



DECISION: 15 APRIL 2021

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The 2018 PISA survey

– ensuring reliable student participation

Summary and recommendations

The Swedish National Audit Office (Swedish NAO) has audited Sweden's participation in the 2018 PISA survey, with a focus on exclusions and student non-response. Exclusions refer to students selected to sit the assessment tests but who were excluded from participating due to disabilities or limited language proficiency. Student non-response refers to students that do not turn up to the test.

The audit shows deficiencies in the National Agency for Education's (NAE) follow-up work regarding exclusions and how the Government and the NAE have dealt with the doubts that have arisen. The Swedish NAO considers it serious that neither the Government nor the NAE has convincingly followed up on the suspicions of implementation errors raised by both media and the Riksdag Committee on Education. The NAE, the OECD and the Government have argued that Sweden's low participation level in the PISA survey was due to the inflow of migrants in the years before the tests were carried out. The audit shows that this is not a valid explanation. The NAE's decision to no longer report the reasons for exclusion separately has made it more difficult to follow up erroneous exclusions.

Since the results of the PISA survey are used as a target indicator in many contexts, including in the Budget Bill, it is important that the results are reliable. If the PISA survey is not carried out reliably, it may have consequences for both educational policy and confidence in public administration.

Audit findings

Small difference in the number of newly arrived students for the 2018 tests compared with 2015

The NAE has explained the large increase in the proportion of excluded students with the large refugee flows that came around 2015. However, most students who came to Sweden in connection with the refugee crisis had been too long in Swedish schools at the time of the PISA survey in 2018 to be excluded according to OECD's criteria. The Swedish NAO's calculations show that the proportion of students who can be excluded according to the criteria for limited language proficiency has only increased by about half a percentage point for the PISA survey in 2018 compared with the survey in 2015.

Appreciated information meetings but insufficient follow-up

The school coordinators appreciated the information meetings organised by the NAE but perceived the information about exclusions in different ways. The NAE has not ensured that the information has been understood and interpreted in accordance with the regulations, nor has it followed up whether it has been correctly applied. This has caused schools to exclude students on different premises.

The follow-up of exclusions became more difficult after the NAE's legal department made a new interpretation of the Personal Data Act in 2016. The new interpretation meant that exclusions for intellectual disabilities and limited language proficiency are now reported together. The NAE has not referred the issue to the Government in order to possibly achieve a statutory amendment, and thus more functional reporting of exclusions.

Suspicious of erroneous exclusions have not been properly investigated

Although suspicions that too many students were excluded have been raised multiple times, neither the Government nor the NAE has made any convincing efforts to investigate the issue.

It is true that the OECD was tasked with reviewing the Swedish PISA statistics once more, but the result cannot be considered an independent and credible review. OECD's conclusions are based on incorrect assumptions about Swedish schools. At the same time, the Government Offices have stated in internal memorandums that the exclusion figures cannot be explained in the way the NAE and the OECD have explained them. Despite this, the Government has continued to refer to the NAE's and the OECD's statements that everything was done correctly.

The Swedish NAO concludes that the Government has not taken sufficient measures to investigate the doubts arising in connection with the 2018 PISA survey. This is not necessarily because rules or processes are incorrectly designed. However, the Government has not fulfilled its responsibility to ensure that subordinate agencies conduct their activities in accordance with the requirements set by the Constitution.

Recommendations

The Swedish NAO makes the following recommendation to the Government:

- Initiate an investigation into the legal conditions for separate reporting of the grounds for exclusion in the PISA survey.

The Swedish NAO makes the following recommendations to the National Agency for Education:

- Improve efforts to ensure correct participation in upcoming PISA surveys. This should entail greater emphasis on the following details of the implementation:
 - Strengthen initial communication with selected schools.
 - Ensure that the instructions are understood and applied correctly by the school coordinators.
 - Follow up the exclusions in more detail by requesting student protocols before the survey is carried out.
 - Raise the level of ambition to reduce non-response through more follow-up opportunities and use the information sent to parents/custodians to emphasise the importance of pupil participation.