is an intrinsic property of their respective quality systems. A study conducted by The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (Högskoleverket) concluded that the students were well integrated into the dialog about quality development and an irreplaceable asset to Linköping University quality system [7]. The claim of good student integration is further substantiated by Linköping University's biannual internal study, Satisfied Student Index, (Nöjd student index) where 82 percent of the students rank their possibility to influence their education as good or very good [8].

## **EXAMPLES OF TOPICS FOR STUDENT UNION WORK**

### ***Employment requirements***

During a restructuring of the employment requirements at KTH, the student union was a strong proponent for requiring that employees who would teach must have some formal education in education. The end result was that employees lacking half a term of such education upon employment are required to acquire such education. In addition, employees with a teaching role need half a term of formal education for promotion.

### ***Resource allocation for a local Science Education Initiative (SEI).***

During resource allocation for educational development projects at KTH, the student union suggested adopting a local Science Education Initiative, similar to those at CU Boulder and British Columbia.

### **Restructuring of semester schedule**

On the local level, one of the student chapters at Linköping University put forth a suggestion to move a popular course in management accounting to another semester in the program in order to avoid scheduling conflicts with another popular course in market analysis.

## **DISCUSSION OF GAINS AND DRAWBACKS**

The Swedish system of student inclusion is based on a great deal of trust between student representatives and the university leadership: The students expect to be included in every major

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decision and focus on participating in the work of quality improvement instead of focusing on supervising what decisions are made by the university. This close relationship requires constant work from both the university and the students as conflicts arise and need to be settled to both parties satisfaction. The student union and university often share common goals, but this is not always the case. When a conflict arises it is generally solved by open discussion to work out the best solution for both parts. Such discussions may be quite time consuming and emotional, but usually issues are eventually settled this way with no lingering hard feelings.

Student representatives are appointed on a yearly basis. They often start out with a lack of knowledge of what is currently happening in the university. The faculty needs thus cooperate with the student union in bringing new students up to speed on a regular basis. The lack of knowledge is offset by fresh experience of the day to day operations of the university since it allows student representatives to have a unique understanding of how strategic policy is being implemented in the classroom.

The quality work done by the students, both locally and centrally, is a chance for students to reflect on their education and is also seen as a chance to gain a deeper understanding of what has been taught in the courses and why it is important [9].

The educational quality work done by the students offers opportunities for valuable experience in a wide range of areas such as academics, economy, leadership, quality management and governance. The experience is further enhanced since the student organizations are run separately from the university: The students handle strategic planning, budgetary work and complex organizational issues within their own organizations.

## SUMMARY

In conclusion, the student integrated educational quality work in Sweden is implemented through student unions. These student driven organizations closely cooperate with a particular university to improve the quality of education. This integration gives the universities a very good resource for keeping up with what is happening in the daily work of their students. Active at both a central and a local level, students across the entire university organize to help improve teaching, create better curricula and define the engineering education of tomorrow.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

**Fredrik Hylarstedt** is a student at Linköping University (LiU), studying industrial engineering and management with a minor in quality development. He has worked for several years with student driven quality both as head of the educational committee of the industrial engineering and management student chapter and head of educational affairs at LinTek, the student union of the technical faculty at Linköping University. He is currently involved in a project to redesign the quality management system of Linköping University.

**Johan Kvastad** is a student at the royal institute of technology (KTH), studying applied physics. He has several years' experience of student driven quality, including multiple terms as head of the educational committee applied physics student chapter at KTH and a term as head of educational affairs at THS the student union of KTH. He is currently working for his student chapter with a project aimed at introducing new teaching techniques at KTH.

### **Corresponding author:**

Fredrik Hylarstedt  
LinTek, tekniska högskolan  
58135 Linköping  
Sweden  
+46 73 939 7641  
[Hylarstedt@gmail.com](mailto:Hylarstedt@gmail.com)



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