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The intentions and effectiveness of the government reform when establishing UHR and UKÄ

Background and motive

The Swedish Council for Higher Education (UHR) and the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ) were established in 2013 through a government reform in which the two government agencies took over tasks which until then had mainly been vested in the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (HSV), the Swedish Agency for Higher Education Services (VHS) and the International Programme Office for Education and Training (IPK). The reform can be seen as part of the then current trend in public administration to refine government administration. The Government justified the need for the new structure based on unclear prevailing roles and a desire to clarify the role of the state as monitor in the area of higher education. The Government's main intentions with the reform were to

- ensure a clear division of roles between quality assurance and supervision on the one hand and service and promotional assignments on the other
- create synergies between operations
- gain access to broadened analytical capacity
- facilitate stakeholders' use of available support.

As no follow-up to the government reform has been carried out, there is no coherent information on the outcome of the reform. In addition to the question of whether organisational changes lead to more efficient operations, it is also important for purposes of trust in the Government that implemented reforms have the intended consequences.

Purpose

The purpose is to examine whether the intentions behind the government reform in the higher education area have been achieved. We do this by answering the following questions:

1. Does the Government's steering help to clarify the role of the agencies?
2. Does coordination between operations work?
3. Has the Government gained access to broadened analytical capacity?
4. Is the division of roles between UHR and UKÄ clear to relevant stakeholders and does it cater to their needs?

The audit is based mainly on the Government bill on the new agencies and the 2010 public administration bill. They emphasise the need for clear governance, that the assignments of government agencies should not overlap and that they need to cooperate, and that the agencies should provide good services to their target groups.

Conclusions

The audit shows that several of the intentions behind the reform have been achieved and that the current regulatory structure is largely working satisfactorily. However, the National Audit Office believes that the boundary between examining, developing and promoting assignments is sometimes unclear and that the intentions behind the reform regarding clear roles hence can be difficult to maintain in certain areas. This is not necessarily a problem as such – the fact that several government agencies have similar assignments may improve quality. However, unclear roles were against the intentions behind the reform and could mean added work for the agencies and their stakeholders. The National Audit Office concludes that further refining of the agencies' tasks would not automatically lead to more effective or more efficient organisation. By contrast, there is reason to consider how the governance of the agencies can be coordinated in order to promote a more holistic approach to the operations, thus avoiding ambiguities and unnecessary overlaps.

The Government's steering has created unclear boundaries

The audit shows that supervision and service are now clearly separate activities, but that roles in some other areas are more unclear. This applies both as between UHR and UKÄ, and as between them and other government agencies. For example, UKÄ's thematic evaluations cover substantive areas where certain tasks are under the remit of UHR. UKÄ also has analytical assignments, for example with the aim of mapping and disseminating good practice, where the

demarcation in relation to UHR's promotional assignment is unclear. The Swedish National Audit Office considers that the division between promotion and auditing was initially reinforced by the focus on control of the then quality assurance system, while the new system also focuses on the quality development of the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

UKÄ's task of including research in the audit of the quality assurance systems of the HEIs has created demarcation issues in relation to the Swedish Research Council. Several co-operating government agencies also point to problems resulting from the Government's allocating joint assignments without clearly identifying the main responsibility.

Well-functioning cooperation but unclear synergies

Frequent and well-functioning cooperation between UHR and UKÄ is required to deal with the ambiguity that exists in the distribution of certain tasks and assignments between the agencies. If coordination between UHR and UKÄ were to cease functioning, this could lead to duplication of work.

The refining of tasks was intended to create conditions for finding synergies between operations. The audit shows that certain synergies have arisen, for example in the field of analysis and in the evaluation and recognition of foreign qualifications. The government reform also solved the problem of overlapping information assignments between HSV and VHS. However, it is unclear to what extent all the synergies envisaged between different operations within the agencies have been achieved.

The Government has gained access to broadened analytical capacity

Through UHR, the Government has gained access to broader operations than previously. In relation to UKÄ, this means that the agency's analyses, to a greater extent, respond directly to the Government's specific needs. The increase in the specific government assignments means that the possibility for both agencies to carry out their own analyses within the framework of their overall analysis assignments is limited.

Satisfied stakeholders but some uncertainty about the division of roles

UHR's and UKÄ's main stakeholders – HEIs and student unions – largely believe that the agencies cater to their needs. The majority of the HEIs also believe that the analyses carried out by both agencies provide important support for them in the development of their operations. Most HEIs experience the division of roles between UHR and UKÄ overall as clear, but feel less certain about which agency is responsible for promotional issues. Student unions have knowledge about the agencies, but believe that the respective roles of the agencies are somewhat unclear.

Recommendations

According to the National Audit Office, UHR's and UKÄ's respective operations should be viewed to a greater extent as one cohesive operation to promote a holistic approach. Based on its findings and conclusions, the Swedish National Audit Office makes the following recommendations:

- The Government Offices should consider having joint agency dialogues with UHR and UKÄ to ensure a coherent analysis. This could also create conditions for a more effective governance because unclear issues can then be discussed jointly.
- The Government should consider mutual representation on the Board and the Advisory council as a way to further strengthen and formalize coordination between UHR and UKÄ.
- The Government is also recommended to clarify the division of responsibilities and resource allocation when agencies are given joint assignments. It must be clear which agency is in charge and whether a joint decision is to be taken.