

The Swedish Higher Education Authority's Pandemic Assignment

Interim Report 3



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Report 2022:4

Published by the Swedish Higher Education Authority 2022

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Summary

Even in 2021, operations at higher education institutions (HEIs) were greatly impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. This is the third interim report for the government assignment to follow up the consequences to higher education of decisions and initiatives taken because of the novel coronavirus. The material consists of four reports produced since the most recent reporting occasion in December 2021.

In each case, this involved repeating studies conducted in one of the previous interim reports, but where new data have allowed the examination of effects during the later stages of the coronavirus pandemic. A first report looked at how HEIs returned to teaching and working on campus. UKÄ has tracked activity at seven campuses during the entire corona pandemic to gain a picture of the transition to distance teaching and remote working at HEIs. Data are now available for the period through February 2022.

These data show a rapid increase in activity on campus during the first part of the spring semester. After increasing spread of infection during the winter, most of the Government's and the Public Health Agency of Sweden's restrictions for the corona pandemic were concluded from 9 February 2022. At the end of February 2022, activity was 72 per cent of the equivalent week prior to the pandemic. This can be compared with the latter part of the autumn semester 2021, when activity was 60 per cent of the equivalent period two years earlier.

The transition to distance learning has placed great demands on both students and teachers. The overall picture, however, is that no major effects can be detected from the coronavirus pandemic on student completion rates. At the beginning of the pandemic, the immediate performance level (a faster follow-up than the normal measurement method) fell somewhat. This was primarily because more students took freestanding courses, where the average performance level is significantly lower than academic programmes.

After this initial period, during 2021 there was a recovery and overall student performance levels have increased somewhat during the pandemic. This applies to all forms of study, both academic programmes and freestanding courses. Younger students, in particular, have improved their immediate performance levels during the pandemic. However, it is not possible to identify any changes to the immediate dropouts during the pandemic.

A clear impact of the pandemic was a significant increase in disciplinary cases during 2020. This increase continued over the last year. In 2021,

the number of disciplinary cases increased by 24 per cent from the previous year. Compared with before the pandemic, the number of disciplinary cases has doubled.

Plagiarism remains the most common cause of a student facing a disciplinary case, but, above all, unauthorised collaboration has increased significantly during the pandemic. About half of the HEIs report seeing in the last year a continued increase in disciplinary cases that they judge resulted from the pandemic. Among the reasons noted in 2021, just as in the previous year, is the transition to distance teaching and difficulties with adapting to digital examinations. Some HEIs also point to better controls facilitating discovery of more cases of suspected cheating.

In the last two years, the labour market has been marked by the coronavirus pandemic. Data for 2021 show that the labour market for graduates of HEIs has improved somewhat in the last year, but the percentage that have a good opportunity to make a living six months after graduation is somewhat lower than prior to the pandemic.

There are still clear differences between different programmes. For graduates of master of science in engineering programmes, the labour market worsened at the beginning of the pandemic, but it has now recovered. The same does not apply to graduates of university engineering programmes and architecture programmes. They continue to have a worse position on the labour market compared with prior to the pandemic. The labour market for graduates of health and medical programmes, however, has not been impacted notably.

Gender segregation is reflected in the differences between women and men in their position on the labour market. Men have seen a greater impact on the labour market, since men more commonly choose programmes that lead to work in the private sector, which has been more adversely affected. At the same time, women often choose programmes that lead to work in the public sector, which the pandemic has not impacted in the same way.

Introduction

The Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ) has been tasked by the Government to follow up the consequences to higher education of decisions and initiatives taken because of the novel coronavirus. The purpose is to be able to follow up the results of initiatives and gain lessons from the effects on higher education and research in the short and long term. The final report for the assignment will be submitted by 1 December 2022.

The assignment includes regular updates from UKÄ to the Ministry of Education and Research about the assignment's implementation and reports on the results of the follow-up. UKÄ has decided to divide the assignment period into four interim reports:

- 16 March 2021 (interim report)
- 1 December 2021 (interim report)
- 15 March 2022 (interim report)
- 1 December 2022 (final report).

This report is the third interim report on the government assignment. It consists of four reports produced since the previous reporting occasion in December 2021.

Follow-up of the consequences of the novel coronavirus for higher education, public service agreement 2 July 2020

“The Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ) is tasked with following up the consequences to higher education resulting from decisions and initiatives taken because of the novel coronavirus. The follow-up is to include the effects of the transition to distance teaching and the initiatives taken by the Government concerning, e.g., expansion of higher education. The purpose is to be able to follow up the results of initiatives and gain lessons from the effects on higher education and research in the short and long term. The follow-up is to consider such questions as quality, the fair and equal application of the legislation, regulations and rules, and scaling. The assignment is to be conducted in dialogue with higher education institutions.

UKÄ is to regularly update the Government Office (Ministry of Education and Research) on the progress of the assignment, regularly report the results of the follow-up and submit a final report no later than 1 December 2022.”

Amendment to the assignment, public service agreement 22 July 2022

“The follow-up is also to consider questions of widening participation.”

Our approach

UKÄ has organised the work of the assignment in eight theme areas, where we study the effects of the coronavirus pandemic within different areas:

1. Basic projects
2. Study and work environment
3. Quality of education
4. Research
5. Student rights
6. Labour market
7. Finances and funding
8. Mobility and internationalisation

Each theme area, in turn, includes one or more subprojects to answer questions on how the coronavirus pandemic has impacted operations at HEIs in different ways. To provide as complete a picture as possible, the follow-up includes statistics and analyses from UKÄ's regular operations in reporting on the consequences of the pandemic.

In autumn 2021, work began within mobility and internationalisation, and several new projects began looking at the labour market.

Follow-ups and analyses collected from the HEIs also provide important documentation. For some subprojects, UKÄ has also utilised consultancies to support the work. The assignment has its own website: *Coronaviruset och högskolan*. The site is updated regularly with our own studies and with studies by others related to the pandemic and higher education.

Consultation is an important part of the assignment, particularly with the HEIs' management. We also cooperate with student organisations and other public authorities. Different subprojects are conducted in cooperation with the Swedish Council for Higher Education, the Swedish National Agency for Education, and the Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education, and we have regular contact with the Swedish Research Council and the National Board of Student Finance (CSN). In connection with the assignment, UKÄ also has contact with its Nordic equivalents, particularly the Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and Education (NIFU) and the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT). The project group has also

informed UKÄ's two reference groups for the national quality assurance system about the work and received feedback from them.

On 27 January 2021, UKÄ held a seminar and other activities on student rights related to online examinations. This was also one of the topics at UKÄ's conference on student rights held on 21 October 2021, where the Association of Swedish Higher Education Institutions (SUHF) presented its recommendations on remote online examinations using real-time streaming. On 1 December 2021, UKÄ held a seminar on the second interim report and an equivalent seminar on the third interim report will be held in the end of March 2022.

The interim report

The material for this interim report consists of four reports produced since the most recent reporting occasion in December 2021. In each case, this involved repeating studies conducted in one of the previous interim reports, but where new data have allowed the examination of effects during the later stages of the coronavirus pandemic. As previously, we present the publications by briefly summarising their results in this report. The full publications are available for download from the assignment's website.

The return of students to campus

This section presents new information on activity at the HEIs' campuses during the period through February 2022.

Activity on campus increasing rapidly

The coronavirus pandemic has led to new questions and an increased need to be able to describe current developments. Changes have occurred very quickly, and this has made it more important to be able to provide updated statistics quickly. To gain a picture of the transition to distance teaching and remote working at HEIs, UKÄ has used mobile phone data to track activity at seven campuses during the corona pandemic. Data are now available for the period through February 2022.

The shift away from campus went very quickly at the beginning of the pandemic. In just a few days in March 2020, a new and significantly lower level of activity on campus became the norm. The HEIs opened campuses in the autumn 2020, but closed campuses again during late autumn when the spread of infection rebounded. During the later part of autumn 2021, activity was somewhat higher than the same period 2020, but the differences were not significant.

UKÄ's new data show that activity on campus during the first part of the spring semester 2022 has increased rapidly. After an increase in the spread of infection during the winter, most of the Government's and the Public Health Agency of Sweden's restrictions from the corona pandemic were concluded from 9 February 2022. At the end of February 2022, activity was 72 per cent compared with the equivalent week prior to the pandemic. This can be compared with the latter part of the autumn semester 2021, when activity was 60 per cent of the equivalent period two years earlier.

Read more

Kraftigt minskad aktivitet på campus under coronapandemin [Significantly reduced activity on campuses during the coronavirus pandemic] Statistical analysis, 2021-05-25, UKÄ.

Aktiviteten på campus på väg tillbaka – men långt kvar till nivån före pandemin [Activity on campuses is rebounding but far from pre-pandemic levels], Report, 2021-11-24, UKÄ.

Aktiviteten på campus ökar snabbt vintern 2022 [Activity on campus increasing rapidly in the winter 2022], Report, 2022-03-07, UKÄ.

Consequences for higher education during the coronavirus pandemic

This section presents statistics and studies on the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic for higher education.

Student completion rates not impacted

The transition to distance teaching has placed great demands on both students and teachers. As a consequence of the pandemic, more students have begun higher education. Both of these factors could have an impact on student performance and retention in higher education. UKÄ has therefore studied student completion based on students' immediate performance levels and immediate dropouts. The immediate measurements mean a faster follow-up than the normal measurement methods for performance levels and dropouts.

The overall picture is that no major effects can be detected from the coronavirus pandemic on student immediate performance levels or programme new entrants' immediate dropouts from programmes. Overall, the students' immediate performance levels increased by one percentage point during the pandemic but the trend between the years has been uneven. Over the first year, immediate performance levels fell by one percentage point. After this, there was a rebound, and between the spring semesters 2020 and 2021 the immediate performance levels increased by nearly two percentage points. During the pandemic, there was a change in the distribution of students among study forms, and this has impacted the average performance level.

It is not possible to see any clear differences in how the immediate performance level has changed between different student groups, except for the age of students. The immediate performance level has improved above all for the youngest students, but it has largely stayed unchanged for older students. It is also not possible to identify any changes to the immediate dropouts during the pandemic. On the contrary, retention of programme new entrants is strikingly stable. The differences between years are small.

Read more

Studenternas avhopp och prestationer under coronapandemin [Student dropout and performance during the coronavirus pandemic], Report, 2022-02-23, UKÄ.

Continued increase in disciplinary cases

For many years, UKÄ has collected data and reported statistics on the disciplinary cases decided on by HEIs. As part of its work with the government assignment on the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic on higher education, UKÄ has asked specific questions since 2020 about disciplinary cases during the pandemic.

In 2021, just over 3000 students were subjects of disciplinary measures. This represents an increase of 24 per cent compared with the previous year. Compared with before the pandemic, the number of disciplinary cases has doubled. Plagiarism has been the most common reason students have faced a disciplinary measure over all the years that UKÄ has collected data. This percentage increased somewhat during the last year. But above all, unauthorised collaboration has increased significantly during the pandemic, and this trend has continued in 2021.

About half of the HEIs report seeing in the last year a continued increase in disciplinary cases that they judge resulted from the pandemic. A third of HEIs report that the number of disciplinary cases is at the same level as the previous year. Some HEIs report a decrease in the number of cases compared with the previous year.

Among the reasons noted in 2021 for the continued increase in the number of disciplinary cases, as was the case in the previous year, is the transition to distance teaching and difficulties with adapting to online examinations. Some HEIs also point to better controls facilitating discovery of more cases of suspected cheating. The HEIs reporting no changes or decreases in the number of disciplinary cases point to adaptations and improvements in examinations as possible causes. Many HEIs, including those that reported more disciplinary cases, conclude that the return to on-campus teaching and examinations, which began in autumn 2021, has contributed to a decrease in the number of disciplinary cases.

Responses by several HEIs indicate that in 2022 they are planning training for both teaching and administrative staff on cheating and managing cases of suspected disciplinary behaviour.

Read more

Disciplinärenden 2021 vid universitet och högskolor [Disciplinary cases in 2021 at higher education institutions], Ref. no. 2022:3, UKÄ.

The outflow of students from higher education

This section presents a study of the labour market for recent graduates in 2021.

Improved labour market for recent graduates

In the last two years, the labour market has been marked by the coronavirus pandemic, with increasing unemployment, particularly among young people. For this reason, UKÄ has used brief statistics to study opportunities for making a good living on the labour market for recent graduates.

The results show that during the initial phase of the pandemic, there was a certain degree of worsening on the labour market for recent graduates. Between 2019 and 2020, the percentage of graduates that had good potential for earning a living six months after graduating had fallen from 77 per cent to 74 per cent. Thereafter, the labour market has recovered to some extent. Of new graduates in the spring semester 2021, 75 per cent had good potential for earning a living six months after graduating.

At the same time, there are large differences between different programmes. Graduates of master of science in engineering programmes had a relatively difficult time at the beginning of the pandemic, but that trend has now been broken. The same does not apply to graduates of university engineering programmes and architecture programmes. They continue to have a worse position on the labour market compared with prior to the pandemic. The labour market for graduates of health and medical programmes, however, does not seem to have been impacted notably by the coronavirus pandemic.

This is also reflected in a larger percentage of graduating women than men having a good opportunity to make a living on the labour market. The background is gender-segregated educational choices; female-domi-

nated programmes lead to careers in the public sector while male-dominated programmes lead to careers in the private sector. One consequence of the corona pandemic is that the private sector labour market was initially hit harder than the public sector.

Read more

Coronapandemin och arbetsmarknaden för nytexaminerade studenter 2021 [The coronavirus pandemic and the labour market for recent graduates from higher education 2021], Report, 2022-03-14, UKÄ.

Annex – Ongoing and planned studies

UKÄ works with the pandemic assignment in eight areas: Basic projects; Study and work environment; Quality of education; Research; Student rights; Labour market; Finances and funding; and Mobility and internationalisation. Below, we list ongoing and currently planned studies within these different areas.

Basic projects

Upper-secondary students who received distance teaching – how do they perform in higher education? Preliminary publication date is autumn 2022. Subproject in cooperation with the Swedish National Agency for Education.

Quality of education

Persistent changes in the clinical part of the nursing programme after the coronavirus pandemic. Preliminary publication date is autumn 2022.

The quality of distance education and remote summative assessment. Preliminary publication date is autumn 2022.

Finances

Analysis of annual reports for 2021. Preliminary publication date is March 2022.

Labour market

Follow-up study of students who had difficulties becoming established on the labour market at the first follow-up occasion. Preliminary publication date is spring 2022.

Unemployed and laid off – the degree to which they have turned to higher education and other post-secondary education. Preliminary publication date is autumn 2022. The subproject was conducted in cooperation with the Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education.

Mobility and internationalisation

The pandemic's influence on mobility through exchange programmes. Preliminary publication date is spring 2022. The subproject was conducted in cooperation with the Swedish Council for Higher Education.

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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