



Educational Strategy of the Department of Peace and Conflict Research 2011

Introduction

In its 2006 review, the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education concluded that the education at the Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University was of high quality. The Agency considered the course literature to be of “high theoretical level”, progression was “very good”, the methodological education was of “high quality”, and it was “exemplary” that the students wrote independent essays on several levels of education (HSV 2006:17R: 182–187). Routinely carried out student evaluations by the department also show generally good assessments of the education. For a number of years, moreover, the courses have a favorable number of applicants per place and compared with other departments at the school of social sciences, unusually many students are registered at the advanced level compared to basic level. In total, over a hundred students are enrolled at the two tracks of the Masters programme, which means that it is one the most sought after educations at the school. Close and open contacts with the students, from both teachers and administrators, contribute to the good reputation of the department.

Despite this accolade, the Department continuously strives to improve the quality of its education. Since the National Agency’s last review, the Department has developed and currently runs education at two tracks of the Masters programme in Politics and International Studies. Starting in 2011, the Department will also host a new BA programme. Over the last few years Uppsala University’s pedagogical programme is being implemented, course plans have been adapted and revised according to the Bologna reform, a major effort in developing grading criteria has been made, and the education is currently mostly done in English in order to aid student movement and increase the exchange among Swedish and international students. In light of the positive evaluations of the education, the nature of the educational development implies that the Department takes quality in education very seriously.

Education at the basic and advanced levels matter greatly. It contributes to financing tenure positions and it contributes to support the department with a steady stream of high-quality research assistants and PhD candidates. In the long run, it therefore produces new teachers. In addition, education and research interacts to develop the subject further. The education is, however, put under continuous pressure to reform. Changing application patterns, new student expectations, changed conditions for higher education in the country, increased demands of students being employable after education, changes in tuition fees, changed organization, increased competition among the universities for students nationally and internationally, increased demands of cost



efficiency, and increased demands of follow-up, evaluation, and pedagogical education combine to put the education under pressure. It is not uncommon that increased demands are not followed by an increase of allocated funding. As one part of managing these challenges, while maintaining the already high quality of the education, the Board for the Department of Peace and Conflict Research developed and adopted this strategy in December 2010.

Decision and guidelines

A strategy is a steering document. It directs educational activity and development without controlling it in detail. It guides action primarily by identifying ends and clarifying the relationship between ends and means. By implication, therefore, a strategy contributes with a narrative; it promotes unity of effort, and directs effort towards a certain prioritized end. Means and ends are expressed in general terms to maximize freedom of action and creativity of the individual teacher. The formal responsibility to implement the strategy is incumbent upon the Head of Department and the directors of study. These shall ensure that structures, instructions, and resources are created and channeled for implementation of the strategy. All teaching staff is responsible to contribute to implementation of the strategy. The strategy has many target audiences. It shall direct the efforts of the staff, inform our surroundings of our education and how we think about education, attract prospective students and teachers, as well as attract the future employers of our students.

As a natural point of departure, the educational strategy of the department builds upon its research strategy adopted in 2006 as well as numerous central guideline documents and strategies of Uppsala University. For example, *Goals and Strategies for Uppsala University* (UFV 2007/1478), *Uppsala University Programme for Quality* (2008/556), *Teaching and Learning at Uppsala University: Guidelines for Educational Activity and Development* (UFV 2008/670), *Uppsala University Internationalisation Programme* (UFV 2008/2064), and *The Equal Opportunity Programme for Uppsala University* (UFV 2010/180) are central for the strategy. Rather than repeating central parts of these documents or other texts such as laws and ordinances, the strategy adopts these ideas and adapts them to departmental level.

The contents of the strategy: Ends and Means

The overriding goal is that the education shall be academically excellent and professionally relevant. Academic excellence implies that the education shall be of highest international standard. Professional relevance means that the education shall prepare the students for their careers. Within higher education, it is not possible to train students in all possible professional situations in which they will find themselves at some stage during their careers. By focusing on generic skills and capabilities as well as academic pluralism, the education becomes professionally relevant.



Both academic excellence and professional relevance increases the likelihood that that the students will be attractive for prospective employers.

The dual end of excellence and relevance is reached through a combination of the following, mutually reinforcing, means; research-based education, pedagogically skilled and professional teaching staff, strategic partnerships, relevant educational supply, internationalization, focus on analytical skills, vocational training, close cooperation with students, and a learning, quality aware teaching environment.

Research based education

Research based education is a pre-condition for both academic excellence and professional relevance. The education at the department is based on research in several ways. Most obviously, the teaching staff is provided with ample time and resources to conduct research within the areas they teach. Courses are therefore run by teachers that are active researchers. Equally obvious is the fact the course literature consists of research. Research is also highly visible and present when the students write their independent dissertations at the BA-, and MA-levels. They are not only learning to conduct research on their own, but also to relate their findings to existing research. The major focus on research makes the education attractive to students. Research based education also has a positive effect on professional relevance. By being able to map the state of the art of contemporary research, students are able to provide employers with up-to-date knowledge. Since PhD candidates carry out a significant part of the research at the Department, it is important that they take active part in the education too. This further develops the PhD candidates and it strengthens the education. It is, however, important that the PhD candidates gradually start to teach and that they have access to senior members of staff to reflect upon the art of teaching. All teachers should present their research to students annually.

Teaching skills and professional teaching staff

Another prerequisite for academic excellence and professional relevance in higher education is that the teaching staff is skilled not only in the subject matter, but also in pedagogy and that it has internalized central and local rules and guidelines of higher education. We know from educational research that teachers play a major role in learning, not least by developing courses, setting learning outcomes, choosing literature, and developing exams. Therefore, teaching skills is essential among teachers. Since research is an important part of the education, skilled teachers tend to be skilled researchers. Preserving and maintaining the most competent teachers is therefore important for both research and teaching. Teacher competence in the subject matter is ensured by lecturers being active researchers. Professionalism in teaching means not only to keep abreast of the development of knowledge in the field or possess knowledge of educational research and



pedagogical methods, but also to be familiar with the rules that govern education. Pedagogical skills and internalization of rules and guidelines is ensured by the teaching staff taking part in the University's pedagogical courses and take active part in the ongoing pedagogical development and debate at the Department.

Prioritize strategic partnerships

Conducting education in cooperation, collaboration or harmonization with strategic partners further strengthens academic excellence and professional relevance. These partners may be international, national or local. Research institutes, other universities, government agencies and non-governmental organizations are potentially crucial partners for improving quality and furthering professional relevance of the education at the Department. National or international exchange of students and teachers is facilitated by harmonization of courses and learning outcomes. Normally, cooperation within education is preceded by research cooperation. In order to strengthen professional relevance, internships – or placements – are important. To facilitate that students receive relevant internships and that we can make other educational elements even more relevant practice, it is important to maintain close contacts between the Department and the rest of society. One way of doing this is to promote and maintain good relations with our alumni societies.

Advancing relevant education programs to increase student recruitment

To maintain and further develop relevant courses and programs that increase student recruitment promote academic excellence and professional relevance. The Department should have the best most engaged and coveted students. It allows us to continue to focus on high quality, while the students will hold teachers to high standards. The training should have a high number of applications and high student completion rate. Competition for students has increased in recent years, a trend that most likely will persist. Other trends is that we have more students with no previous experience from university studies, more students are working in parallel, more students with disabilities, and more international students. By maintaining high numbers of applicants, we can ensure that this heterogeneous student group is offered the best possible education. Staff and students at the Department should therefore take an active role in recruiting new students. To clarify the information to students about requirements, grading criteria and formal regulations regarding education and examination, the staff should continue to develop the so-called course guides. Learning that takes place in the group setting is often effective. We should therefore increase the proportion of educational elements that occur in groups and led by the students themselves or develop exams that encourages collaboration between students. In addition to continuously reviewing existing education, new markets for education should be explored. This applies to both regular and contract education. One way to do this is to consider the balance between



individual courses and programs, and between regular and contract education. Where possible, synergies between these forms of education should be sought to maximize quality and efficiency.

Increased internationalization

Academic excellence and professional relevance is further reinforced by increased internationalization. International exchange exposes students to other environments, variation in teaching methods, course structure, learning, and literature. This exposure is advantageous for learning since it promotes reflection and allow for more informed decision-making. Similarly, the labor market for our students is often international, which means that internationalization will benefit the professional relevance of the education too. Internationalization has long been a natural feature of the education and research at the Department. Swedish teachers, PhD candidates and students regularly take part in international exchanges, and international scholars often conduct research and take part in the education at the Department. In order to facilitate international exchange further, virtually all teaching at the Department is currently conducted in English. This also provides a relevant education for students aiming for mainly an international career. If the students are proficient in understanding the subject matter as well as being accustomed to speak and write about area relevant issues in English, it will ease their transition to their career after finished education.

Train and further develop students' analytical skills

For academic excellence and professional relevance, it is important that all education continue to focus on practicing and developing the students' problem-solving skills and ability to conduct independent, critical analyses. These generic skills make the student-sought-after in the labor market. Prioritizing the training of good analysts with a scientific approach implies that the already strong focus on methodology, written assignments, and independent dissertations at all educational levels should continue. Being able to make independent analysis is also a sign of academic excellence, not least because it prepares students for doctoral studies. In addition to courses for independent projects, courses such as review writing are exemplary in this regard. At the Department we should continually reflect upon the progression in how we train and refine the student's analytical skills. An important aspect of this is to maintain a spirit of scientific pluralism, implying an open, curious approach also to findings that seemingly undermine our common assumptions as well as a critical approach also to findings that support our contentions.

Advancing vocational training

For both academic excellence and professional relevance, it is important to use practice near pedagogical methods and that subject matters close to the practical sphere is elucidated. Higher



education is based on both science and proven experience. We know from educational research that learning is more effective when it is read about, experienced, and then reflected on in a systematic way. This suggests that we should continue to develop the vocational training as part of the education. We also know from studies among former students at the Department that working in groups, problem solving in groups and oral presentations are things they want more of in order to prepare better for their careers. In this respect, we should not focus only on pedagogical tools such as role play and guest lectures by practitioners from the field or other methods usually associated with vocational training, but also how methodology and even epistemology can be taught effectively using vocational training. One central part of the advancement of vocational training in the education is the internship courses that is a part of the educational programs at both BA and MA-level. Here, the quality of learning would probably be further strengthened by improving the follow-up and organize reflection over the placements' routines and organization from various theoretical perspectives. Other generic career paving parts in all classes is to provide the students good knowledge and skills in seeking and evaluating information, using libraries, computers, as well as written and oral communication.

Advancing student cooperation

Student cooperation benefits both academic excellence and professional relevance. From pedagogical research, we know that learning that centers on the students tend to be of higher quality and more effective. To cooperate with the students regarding their education is thus advantageous for learning and it is good because it creates a constructive, creative and positive relationship between students and teachers at the Department. Student cooperation is already well developed at the Department. The students have representatives in the Departmental board, where decisions about course curriculum are taken and there are student representatives in the Faculty Board where, inter alia, decisions about program plans are taken. Teachers should also, where it is practically possible, cooperate with the students on pedagogy and structure of courses. Perhaps one could consider the views of former students on the content of the course description obtained before the course starts. After the course, it is important that the student cooperation continues to include thorough evaluation. The Department should move to a system where we have both electronic, anonymous surveys and oral evaluations. Evaluations should be learning-centered, which means that they can be used as another learning opportunity, where students reflect on what they learned under guidance from teachers. As the training also takes place in the context of educational programs, annual program evaluations should be conducted.

Advancing a learning, creative quality-conscious organization

Collective learning within the teaching profession – a learning organization – promotes academic excellence and professional relevance by sustaining skills within the teaching staff, reduce vulner-



abilities, and make the organization adaptive to external challenges. Currently, there is a high level of teacher competence at the Department, but the tenured staff is still few. Given financial constraints, however, sustainability can be created through organization and efficient procedures. The environment at the Department should be permeated not only by collective learning, but also continuous and conscious quality improvement. By continuously reflecting on course contents, teaching methods, organization and procedure, we can encourage creative solutions in the education. Detailed command and control discourage resourcefulness. To further strengthen sustainability, team of teachers should be created the two tracks of the Masters program, for the basic, intermediate, and advanced courses as well as the IT-courses. Within these teams, coordination of learning outcomes, progression between courses, and pedagogical methods can be made more fruitfully. Within these teams of teachers, lecture notes, seminar documentation and other course materials can be made available to all. Parallel to the regular research seminar, an educational seminar should be created where general issues relating to education can be discussed and experiences exchanged. Examples of such themes can be assessment and evaluation. Educational research also shows that a system of mentoring of new teachers creates a positive impact among the teaching staff as a whole.

Evaluation of the strategy

The strategy shall be evaluated annually by the directors of study and, when need be, revised by the departmental board. *Research-based education* can be evaluated quantitatively by key figures on the staff proportion of research/teaching, the relationship between articles/research volumes vs. "textbooks" in the education, share of independent work in education and the number of publications/year of the staff in areas addressed in the education. *Pedagogically skilled and professional teaching staff* can be evaluated quantitatively by key figures on the proportion of teachers who have received pedagogical training, the number of publications/year in the areas addressed in education (including textbooks), percentage of teachers who take active part in the educational seminars, variety of exams, educational development talks, regular analysis of course evaluations and the degree of criticism of the formal elements of education. *Strategic partnerships* can be evaluated through various forms of network analysis, proportion of teachers participating in meetings with alumni, and teachers' and students' level of mobility. *Relevant educational supply* can be evaluated through analysis of students' application patterns, mobility and completion rate. *Internationalization* can be evaluated quantitatively by the share of courses taught in English, the proportion of foreign students, the number of returning Swedish students, the proportion of teachers with international experience of at least six months, percentage of international education cooperation and share of international visiting scholars. *Focus on analytical skills* can be evaluated quantitatively by the share of courses with independent analysis as form of exam, the share of courses with problem-based learning, share of courses where the students' learning focus on theory, practice and research 'craft' and share of courses where students are encouraged to analyze the same phe-



nomenon/event from multiple perspectives. *Vocational training* can be monitored by examining the proportion of courses that have been practitioner who lectures for the students, the proportion of courses in which practice near pedagogical methods are used, time courses which include training and share courses where essays by practitioners included in the literature. *Close cooperation with students* can be followed up by number of board meetings, share of classes where student interaction takes place before the course description is made public and share of courses where both written and oral evaluation are used. A *learning, quality aware teaching environment* can be followed up by reviewing the organization, the degree of cooperation among teachers, proportion of teachers that are permanent staff, proportion of teachers who regularly meet to share their teachings experiences either in the form of mentors or through seminars.

Summary – means and end

