

Decision

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Fundamental Principles for the Quality Assurance of Research at Stockholm University

Introduction

This document describes the fundamental principles for the quality assurance of research at Stockholm University and should be read as a supplement to the University's Quality Policy.¹

Quality assurance is built into research

A large number of quality assurance mechanisms of varying kinds are built into research at the University. The scientific methods used in research are in themselves an assurance of quality and a cornerstone of higher education institutions' quality assurance. Herein lie many of the principles that recur as key concepts in quality assurance, including external review, feedback and revision, as well as transparency and openness. Teachers and researchers are required to clearly describe the methods they use and demonstrate that these are suitable for the study in question before their results can appear in a peer-reviewed publication. The validity of their conclusions is routinely assessed by independent researchers. In many cases, the authors of scholarly publications will revise their manuscripts or expand their studies in response to this review process.

Learning to abide by and work in accordance with these principles is a key component of third-cycle education (doctoral studies). For the award of a Degree of Doctor, a doctoral student's thesis, and in many cases the including publications, must undergo external review prior to the public defence. The research career is

¹ This is a translated version of the Swedish document. Should there be any discrepancies between the Swedish version of the document and the English translation, the Swedish version will take precedence.

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also characterized by the quality assurance mechanisms that are inherent to research. In addition to the ongoing review of scholarly publications, the researcher's work is reviewed in each grant application process by impartial external, often international, experts. Alongside this, the researcher's activities in general are reviewed in every recruitment and promotion process. Today, it is impossible to conduct research at a Swedish higher education institution without regularly interacting with these quality assurance mechanisms.

Given the robust quality assurance built into research, it is important for Stockholm University to ensure that it has an organisation, governance and working methods that allow these mechanisms to have the greatest possible effect and to remove any potential obstacles.

In addition to these general principles and working methods, research at Stockholm University is quality assured through a number of other principles, working methods, internal guidelines and ongoing measures, as summarised below.

Teacher recruitment

Teachers at Stockholm University are the driving force behind the University's quality assurance work. They conduct long-term research and the activities summarised in the University's strategies. Teachers can be elected and appointed to the University's most important decision-making positions. Furthermore, it is they that primarily influence the direction of the University's research, not least in planning new recruitments and making strategic choices about which research paths the University should follow. Teacher recruitments are therefore the University's most important processes and decisions, with a major bearing on quality assurance and quality enhancement.

Stockholm University's *Rules of Employment for the Recruitment and Promotion of Teachers* and *Decision-making and Delegation Regulations* are two key documents for ensuring that recruitment processes work well. One critical point is the level at which decisions on new teaching appointments are made. By delegating these decisions to the academic area/faculty level, the University ensures that new recruitments are made strategically in appropriate subject areas. This creates good conditions for reprioritising existing research domains and for new domains to emerge.



It is also of the utmost importance to fill vacant positions with the most competent candidates. This demands open, readily accessible information on the appointment and terms of employment, including future career paths, and that these are competitive and attractive nationally and internationally. The work of the academic appointments boards within the academic areas or faculties, in conjunction with external experts and peer-review, is central to ensuring the quality of the recruitment process. Expert review covers both research and teaching expertise, as well as collaborative ability and management experience.

Like transparency, competition and external review, Stockholm University's work with equal opportunities, gender equality and non-discrimination is vital from a quality perspective. This work helps us to ensure that the entire scientific community views Stockholm University as an attractive employer and that we assess applicants objectively and neutrally, which in turn ensures that quality is the primary concern in recruitment and other selection processes. A multifaceted workplace and research environment also creates preconditions for working dynamically.

Preconditions

The preconditions for conducting high quality research are created on several levels. Individuals must be given opportunities to work and develop whilst being part of an effective and efficient organisation characterised by good leadership. Stockholm University strives to make it easy for researchers to establish and maintain national and international collaborations, and to create clear incentives to, and robust support for, applying for grants for researcher-initiated projects. Effective operational support is key.

The University offers a broad range of compulsory and elective continuing professional development courses for staff and management and all employees are offered opportunities for continuing professional development as part of their employment. The University's flat organisation and collegial culture – for example, mentorship and support for grant applications – also contribute to mutual learning among staff.

The active participation of our teachers in the assessment work of research councils and foundations is also a form of continuing professional development. The organisation's simplicity is important for fostering transparency, participation, and understanding among all employees regarding the University's governance.



It is teachers and researchers who above all create excellent research environments, not which management model or organisation we choose. Setting aside time for staff to conduct their own research is therefore a high priority. In practice, this means that the administrative burden on teachers and researchers must be no more than is absolutely necessary. This places demands on both University Administration and departmental operational support to effectively relieve the burden on staff, to ensure that they have time to conduct research. The University strives for a work environment in which even the most active and successful researchers have the opportunity and desire to, willingly and with collegial support, take on managerial roles such as Head of Department and Director of Studies. This is key to ensuring effective, quality-enhancing management.

Most of the University's research relies on external funding and applying for research grants is a necessary part of the duties of teachers and researchers. The grants we are awarded create the conditions for researchers to initiate projects in potentially innovative fields. The grant application process also has the welcome side-effect of subjecting our researchers' ideas, plans, and ability to undertake complex projects to the scrutiny of unbiased external experts prior to implementation. Teaching appointments, on the other hand, should mainly be financed through direct government funding in order to create a work situation that facilitates long-term, sustainable strategic governance and development. Stockholm University must not become what is commonly referred to as a 'research hotel'. For the same reason, the University takes a very positive view of career-development positions that stake out a clear career path, such as tenure track assistant professorships. These appointments provide clarity to junior researchers about our expectations of them and their future career development. In this way, we can attract competent applicants from the international pool of strong junior researchers, who have yet to undertake their first long-term appointment.

Another vital component of quality assuring research is a system for identifying and dealing with breaches of ethics and misconduct in research. The University's Research Integrity and Ethics Policy is a key document that is supplemented by training and support from the Office for Research, Engagement and Innovation Services (REIS). A working climate that promotes an open, lively and tolerant dialogue between teachers, researchers and management also helps us to identify ethical issues related to planned or ongoing research.



Trust-based collegial management

Stockholm University has a simple line organisation with decision-making and delegation rules that clearly allocate responsibilities and authorities. The organisation is flat: Heads of Department report to the Deputy Vice Presidents/Dean, who is a member of the Senior Management Team, ensuring short communication and information routes between departments and university management. This efficiency is a cornerstone of the University's quality assurance work. The organisation is intended to ensure that management is aware of issues of importance to departments, and that everyone has a good understanding of how the organisation works.

All in all, this creates a high level of commitment to, and sense of responsibility among staff for the University's operations as a whole. This is an important factor for success, particularly in the role of Head of Department, which is a key position for the University's research activities. It also fosters an understanding in the Senior Management Team about the challenges and opportunities faced by departments, facilitating flexible management at departmental level based on the prevailing conditions. Management shall be based on trust and collegial support. In part, the latter is achieved through collegial elections to various drafting and decision-making bodies arranged by the University.

The services of Stockholm University's teachers and researchers are regularly engaged by research councils to assess grant applications, and as well as in the evaluation of the quality of research at other higher education institutions. The high level of expertise among the University's teachers and researchers, along with their thorough understanding of our internal operations, typically positions them well to assess the quality and functionality of the internal operations. When warranted, external experts will also be employed to assess the organisation from a different perspective. However, ongoing general development takes place through dialogue with Stockholm University's own staff. Cooperation across the University's three decision-making levels – the Senior Management Team, academic areas/faculties and departments – is key to countering the potential pitfalls of collegiality.

The University also conducts structured work on strategies, action plans and following up operations, all of which contributes to quality assurance. Researchers at the University work in a constantly changing system governed by scientific, political and economic conditions and objectives, as well as prevailing societal



challenges. Quality assuring and developing operations demands an organisation and working methods that can quickly adapt research to the possibilities that exist within the scope of these dynamic circumstances. This is one important reason for choosing to work based on trust, with the point of departure being the enormous knowledge of staff concerning the organisation's challenges, opportunities, context and conditions.

Peer review is the single most important quality assurance mechanism for research. Depending on the issue in question, this may be conducted by internal or external, national or international experts. Peer review takes place in conjunction with scholarly publication, grant applications, the defence of doctoral theses, recruitment and promotion and when evaluating research fields, operational areas and departments.

Many important aspects of research quality – such as the scope of peer review, the number of applicants when recruiting, publications, etc. – are regularly followed up at both the research environment and departmental levels, in university-wide research indicators. These indicators serve as a basis for discussion at regular dialogues on research quality between departments, academic areas/faculties and the Senior Management Team. When the need arises for further review of research, processes or organisation, the University appoints external reviewers for focused research assessments.

While the research indicators are used to describe various aspects of operations and as a basis for discussion, bibliometrics and other quantitative metrics for quality are no replacement for collegial discussion or the depth of knowledge available within the organisation. There is a risk that simplified quantitative methods will lead to inaccurate analyses and, in the long term, governance that is not fit for purpose. Stockholm University's stance on this issue has been underlined by signing both the San Francisco Declaration of Research Assessment (DORA) and the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment prepared by the Coalition for the Advancement of Research Assessment (CoARA), both of which emphasise the importance of qualitative evaluation methods. The overall recommendation of DORA is: "Do not use journal-based metrics, such as Journal Impact Factors, as a surrogate measure of the quality of individual research articles, to assess an individual scientist's contributions, or in hiring, promotion, or funding decisions."



Stockholm University is also a driving force behind the transition to open access to scholarly publications and research data. This work has both quality assurance and quality enhancement aspects. Greater transparency and openness make it easier for external reviewers and create the preconditions for increased collaboration both within academia and with the surrounding community.

In summary, Stockholm University's quality assurance system for research consists of a number of components that in turn build on a large number of governance documents, regulations, procedures and policies. These elements are based on the quality assurance mechanisms inherent in the overall research system.

This decision has been reached by President Astrid Söderbergh Widding in the presence of Vice President Professor Clas Hättestrand and University Director Åsa Borin. Representatives of the student body have been informed and offered the opportunity to comment. Also present was Anna Riddarström, President's Office (minute taker).