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Whatever works works. Different ways for external stakeholders to contribute to quality and relevance assurance in higher education in Sweden.

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Abstract:

This paper reports the preliminary results of a study of university-business collaboration in education in Sweden. At seven higher education programmes, associated external stakeholders, mainly in advisory boards or similar, have been interviewed. The focus for the interviews has been to explore the external stakeholders' ability to have an impact on the development of courses and programmes and their perceived role in the quality assurance process. The preliminary results of the study are mainly twofold; firstly, the diversity of the nature (settings, traditions, the ability to have an impact, etc.) of the seven different collaboration cases are immense and hardly comparable, secondly, the collaboration in the cases with mandatory internship (nursing education, teacher education) revolves almost exclusively around the internship periods. A preliminary conclusion is that the external stakeholders in the study are not aware whether they are a part of a systematic quality assurance process or not.

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University-business collaboration [\[1\]](#) is a common theme in many research studies (cf. d'Este & Patel, 2005; Thune, 2006; Broström, 2012). The extent and modes of collaboration between higher education institutions and especially the private sector is widely reported as being complex and thus difficult to map and categorize, although attempts have been carried out (cf. Mora-Valentin, 2002; Bonaccorsi & Piccaluga, 1994). Furthermore, the main part of this literature on university-business collaboration has focused on activities within the research or commercialization domains, more

seldom on educational collaborations (Thune, 2011; Bengtsson, 2013), which is a bit surprising as both the largest share of collaboration activities as well as the most valuable part for the society in higher education institutions emanates from education rather than research (ibid.). However, a few studies inform on 'best practice' or 'success factors' in educational parts of university-business collaboration (Brandt et al. 2008; Mora-Valentin, Montoro-Sanchez & Guerras-Martin, 2004; Pertuzé et al., 2010; Thune, 2011).

During the last years there have been a political emphasis, not at least at the European level, on increased knowledge transfer and innovation and an expectation that higher education should match the needs in the labour market (cf. EHEA, 2015). Obviously, there are many ways for a higher education institution to improve and ensure the relevance for the labour market of its courses and programmes, and in many countries the governments have launched different models to ensure involvement of external stakeholders in higher education, presumably as extended collaboration is seen as a good way to achieve this goal.

Two Nordic examples of increasing involvement of external stakeholders in higher education are Denmark and Norway. In Denmark a new model for the national quality assurance system for higher education was launched in 2013. Every higher education institution in Denmark has to be accredited by the national agency for accreditation, *Danmarks Akkrediteringsinstitution* [2]. New programmes must show quality and relevance based on: needs in the labour market, research connection, professional profile and level, and the existence of an internal quality assurance. Every higher education institution must renew its accreditation every sixth year, and without an accreditation it is not possible to run a programme. The involvement of external stakeholders (the labour market) in the process is a necessity, for example in order to screen future needs of labour as well as the experiences from earlier cohorts of graduates (Svenskt Näringsliv, 2015). In Norway in 2011, the government decided that every higher education institution should set up a 'labour market collaboration board', *Råd for samarbeid med arbeidslivet (RSA)*. The vision was that with an RSA, the collaboration with the labour market would lead to higher quality and relevance and also increase the flexibility in the mix of programmes offered by a higher education institution (Tellmann et al., 2017).

The national quality assurance for higher education in Sweden does not include any of the components mentioned above in the examples from its Nordic neighbours. However, one of six assessment areas in the Swedish quality assurance process focuses on 'working life and collaboration' (UKÄ, 2016). In a self-evaluation, the higher education institution must show how their quality system and quality work help to ensure and improve the quality of the courses and programmes at all levels. For the assessment area 'working life and collaboration', the higher education institution must show well-functioning collaborations with the labour market and with the surrounding society, as this is supposed to help to improve the quality of the courses and programmes. It is not stated in the guidelines, though, how the involvement of external stakeholders should be organised.

This study focuses on the external stakeholders involved in different educational collaborations. Using an explorative and qualitative approach, collaborations at seven different educational programmes and at seven higher education institutions in Sweden has been studied. Semi-structured interviews with external stakeholders has been used to gain knowledge about the experiences and expectations of the collaborations. Key questions in the interviews have been to explore the external stakeholders' ability to have an impact on the development of courses and programmes, their role in quality

assurance and their view on the relevance of the programmes they are involved in. In order to gain the most variety from the interviews as possible a vast diversity of educational disciplines were selected, ranging from programmes in nursery, to teaching, to biomedicine, to engineering, to environment & health protection, to media & communication. The external stakeholders selected for the interviews were typically involved in on-going advisory boards or in working groups for developing new programmes. A common theme was that they all had a connection to the programme director of the selected programme.

In the analysis we have used a rough division of education-related collaborations into three types (Brandt et al., 2008):

- Collaborations focused on the development of new, or revision of existing programmes.
- Collaborations focused on teaching and learning processes.
- Collaborations focused on the transfer between studies and the working life.

Furthermore, earlier studies have shown that a categorization of the collaboration in contextual factors, organizational factors and process factors (Mora-Valentin et al., 2004; Thune; 2011) can be helpful in the analysis of the nature of the collaboration.

As for the different factors influencing the nature of collaboration we can see a common theme in the interviews in that everyone points out geographical proximity as a reason why the collaboration exists, i.e. a contextual factor. Other than that, the preliminary results of the study are mainly twofold. Firstly, the diversity of the seven different collaboration cases are immense and make them hard to compare. The organizational preconditions at the higher education institutions differs a lot, the traditions in different disciplines (and labour markets) differs a lot, the expectations from students differ a lot, etc. Secondly, the collaboration in the cases with mandatory internship (nursing education, teacher education) revolves almost exclusively around practicalities for the periods of internship. In fact, a preliminary conclusion is that the external stakeholders in the study are not aware whether they are a part of a systematic quality assurance process or not. However, they are all convinced that their views and experiences are appraised by the higher education institutions.

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[1] In this study we include the whole labour market as 'business', that is, we include, for example, public hospitals and schools as well as private business.

[2] <https://akkr.dk/en/>