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## The Swedish Netuniversity

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**Abstract** This paper focus on quality indicators for lifelong learning and the learners' choices. The main issue for the paper is indeed to highlight the Swedish response to some of the initiatives from the Commission concerning LLL and the eAction plan. The paper will also give a short overview, mainly of the Swedish Net University.

**Key words:** eLearning, ICT, netlearning, netuniversity, ODL, distance learning, Internet-based education, flexible learning, quality indicators

**Introduction**

Initial position for this paper is to reflect on the recommendations by the European Commission (1-7) on eLearning, lifelong learning and quality indicators for lifelong learning and some consequences for the partner countries, in this case for Sweden. This presentation will try to cover a short overview of the Swedish Net University (8, 9, 10).

**Flexible learning**

Flexible learning is not a new phenomenon. Students in HE have for long time has had an enormous dimension of flexibility. Flexible learning is a concept which has became extremely "trendy" nowadays. One have to take into consideration on what level you talk about and also reflect on "flexible for whom or for what"?

In many documents, mainly from the European Commission one talk about flexible learning in a broad meaning, with the key idea being the learners choice in different aspects of learning experiences. Collins et al already in 1997 (11) talked about different dimensions of learning flexibility, such as; flexibility related to time, flexibility related to content, flexibility related to entry requirements, flexibility related to instructional approach and resources and flexibility related to delivery and logistics. Collis and Moonen (11) introduce four key components related to flexible learning in HE, namely technology, pedagogy, implementation strategies and institutional framework. But to begin with, what is flexible learning? The concept is even very often taken as synonymous with distance education (2, 8, 11, 12). What does it mean in our frame of reference for our HE in the member states in EU?

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The concept of learning has as well different meaning depending which frame of reference we use (1, 4, 8, 12).

### **eLearning Action Plan**

The strategic goal for Europe, set by the 2000 Lisbon Council is to become *“the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion”* In the eLearning Action Plan (5, 6) three main challenges are explicit expressed; extending educational opportunity, accelerating educational innovation and exploring public private partnerships. What will be the meaning of this for the partner countries?

The Commissions recommendations are to remove barriers to access and connectivity, support professional development, accelerate eLearning innovation and content development, address the ICT skills shortage, promote digital literacy and lifelong learning and explore sustainable public private partnerships.

Ten recommendations can be underlined:

- Connect everyone and everything from everywhere
- Adopt and participate in the development of open standards for eLearning
- Focus eLearning research on pedagogy, eContent and user-friendly interfaces and devices
- Create the conditions to sustain a commercial market for eLearning content development
- Increase investment in continuous professional development of educators. Enhance their status. Help them develop an understanding of and a pedagogy for eLearning
- Develop flexible curricula and assessment frameworks to provide individuals with the skills needed for participation in the Information Age
- Expand eLearning communities and forums
- Provide financial incentives to promote the take-up of eLearning
- Leverage financial instruments to support eLearning
- Explore the potential of public private partnerships

(5, s 4-6)

Several authors, among them Collis and Moonen (11) mean that the most important step for HEI is to create strategies for changes. Elements to be included according to CRE, already in 1998 (aa) in the strategic plan would be to define a) pedagogical goals such as infrastructural requirements, evaluation, dissemination and debate b) quality issues such as expertise for development, production and c) distribution such as funding developments and resources of planning.

### **Quality Indicators of lifelong learning**

The European Commission stated in the Report on Quality Indicators (7) that “People are Europe’s main asset and should be the focal point of the Union’s Policies”. In a knowledge society education and training rank among the highest political priorities. The overall strategic objectives will influence the development of education and training systems in Europe over the course of next decade. This means to improve the quality and effectiveness of education and training systems in the EU. Second to facilitate the access of all to education and training systems and finally opening-up education and training systems to a wider world. This will really be a challenge for HEI, are we ready for that?

The commission has set up 15 quality indicators in four different areas (fig1). The role of the indicators could be to describe the present situation, to quantify the objectives which have been set, to provide continuous updates on progress towards certain

objectives or to provide insights into which factors might have contributed to achieving results.

<i>Area A: Skills, Competencies and Attitudes</i>	<i>Area C: Resources for Lifelong Learning</i>
Literacy	Investment in lifelong learning
Numeracy	Educators and training
New skills in the learning society	ICT in learning
Learning –to-Learn skills	
Active citizenship cultural and social skills	
<i>Area B: Access and Participation</i>	<i>Area D: Strategy and system development</i>
Access to lifelong learning	Strategies of lifelong learning
Participation in lifelong learning	Coherence of supply
	Counselling and guidance
	Accreditation and certification
	Quality assurance

*Fig 1. Overview of Quality indicators for lifelong learning (7)*

The survey (7) distinguishes two groups of countries: those e.g. BE, DK, FI, DE, IT, PT, SE, UK who have a very good coverage, i.e. generally only very few indicators were missing for these countries. The indicators (based on PISA data) which were missing even for the countries just mentioned were access to lifelong learning, coherency of supply, counselling and guidance, accreditation and certification and finally quality assurance. The second group were countries which have not implemented any of these indicators or only very few.

### **The Learners Choice**

So many initiatives, recommendations and strategies to reach the overall objectives; active citizens, sustainable economy, sustainable and growing labour market, piece, harmony etc., but what are the learner's perspectives and choices?

Flexibility to time, flexibility related to content, flexibility related to entry requirements, flexibility related to instructional approach and resources, flexibility to delivery and logistics are some indicators from the learner's perspective (11). Are HEI ready to meet those challenges? Are the learners ready to meet the challenges?

### **The Swedish Perspective**

The Swedish response (8, 9, 10) on the recommendations and demands concerning initiatives on lifelong learning and eLearning, both from OECD (1998, 2002) and the Commission of the European Communities (1-7) can be mentioned as following. One has indeed to pay attention to, that the Swedish education system and specially Universities has since many years ago, even before the above mentioned recommendations, worked in those directions and has for many countries been a model of good examples. Sweden has of course indeed, even to strengthen its strategies and implementation of lifelong learning in daily life and in the society and through higher education at Universities (13).

The Budget Bill for 2002 (Budget propositionen, 2002) states that there will be increasing resources for basic higher education, promoting of recruiting activities, new exams, e.g. Master education, shorter vocational education, pedagogic renewal, the Net University, supplementary education for students with foreign academic

education, students with different kind of disabilities, increasing of courses in science and technical subjects as well as in rehabilitation and nursing, improvements of pedagogical resources and the education for teachers, co-operation with industry and enterprises both in the private and the public sector, increasing of research and doctoral studies.

In the policy from the government, stated in the Government Bill (8) interventions for promoting broader recruitments to Universities are described as follows:

- The government suggests that there will be special regulations in the Higher Education Act, concerning Universities duty to promote and widen the recruitment to Universities. The government suggests further that there will be a special delegation, aiming to stimulate and promote wider recruitment activities at each University.
- Each University will also establish special action programmes according to the plans for wider recruitment.
- Another activity supported from the government is the so-called college education, together with the Local Authority Administered Adult Education.
- The government also promote the new role of Universities, the role to stimulate lifelong learning, for example to stimulate judgment of real competence for qualification for higher education and even to state in the Higher Education Ordinance that real competence is adequate as well for qualification for higher education. Universities have to develop methods for judgment of competence, besides the formal educational system.
- Commissioned Education is one instrument to confirm the Universities role in the process of life long learning.
- There will be new possibilities for doctoral students, to study on part –time and also for students at licentiate degree, to be enrolled in research study programmes.
- The government also states different commitments for renewal of the pedagogic in higher education, as well as organization and structure. Also all lecturers enrolled in higher education will have a formal pedagogic education as well as in ICT and ICT /net pedagogy.
- The Swedish Net University was established in March 2002. All net courses from all of the Swedish Universities will be co-ordinated from the The Swedish Net University.
- From 2002 there is also a new organization for flexible learning (CFL), aiming to co-ordinate, stimulate and promote all flexible learning (The Old organization was the National School for Adults).
- New forms for distributed learning and also new alternatives for education will stimulate and promote possibilities for lifelong learning.
- The government also estimates that there will be a stronger concentration on additional courses for immigrants with foreign higher education qualifications.
- The wider perspective of internationalization mobility activities will also promote recruitment to higher education. Sweden will also through different activities promote and stimulate recruitment of foreign students.
- Universities will also, without the government's admission, get possibilities to prosecute education on mission, even from customers outside the EES-region.

### **The Swedish Net University**

In the following the Swedish Net University will be described in more details (10). The Swedish government recently decided to set up the Swedish Net University as a dual or multi-modal university, based upon the courses and education already given by the Swedish universities and university colleges. As an initial incentive, these institutes of higher education were given an extra disbursement (totally 211 million SEK for year 2002) from the government, for courses given within the Swedish Net University. Participation within the Net University is voluntary for the universities. The Swedish Net University consists of HEI in Sweden. There is also The Swedish

Net University Agency which aims to support the The Swedish Net University, but also the single HEI.

The plan for the Swedish Net University Agency has been drawn up by the Board of the Agency and includes directives concerning the direction of the work of the agency.

The goal for the Agency is to develop a powerful, high quality, relevant support for the Swedish Net University. Measures taken in all areas are dependant on good contacts and a close co-operation with the participating universities and colleges.

### **Strategic Plan**

The Swedish Net University Agency will work within three principal areas:

1. Information and marketing of courses via a web gateway
2. Development of ICT supported distance education within important areas
3. Development of knowledge and exchange of experiences

The Agency will also administer and co-ordinate activities within the Swedish Net University (10).

Overall aims are widening the distance education market in Sweden. This will be reached by in principle three ways:

#### *Strong Brand Name*

The Swedish Net University is planned to be a strong brand name for Swedish distance education provided by Swedish universities. However, most universities will participate, and offer a wider range of courses than those supported by the extra stimulation resources. These extra resources will be given this year and during 2003.

#### *Co-ordinating Agency*

In order to run the project the Swedish Net University Agency (located in Härnösand in the geographical middle of Sweden) has been started. The primary task for the agency is to co-ordinate the different courses and education given by the various Swedish universities. The agency has an annual budget of about 35 million SEK.

#### *Stimulate improvements*

Most of this funding will be used for different purposes such as stimulating improvements in skills and competence among distance education teachers and other personnel. It will also be used to identify topics and areas that would benefit from more distance education. Furthermore the agency runs and develops the web-based platform where the Swedish Net University and its courses are presented.

### **The Swedish Net University Portal**

The courses are searched through the already existed Swedish HEI database [www.studera.nu](http://www.studera.nu). All courses are legally registrated from the single HEI. The portal is divided for different groups such as students, lecturers and HEI as their demands are different.

During the summer and autumn 2002 a pilot study for the new IT portal has been carried out. Focus groups with students, teachers, study counselors and experts have been given the opportunity to present their views on the Swedish Netuniversity's future development of an IT portal.

Views and comments on the pilot study will be gathered in, both at a meeting held

during the Netlearning 2002 conference in Ronneby, on the 27th November, and by submissions made to the Swedish Net University Agency until the end of the year.

The report can be downloaded through [www.netuniversity.se](http://www.netuniversity.se)

*Nätuniversitetets nya portal: inte bara teknik. (Pilot study report, in Swedish) (213 kB)*

(Summary of the report The Net University's new portal; not just a question concerning technique (7.53kB) Appendix 1.

The pilot study turned up with 56 suggestions which will be presented and discussed at the above mentioned conference. Just to summarise and emphasise is that "What" questions are in focus and not "How" questions. There are plenty of creative suggestions what the portal could provide. For full information, please see the downloads mentioned above.

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