Joint framework for HEIs' research quality assurance and enhancement systems

At its meeting on 13 March 2019, the General Assembly of the Association of Swedish Higher Education Institutions (SUHF) adopted the following joint framework for higher education institutions' (HEIs) quality assurance and quality enhancement of research.

1. Background

By commission from the Board of SUHF The Expert Group for Quality Issues have developed a framework for HEIs' quality assurance and quality enhancement of research. With the Swedish HEIs themselves developing and managing a framework of this kind, they can strengthen their accountability for research quality.

The framework is a lowest common denominator, on which all the HEIs can agree, regarding the central aspects of quality assurance and quality enhancement of research. With their knowledge of the conditions, processes and results of research, the HEIs are the stakeholders best equipped to define the parameters below, which should provide support both for the HEIs' own quality efforts and for the Swedish Higher Education Authority's (UKÄ) scrutiny of the HEIs' research quality assurance.

2. Parameters

The framework is intended to:
- develop the HEIs' ownership of, and accountability for, quality assurance and quality development of research, thereby strengthening the HEIs' autonomy
- be adaptable to an HEI's specific goals and conditions
- foster the HEIs' quality assurance and quality development of research
- take into account the variation among research areas and HEIs that exists
- tighten up quality assessments and measures without, in so doing, prescribing particular methods of quality assurance
- support use of resource-efficient methods for quality assurance
- be based on freedom of research, i.e. the right to freely choose research problems, develop research methods and get research results published
- serve as a guide for external evaluations, including UKÄ's scrutiny of the HEIs.

The framework excludes monitoring of specific policy areas, unless they have a direct bearing on research quality. Political aims, such as promotion of sustainable development, gender equality or internationalisation, are highly integrated with and prioritised in HEIs' activities but should nonetheless be monitored in other procedures, distinct from the quality system itself.

The framework is inspired by standards that have been formulated on the basis of knowledge and experience of what is conducive to high-quality research, and of various international frameworks for evaluating research.[1] Where applicable, the text also cites statutory rules.

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[1] Examples are the Research Excellence Framework (UK), the Standard Evaluation Protocol (Netherlands), the Charter and Code for Researchers (European Commission) and the knowledge overview *Research Quality and the Role of the University Leadership* (SUHF, 2011).

3. Framework

The framework is based on the existence of established, *built-in forms of quality assurance* that exist in research. Peer review with written assessments and seminar discussions with special appointees (an opponent and a discussant) are fundamental tools.

In a research environment with a well-functioning *quality culture*, quality and relevance are continuously assessed in internal and external processes, nationally and internationally. This takes place in conjunction with, for example, decisions on appointments, funding and publication, and in examination in PhD education.

The HEIs' primary responsibility for quality in this respect is, to following up and appraise research performance, quality and relevance, to ensure that this built-in quality culture does function well in their research environments.

The framework outlined below is twofold and the two parts, in turn, have three and six components respectively:
- basic components of an HEI's quality system for research
- themes and requirements to be included in the quality system.

The various parts are, of course, interrelated; and in practice quality work is often a matter of working specifically to improving the prospects of good research and HEI development taking place. The point of the twofold division is nonetheless to focus the notion of a quality system for research on a particular procedure for monitoring, analysing and evaluating research performance and quality. For an HEI to be described as shouldering its responsibility for quality, this procedure may be regarded as indispensable.

1. Basic components of an HEI's quality system for research

1.1 Established procedure for quality assurance and quality development of research

Every HEI has an established presentation, accessible to the public, of its own quality system (policy, programme or equivalent). This describes the distribution, in quality management, of responsibilities and roles in the organisation, and the principles and practical forms of work for assuring and developing quality in the research.

Quality management supports strategic efforts at every level; engages employees, including doctoral students as well as managers; and helps to ensure efficient use of the HEI's resources.

1.2 Continuous monitoring

The HEIs continuously collect, analyse and use information with a bearing on research quality and relevance, to serve as a basis for quality development, prioritisation and strategic decisions.

1.3 Recurrent reviews

The HEIs ensure that their research environments and projects regularly undergo detailed assessments, in both a national and an international perspective, through peer review. This is done in a way that the HEI finds appropriate, to identify strengths, weaknesses and development opportunities. The HEI has systems for capturing and responding to the recommendations to which such assessments give rise.

2. Themes and requirements to be covered by the quality system

2.1 Development and renewal of research

The HEIs work systematically to create forms and scope for development and renewal of their research and research environments.

2.2 Good research practice

The HEIs engage in systematic efforts to promote good research practice, prevent research misconduct and deal with infractions.

2.3 External collaboration

The HEIs work systematically for collaboration with other actors in society, and follow up such such activities. They also issue information about their research and education and work for research results obtained at the HEIs to be disseminated and put to good use.

2.4 Recruitment, career paths and career support

The HEIs see to it that development and renewal of research are supported by legally secure, transparent processes of recruitment and promotion. Employees have access to skills development and career support. Equal opportunities and gender equality are self-evident, integral to these processes.

2.5 Support activities and research infrastructure

The HEIs work to ensure that the research has support that is fit for purpose, and that processes for prioritisation and long-term renewal of research infrastructures are in place.

2.6 Connection between research and education

The HEIs work to foster a close connection between research and education in an appropriate learning environment.