Some reflections and lessons following the first round of higher education institutional reviews

Introduction
On 19 March 2019, the first decisions were taken in the Swedish Higher Education Authority’s higher education institutional reviews within the national quality assurance system for the period of 2017–2022, and in which the institutional reviews are one of four components. The first round included four higher education institutions (HEIs): Mälardalen University (MdH), University of Borås (HB), Malmö University (MaU) and Jönköping University (JU).

The primary purpose of this document is to summarise and discuss some reflections and lessons from the first round of institutional reviews. Because this document only includes four HEIs, no general conclusions can be drawn. Rather, the issues raised here are specific to this particular round. Hopefully this summary can offer support and inspiration for the ongoing work at the HEIs; it will also serve as a basis for and be part of UKÄ’s upcoming analyses of completed institutional reviews.

This summary is based primarily on a review of the four reports, but also on issues raised at the feedback conference held on 22 May 2019. Representatives of the four HEIs and the chairs of each assessment panel took part in the feedback conference. The assessment panels highlight both strengths and areas for improvement in the reports. UKÄ’s review of the reports focused on identifying some of the strengths and areas for improvement raised by the assessment panels in all four reports. The identified strengths and areas for improvement recur in different assessment areas and pertain to different levels and parts of the organisations and can be viewed as both central and urgent for the HEIs’ systematic quality assurance processes.

At the feedback conference, the HEIs were asked to reflect on one or more of the following statements from their perspectives:

Systematic follow-up, development and feedback
A well-functioning quality assurance process is characterised by such things as systematic work at every level and in all parts of the HEI. The systematic work includes the implementation of follow-ups, and that they lead to relevant measures to improve and develop the courses and programmes. This is a significant challenge for everyone involved with quality work, an aspect that also came up in the four reports.

Internal learning
All four reviews show many excellent examples of development processes that are carried out within the HEIs, and of knowledge and lessons that are important from a quality assurance perspective. The reviews point out the challenge of systematically disseminating information and internal learning throughout the organisation, based on these lessons and experiences.

**Link between research and education**
The importance to the HEIs of the link between education and research emerged clearly in the reviews, as have several examples of activities and measures intended to ensure the connection of education to research. The reviews also present several challenges.

The text below begins with some overarching reflections and continues with a report on some of the special challenges associated with the HEIs’ quality assurance processes. In addition to the three things mentioned above, there are also reflections on procedures and processes, commitment, involvement and communication. To conclude, some of the experiences and reflections on the actual review process are summarised.

**Overarching reflections**
Efforts to improve the quality systems are underway at all four HEIs, which is reflected in the reviews. While not all components of the systems have been tried in practice, there have been quality systems in place or quality work carried out in the past. However, it is clear that the new, national quality assurance system for higher education has caused the HEIs to review and start to revise their existing systems. In some cases, the HEIs have moved towards more centralised systems, with a clear intention to harmonise the system and work between different parts of the organisation. In other cases, they have chosen more decentralised systems, where different parts of the organisation are given greater space to develop local adaptations within the framework of an overarching quality system. The different models encounter different challenges. Based on the reports, perhaps the primary challenge for a centralised system is to have it firmly established within the organisation, while for a decentralised system, the challenge is clarity, for example in connection to the degree of freedom at the different levels within the organisation.

The fact that the systems are under development has entailed some difficulties for the assessors when it comes to expressing how well all components of the systems function and the degree to which they contribute to development and learning. Different factors have played into the assessment here, for example, the extent to which the current system is a clear development of a previous system and how far the HEI has come in planning, testing and implementing the various components, and the scope to which this has taken place.

The HEIs’ level of ambition is consistently high, and in addition to clearly incorporating the national quality assurance system, there are also clear links to legislation and the ESG. The HEIs’ own particular conditions are also an important starting point for how they have chosen to design their systems. Quality work is based on the HEIs’ quality policies or equivalent, which, along with work plans, delegation of authority and other
aspects, contribute to structures that provide the background for the quality work. The reports also indicate that the HEIs’ leadership demonstrate both involvement in and commitment to ongoing quality work.

The reports indicate that a connection exists between the quality system and the overarching strategies, but all four HEIs struggle to clarify this. This may involve how well they have described the connection or the absence of clear evidence for its visibility in practice.

All four of the HEIs are considered to ensure that their courses and programmes are useful and prepare students to face a changing labour market, and collaboration with the labour market is deemed as satisfactory. Among other things, the reports bring up that clear procedures and processes are in place for ensuring the presence of these components and structured, clear interaction with external parties, for example in the form of external councils.

Special challenges

Procedures and processes
The first two assessment criteria within the area of governance and organisation stipulate that the HEIs should have a quality policy related to the HEI’s profile and overarching strategy, and serves as a tool for strategic governance. One challenge in this context is clarifying how quality assurance, through different processes and procedures, is connected to other operational development and resource priorities, as well as how this in turn supports the HEI’s strategy and profile. A part of this challenge may be due to the systems not having been tested in their entirety, making it difficult to see their effects in all areas. The complexity of operations may also make it difficult to follow individual issues and to see and understand how they are handled and to see their consequences. Regardless, this is a central issue for the ability of the quality system to serve its purpose.

Allocation of responsibility, procedures and processes are documented. A recurring challenge in the reviews is to make them comprehensive, clear and easily accessible. According to the assessors, one of the conditions for conducting quality work systematically throughout the organisation is familiarity with the procedures, rules and regulations. The reports note an example of challenges with clarity and allocation of responsibility: It is difficult to clarify central rules that apply to the entire organisation and there needs to be room to manoeuvre at the local level to adjust the system based on applicable conditions. Other examples are lack of clear information about who is responsible for certain crucial parts of the system, for example when something should be followed up and by which office. In other cases, documents may contain partially contradictory information, and it is unclear which document takes priority. Clear and uniform use of terminology is yet another issue raised that would increase transparency and strengthen involvement and commitment.

In summary, the reports show that, moving forward, policy documents need reviewing to ensure they are uniform, understandable and easily accessible. Recommendations for
improving clarity include creating graphics or “maps” that give an overview of structures and processes and ensuring that key information is also available in English. One issue that was discussed at the feedback conference that is related to clarity and transparency is the scope of the documentation. Traceability in the system requires clear documentation, while the quantity of documentation risks making it difficult to gain an overview and absorb the information. This balance will be a clear challenge moving forward.

The reports also recommend clear quality criteria describing good/high quality for the organisation. It is felt that these can contribute to the system “capturing” the right information. According to the assessors, clear goals and criteria can facilitate communication with everyone involved regarding which priorities need to be set and the basis of their selection. One example to which we will return later is the link between research and education: clarity can be improved by defining what it entails specifically for the individual HEI or the specific programme.

Commitment and involvement
Throughout the reports, leadership at the different HEIs want to achieve both involvement in and commitment to the quality work. There is an awareness that this is key to ensuring that the quality work permeates the entire operation. The challenges noted in the reports include: how clear the system is for individual employees and students; how well the HEI and individuals with responsibility at different levels in the organisation can communicate what happens and why; that there are known and available forums where quality issues are systematically discussed and communicated; and not least, that the result of the quality work is made known within the organisation.

A special challenge brought up in the reports is feedback, especially to students, but also to teachers, in conjunction with course and programme follow-ups. The lack of feedback and clear results are pointed to as explanations for why it is difficult to get students to participate in course evaluations. At the same time, the HEIs point out that course and programme follow-ups are a central part of education-related quality work and should therefore also be given special attention. Several examples from some areas of the organisations show that this works well and demonstrate the improvement work being implemented, but these examples also need to be shared the rest of the organisation to ensure internal learning.

Communication
How the quality work and system are communicated is important for both clarity and as an opportunity for involvement and commitment. The primary challenge is systematically reaching all employees, students and other stakeholders who are not represented in any formal groups. Good examples included in the reports of how HEIs work to communicate issues of quality include the establishment of a communication plan and different forms of quality days/conferences.

Communication with students and employees who do not speak Swedish is brought up in several of the reports as an area in need of improvement. Access to information is important for enabling these individuals to participate and be involved on the same terms
as everyone else, and to be made aware of the good examples that exist within the operation.

**Systematic work**

Achieving systematic work at all levels and in all parts of the organisation is central for well-functioning quality assurance processes. This is one of the major challenges for the reviewed HEIs.

As mentioned above, the HEIs are working to develop their systems. As a consequence, systematic work in some areas is difficult to document. But even in areas that have been tested, whether the systems are able to systematically capture areas for improvement is a recurring question. Perhaps above all, how well they succeed at systematically handling measures, follow-ups and feedback to the parties involved is relevant. In the paragraph above on commitment and clarity, it is noted that the various reports point to feedback in conjunction with course and programme follow-ups as an area for improvement. Another challenge connected to course and programme follow-ups is how the actual follow-up is conducted. The HEIs use, among other things, different forms of surveys as a primary method for identifying areas for improvement. At the same time, it is difficult to achieve a sufficiently high response rate for the surveys to be a reliable basis for follow-up. This is a general and well-known problem which applies beyond these four HEIs. The reports show that the HEIs are trying different ways to address low response rates, both through motivating students to complete the surveys and by using additional methods for following up and identifying the areas in need of improvement. The reports note that some parts of the organisations have several good examples demonstrating that this can work well. One of the challenges is internal dissemination of these good examples and incorporating them into the systematic work. An issue noted at the feedback conference was the extent to which students are prepared to give thoughtful and constructive feedback. It was suggested that students should have the opportunity to practice reflecting on their education, which could help increase response rates and provide more thoughtful feedback. Such training could be built in as part of the general skills which students will develop during their studies and could clarify for students that this is a skill which they will find useful.

**Internal learning**

As stated above and as noted multiple times in the reports, the matter of finding efficient, systematic ways to achieve internal learning within the organisation is an important area for improvement. As someone expressed it at the feedback conference, one can say that the different parts of the quality system work well, but the different parts work in different parts of the organisation. In other words, some parts need to be linked together and by learning from each other, hopefully people will be able to contribute to getting all parts of the system to function more comprehensively. The reports make it clear that where the system is judged as working, those involved view it as actually helping the dissemination of knowledge between responsible individuals at different levels and in different parts of the organisation. The challenge lies in getting the flow of information and lessons from the education-based work to and from individuals with formal responsibility, and between people with roles in the educational organisation. This does not mean that no efforts are being made to achieve this goal, but the fact that the systems
are under development has probably affected the assessors’ opportunities to find and verify these impacts in the organisation.

Connection between research and education
The assessment criteria related to the connection between research and education is within the assessment area “Design, implementation and outcomes.” At the same time, several of the other assessment areas have significance for how the connection is made and assessed. The challenges noted in the reports also reflect this fact. In addition to how the connection can be ensured in the design and implementation of the programmes, the goals and strategies the HEIs have for this area and how to ensure the conditions for them are also relevant. Challenges noted in the reports include such difficulties as creating long-term planning conditions for staffing courses and ensuring cohesive research time for the teachers in the programmes. Another challenge is the difficulty in certain educational areas to recruit teachers with specific skills who also have relevant academic competence. Even if these challenges are partly dependent on such external factors as external research funding and the labour market, there are examples of how these challenges have been handled at the HEI level.

Yet another challenge is ensuring that the connection between research and education permeates all courses and programmes throughout the HEI and that this is done in an appropriate way for the different courses and programmes. At the feedback conference, it was noted that the research connection may mean different things and look differently in different programmes and in different areas of a single programme. The need to define the research connection at different levels was raised, along with what is sufficient and how it should be followed up.

The review process
Lessons and reflections on the review process were also discussed at the feedback conference. These will be followed up in special surveys to the HEIs and to the assessors, but we would still like to highlight a few points that came up.

In general, it can be said that the review process has improved quality. Another conclusion that can be drawn is that a balance between trust and control is important, and UKÅ’s interpretation is that there is a desire for trust in the HEIs’ work to be even more overt.

Both the assessors and the HEIs emphasised the scope of the documentation and work involved with it. It was stated that there is a risk that the HEIs will produce documents with the sole purpose of presenting them in conjunction with UKÅ’s reviews to illustrate the systematic work and demonstrate transparency. Both UKÅ and the HEIs should be aware of this risk. An important aspect is that systems should be fit for purpose and effective, which is also apparent in the assessment criteria. The reports also recommended monitoring to ensure that the system does not become overly burdensome. The HEIs concluded that there is a risk that the effect will be the same within the organisation when it comes time to document, report and verify.