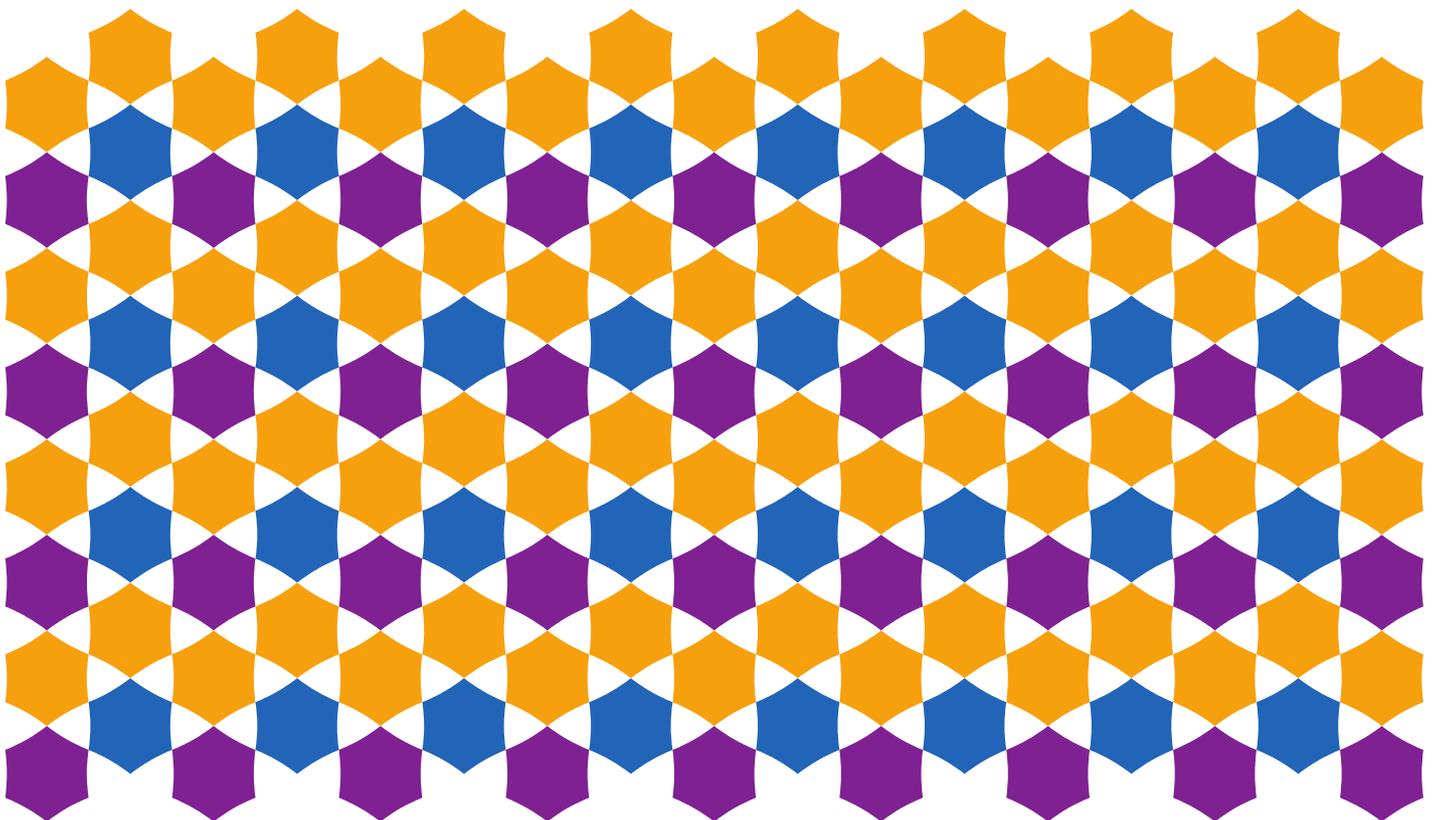


# Distance Learning in Swedish Higher Education

A Short Version in English



Report 2017:18E

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– A Short Version in English

Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ), 2018  
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# The government assignment

In December 2017, the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ) reported on a government assignment to survey and analyse distance learning at higher education institutions (HEI) in Sweden and to report on the HEIs' strategies and range of distance learning courses and degree programmes, and the support they offer distance students. The assignment also included reporting on how the HEIs cooperate on distance learning with municipalities, county councils and regions.

The study is based on questionnaire responses from the HEIs and information from various registers at the Swedish Council for Higher Education (UHR) and Statistics Sweden (SCB). A questionnaire was sent to all 44 universities, university colleges and freestanding higher education providers in the country that are entitled to award qualifications. All but one responded. Thirty-four HEIs have answered that they offer distance learning.

Statistically, UKÄ defines distance learning as “education based on instruction where teachers and students are, for the most part, separated in space and in time”. The questionnaire replies indicate that the HEIs use a variety of definitions for distance learning beyond the one that UKÄ uses, such as blended learning, online education, e-learning and MOOCs.

# The development of distance learning in Sweden

During the early 2000s, major initiatives were taken in distance learning in Sweden. Specific authorities were tasked with promoting the development of distance courses. Originally, distance learning grew out of the desire to increase the availability of education and to broaden the recruitment base of HEIs. Distance learning is seen as part of life-long learning. In the terms of reference for a government committee of inquiry (2017), which includes a review of the resource allocation system for public higher education institutions, the Government emphasises the need both for equal access to education regardless of where you live in the country and for opportunities for lifelong learning.

The extent and range of options for distance learning has changed over the past 10 years. Between the academic years 2007/08 and 2010/11, there was an increase from 7 659 to 9 982 distance learning courses and degree programmes (see Figure 1). Thereafter, a gradual decline occurred and in 2016/17 there were 7 332 distance learning courses and degree programmes offered. That this number peaked in the academic year 2010/11 was due to a temporary expansion of funding to universities, which meant that HEIs could accept more students than ever before.

Approximately 90 per cent of distance learning degree programmes and courses are offered as freestanding courses. In 2016/17, the institutions offered 6 833 freestanding courses. The number of offered distance learning degree programmes has been stable, around 500 per year, for the academic years studied. This shows that the decrease in distance learning since 2010/11 is mainly due to a reduced number of freestanding courses.

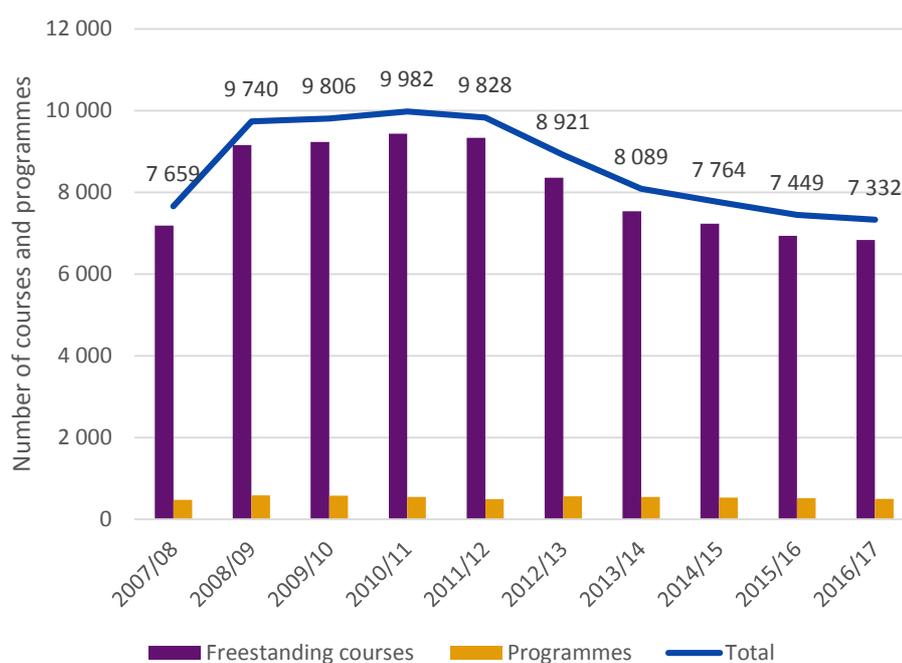


Figure 1. The number of offered distance learning freestanding courses and degree programmes between the academic years 2007/08 and 2016/17. Cancelled courses are included. Source: UHR

During the same period, the number of course registrations (which consist of individual student registrations for courses) increased by 88 per cent for degree programme courses (courses included in a degree programme). This occurred despite a stable number of degree programmes on offer. At the same time, the number of course registrations on freestanding courses has decreased since 2010/11 (see Figure 2). This means that the proportion of such distance learning that is part of degree programmes has increased, and in 2015/16 amounted to 39 per cent of all registrations, compared with 28 per cent in 2006/07.

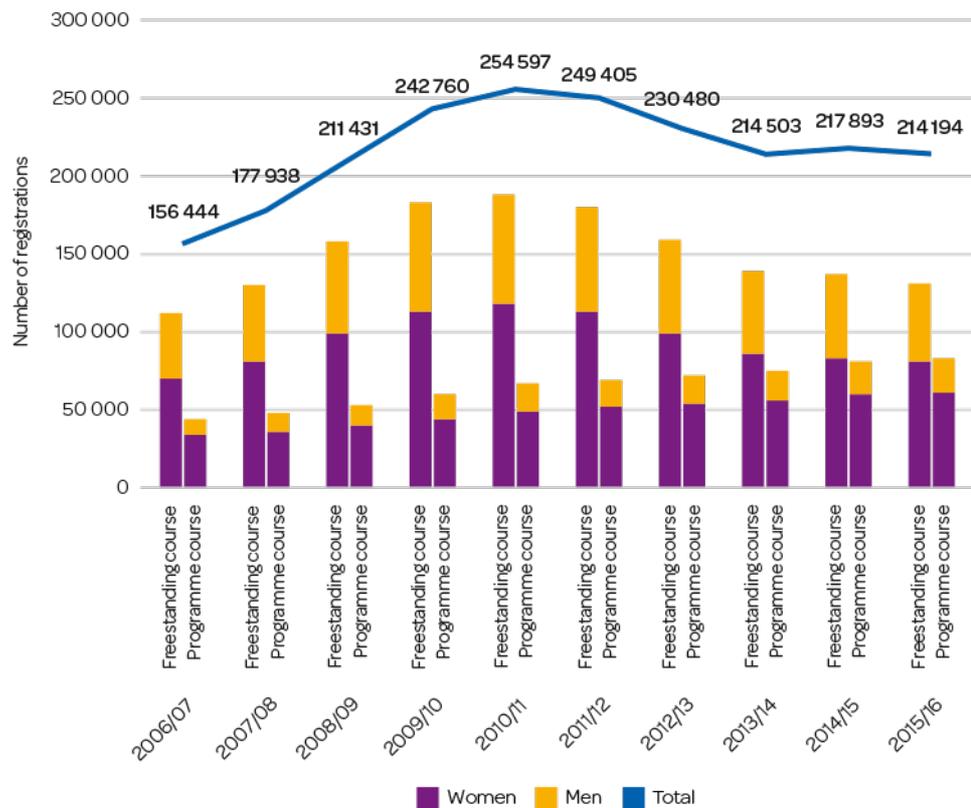


Figure 2. The number of registrations for freestanding courses and degree programme courses offered as distance learning for the academic years 2006/07 to 2015/16. Source: SCB

### Women and men attend different distance learning courses

Annually, about 400 000 students attend HEIs in Sweden. About 100 000 of these were registered for at least one distance course. In 2015/16, 67 per cent of students studying only through distance learning were women and 33 per cent were men. This distribution between men and women has been consistent for a longer period. The corresponding proportion among those who only attend campus-based courses and programmes was 60 and 40 per cent, respectively. In total, for the period studied, women account for 66 per cent of all registrations, and this has not changed in principle over the academic years. Women account for a higher proportion of

registrations on programme courses compared with freestanding courses, 74 per cent compared to 62 per cent for men, which shows that women attend distance learning, especially at programme level, to a greater degree than men. Women take more distance courses in healthcare, while men take more distance courses in engineering and technology (Figure 3).

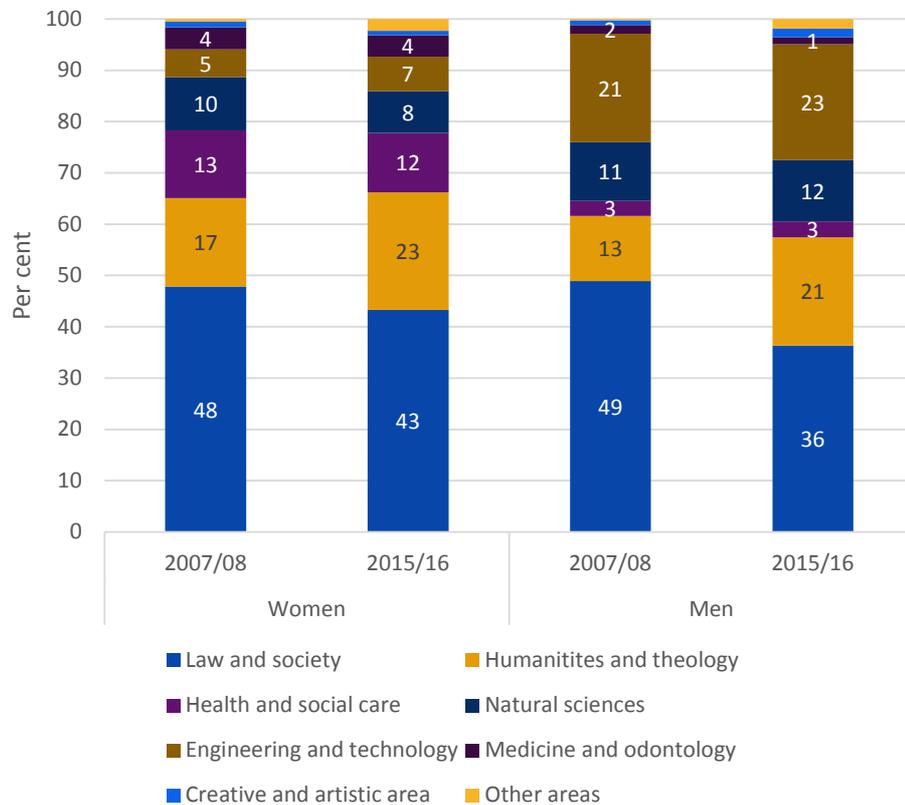


Figure 3. Percentage of course registrations divided into subjects and women and men for the academic years 2007/08 and 2015/16. Source: SCB

Student performance indicators are overall high on programme courses in professional qualification programmes (2013/14: 89 per cent for women and 77 per cent for men) where the performance indicator for women in particular is comparable to what is achieved on programme courses within campus-based professional qualification programmes. On the other hand, students perform less well on freestanding distance courses than the equivalent campus-based courses. The achievement level on campus-based distance freestanding courses, based on course registrations from 2013/14 that have been followed up through 2015/16, was 55 per cent for women and 48 per cent for men compared with 70 per cent and 64 per cent, respectively, for campus-based freestanding courses.

### Distance learning's role in regional access to expertise

Many parts of the country have problems accessing qualified staff, especially in fields crucial for society like teacher training, nursing and care programmes. In distance learning, the number of students who have attended programmes has increased, especially in the new teacher training programmes and the specialist nursing

programmes. UKÄ believes that distance learning could be part of the answer to increasing and improving access to expertise in these areas. Contract education can also contribute to increased access to qualified staff. The HEIs have reported 345 contract education courses offered as distance learning in the academic year 2016/17. A total of at least 13 600 people participated in these contract courses. The most common were courses for teachers.

Distance students are older than campus students and more often have children living at home (applies to both men and women), which may mean a stronger link to their home town. In addition, parents of distance students more often have lower education levels than parents of campus students, indicating that distance and campus students come from different social backgrounds.

UKÄ has concluded that distance learning facilitates wider participation and lifelong learning for those living outside cities with higher education institutions. The HEIs also emphasize this in their strategies. In addition, distance students in the northern counties attend programme courses at HEIs located in the same counties as their home residence more often than students residing in the counties with the major cities and the more southern counties. Students in the major cities and the more southern counties typically attend freestanding courses in counties other than their home counties. This highlights the importance of offering distance learning throughout the country.

Half of the HEIs indicate that they cooperate with municipalities, county councils and regions on education through municipal learning centres or the equivalent. UKÄ's study shows that there are challenges both regarding HEIs' cooperation with the surrounding community and in producing forecasts for future labour market needs. If the Government wishes to strengthen dialogue and cooperation between the HEIs, on the one hand, and municipalities, regions, industry and other actors on the other, incentives may be required to allow HEIs to prioritise this more than other activities.

# UKÄ's other proposals

All 34 HEIs providing distance learning state that they use learning platforms for their distance learning and often even for campus-based education. The HEIs often do not distinguish between distance students and campus students in terms of different kinds of support functions. The most common support for distance students is what is provided by the lecturer, but there are other forms of support, such as that provided by IT and ICT staff and digital support resources. The analysis of the HEIs' strategies for distance learning also shows that the most important part of these strategies is educational and technical development. Development is also seen as a future opportunity both for widening participation and lifelong learning. Future challenges mentioned by the HEIs are the high development costs and in the financing of distance learning. UKÄ wishes to reiterate the proposal to provide support for the development of digital pedagogics, which was noted in UKÄ's 2016 report on MOOCs in Swedish higher education, *Öppna nätbaserade kurser (MOOCs) i svensk högskola*.

It is important that the HEIs report data on programmes and courses in a consistent manner for follow-up and information purposes. Reported data can form the basis for conclusions about distance learning and national or regional initiatives on distance learning. It is therefore important that the HEIs agree on definitions and communicate with each other if new definitions are needed. UKÄ is willing to participate in such a discussion. There is also a need to monitor the existence of learning centres.

The Swedish Higher Education Authority (Universitetskanslersämbetet – UKÄ) is to contribute to strengthening Swedish higher education and Sweden as a knowledge society. We review the quality of higher education programmes, we analyse and follow-up trends within higher education and we monitor the rights of students.

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