

## Abstract

UmePedagogerna is an organization for all teacher and study and career guidance counselor students within Umeå Studentkår, one of three students' unions at Umeå University. UmePedagogerna is close to 20 years old and has during that time worked to increase student influence and quality assurance procedures for its members. Swedish teacher education has for a long time been the subject of much political debate and has, as a result of this, been restructured and remodeled often and during these changes student influence has been and will hopefully remain an important aspect. We as students at Umeå University are in a sense both receivers and participants of a product which gives us a unique perspective that, when applied to course and other educational related development, we hold to be a very important aspect of quality.

The faith shown in us by the university and more particularly the body for teacher education have strengthened us in our work and given us good possibilities to exercise student influence. We are not seen as adversaries, although we may not always agree, but as players in the same arena sharing the same goal; education with the highest level of quality.

Important issues for us students have varied through the years, but school placed education and its organization has always been a central issue. At present, considering the new organization of teacher education through Umeå School of Education at the university and the possibility of a new teacher education, UmePedagogerna sees course evaluations, teacher supervised time, forms of examinations, learning outcomes relevant for the teacher profession, equivalence in education, school placed education, progression in education and teacher competence as our most important questions. In the future, with potentially weaker student organizations and unions in terms of economy due to the abolishment of the compulsory students' union membership, we see maintaining our current level of student influence and developing it further as perhaps our most important question. This as an absolute prerequisite for future students to be able to affect their education.

## Introduction

What is high quality education or rather, what factors help create education of the highest possible quality? How about world class research? Scientists and researchers at the very top of their fields, pushing the frontiers further and further. How about the world's best teachers and educationalists? People with fantastic abilities to interest their students, constantly finding new ways of explaining complex issues and developing new methods of teaching. How about high tech equipment, computers, machines etc. capable of performing whatever one wants them to? A library with access to every doctoral thesis, article, book, newspaper and magazine you could ever think of? What of fantastic areas and premises adaptable to different styles of teaching and learning? The answer to all of these questions is a strong and definite yes.

This yes, however strong and definite, quite naturally gives rise to a lot of new questions; Are the students aware of what the researchers are doing? Do they find it applicable to their studies? Do they understand the purpose of the teaching methods? Are they learning? Do they like how they are treated by their teachers? Do they use the high tech equipment? Does it function properly? Is the library like a maze? Can they find what they are looking for? These and many other questions are crucial to determine whether or not we can claim to have education of the highest quality. What are the answers? Why not ask the students?

In this paper we will show why student influence is an important aspect of quality, why both informal and formal student influence is important, why students' unions are important for student influence and we will also show some of the things student influence has contributed to at Umeå University.

## Background

UmePedagogerna, as one of the subsidiary organizations within Umeå Studentkår, one of three student's unions at Umeå University, has been active for about 20 years. The organization has during these 20 years had different forms and varied levels of active students, but has since its beginning worked for student influence, making sure that students exercise their right and increasing their possibilities to do so.

At Umeå University in particular, we feel that the separate body for Teacher Education sees us as a resource. Like the faculties on campus they give us funding for working with student influence. This funding, which is substantially higher than most others, allows us to employ 2

students to work as students' union representatives (one for campus students and the other for distance students). They are chosen at one year intervals by and for the students, to strengthen student influence, to help students in conflicts with teachers (much like union representatives) and making sure in dialogue with university personnel that the policies and regulations that we from the students' unions have put forward together with the university are followed as well as relevant national laws. They work preventatively in that they also are an important part of the formal student influence as they have positions as student representatives in boards, committees and other organs.

When students experience problems with their education or nearby related area concerning things such as treatment, grades, rule violations etc. they have the possibility to contact these students' union representatives to receive help and guidance. Every time this happens we refer to it as a "student case". This is then noted and at the end of each financial year put together and used as a basis for a formal letter sent to the university board concerning problems and risks and possible solutions to such that all students' union representatives have seen during that year. It is not to be seen as a "hall of shame"-list, but as something that all faculties and institutions should work with.

These two students' union representative posts have been a great help for us to systematize student influence, professionalize how we handle student cases, solve problem areas and establish progression in our own and the university's quality assurance procedures. The posts have also been integral in helping to build a solid and stable organization together with our student volunteers in our own board and our student representatives.

When looking back at the history of the organization one can see that much of the issues have been related to a few core questions; School placed education (concerning student placement and organization) has always been the subject of much discussion. Student related information from the university and its faculties and how it is spread is another. Our organization has also proposed new courses and parts of courses that we have felt to be missing.

### **Why are students' unions important for student influence?**

Today much, if not to say all, formal student influence in terms of student representatives are coordinated by students' unions. The students' union representatives are an important

part in this, but the singlehandedly most important aspect is the students' unions role in filling student representative places.

Student influence is not only important for direct educational development and quality. It's important for students when it comes to their life situation in general. Students' unions are working to make sure that students are in a financial situation that means that they don't have to work to afford going to university, working for keeping the 40 hour work week (both if it's too little or too much) that full time studies are supposed to mean. They're making sure that ethnic groups, students with children, men and women are treated equally.

They are important for making sure that people who partake in distance learning are treated as well as campus students. Students' unions welcome students to campuses and cities through various activities and make them feel at home.

They try to make sure that students are happy and like their university. Students, who are happy and well perform better and help make a better education. Both current students and alumni are the best ambassadors a university has. The more they talk of their great education, campus, social life etc. the more likely their friends are to choose that particular university.

### **Why is student influence an important aspect of quality?**

If one looks at the Swedish legal documents that relate to education and students' rights one quickly finds a clear view on the role of students in Swedish higher education. The Higher Education Act states that quality assurance procedures are a common concern for both university personnel and students. This is a point of view that we share with the university which can be seen when looking through some the different university policies.

The university's student influence policy states that the quality of an education is created in the day-to-day work. Since quality assurance procedures are an important matter for all institutions it is important that students are present in the discussion forums and possible preparatory groups that work with quality assurance.

In Umeå university's quality assurance procedures strategy it is written that all activity that influences the student's education and situation at the university will be based on cooperation

between personnel and students and be characterized by an ambition for mutual trust and sense of responsibility.

Another very important document for us students is the Higher Education Ordinance. Amongst other things it states the students' right to be represented in every decision-making and preparatory body. Throughout our Swedish legislature and policies and guidelines we are stated as co-creators of our own education.

The role that students have at a university can vary, depending upon how you look at it. In one aspect we are consumers of a product, even though we do not pay for our studies. We choose a certain education and want to enter our working life with the necessary tools. Therefore we are bound to have opinions on our own education. Through our choice of study programme or course we, in sense, become the economic foundation of much of the university's work in that our presence is a prerequisite for the government's financial support. Should we choose to quit it would have an economic impact on the university.

The educational culture of the university is to a large extent based on student participatory teaching methods. This means that much of the educational quality is based on students' preparation, commitment, experiences and knowledge. In that sense we are also co-creators of our own education.

The student perspective is an essential one to have in all aspects of university issues. As it is present in boards and other organs it broadens the perspective of the group, helps to not forget the individual and. Students might not be experts at one particular area, but they often see the big picture. This especially applies to teacher students as we move from faculty to faculty and institution to institution. We met many different teachers and see many different ways of treating students. Our belief is that the voice of many gives a better and more solid foundation for decisions than the voice of a few.

### **Why is both informal and formal student influence important?**

It is also important to distinguish between formal and informal student influence as they are organized in different ways. The very foundation of formal student influence is the students' possibilities to affect their education through course and study programme evaluations. Another very important part of the formal influence is the student representatives at course, institution, study programme, faculty and board level. Concerning questions that are not

directly related to a single course or study programme formal influence in terms of student representatives is a necessity

The informal student influence, while it is perhaps not always as visible as the formal, is also a central part of student influence. By informal student influence we mean such influence that is not regulated by law e.g. teachers listening to constructive criticism during discussions and coffee breaks, student representatives talking to university representatives etc.

Our student representatives are representatives for all students within Umeå School of Education. It is important to remember that such representation in itself has no real value. If our right to student influence is not exercised then all we do as representatives is to give legitimacy to decisions. It is therefore important that students themselves choose their representatives. There should be no possibility for university representatives to themselves choose the students they want for an evaluation, student representative post etc. While we in essence do not see ourselves as adversaries to the university it is important that we can be a critical voice when necessary. Our coordination of student representatives is also an important part.

Another important aspect of this is the fact that university studies in Sweden, and teacher education in particular, comes down to an almost equal amount of self growth and maturity as developing knowledge and skills. If society wants active and participatory citizens and teachers we feel that student influence is one building block for this. Both the students who are student representatives and those who through course evaluations and informal student influence affect their education receive an education within their education. Teachers are, regardless of teaching age, role models in that students and pupils look to them for inspiration and guidance. When teacher educators open up to discussions and try to increase student influence it will make students positive to participatory teaching styles and pupil influence, which is highly valued in Swedish curriculums. We see student influence as intimately connected with the university's pedagogical development.

### **What has student influence has contributed to at Umeå University?**

During the 50 years that the student's union has existed and UmePedagogerna's 20 a lot has been done and we've been involved in a lot of questions. Amongst other things we have managed to introduce anonymous exams (where the student's identity is hidden

from the examiner to prevent unjust grading), started a gym that has now grown into Sweden's biggest sports centre, arrange CPR courses for students (by students), create housing for students, introduce a document with guidelines for examination during school placed education, annual welcoming activities (that does not encourage the use of alcohol or involve any sort of peer pressure) for freshmen strengthened rules during examinations etc.

The students' union's greatest work does not lie within this however. The hundreds of active student representatives, volunteers, etc. everyday contribute to a broadened perspective in boards, groups, councils and other decision-making and preparatory organs.

### **What are we working with right now?**

Last fall, before the reorganization of the faculty to Umeå School of Education, we put together a formal letter to the board of the new organization stating what we saw as the eight most important questions to deal with.

One of the most important is course evaluations. We stated earlier that they are at the very bedrock of our formal influence and as such it is critical for them to function properly. Not only must they always be done, but the compilation for and feedback to the students is integral for raising student participation and awareness of the possibility to influence and improve not only their own, but their fellow students' education.

Teacher supervised time is another important issue for us. We have seen that teacher presence has a positive effect on student commitment, students' preparation for seminars etc. Teachers are there to help us learn and to help us improve our skills. Self studies are one part of our university education, but we need teachers and educationalists to push and help us become the best teachers we can be.

When students are tested through various forms of examinations it is essential that they feel that their own performance makes a difference, that it can be individually graded. It is not reasonable to assume that 30 students can be individually graded by a single teacher during a 45 minute seminar. When students feel that it makes a difference when they are well prepared for e.g. a seminar it will raise the quality of discussion and therefore also the quality of education.

It must not be forgotten that this is a study programme for learning a profession. We agree that it is important that research in these areas need to be strengthened, but at the same time the learning outcomes must continue to be relevant for the teacher profession.

One of the biggest issues with the so-called general education studies that are a part of our teacher education is that it varies much in quality and educational direction from group to group even during the same course date. The scale at which these courses are run is too big and makes it difficult for teachers to have equivalent course content.

School placed education is, and always has been, a central question for us. As a university Umeå has a larger area than most to which it can send students for school placed education. This means that there are large differences in how much students can teach and how much tutor time they can get. One important goal for us is to make sure that students have, to as large an extent as possible, an equivalent amount of tutor and teaching time. There is no doubt that students gather more experience the more they teach.

The lack of progression between first and second cycle courses has sometimes been seen as a problem. This is mostly related to our general education studies and the overall perspectives such as gender and diversity that are supposed to exist in all courses.

In the discourse surrounding Umeå School of Education there has been much focus on research and teachers' research competence. As we have said earlier, we agree with the importance of research, but it must be remembered that we are talking about a profession education. Teachers' school, pedagogical and didactical experience should also be an aspect of quality.

It is also important for us to make all students realize that student influence is important and for it to work we need committed students at different levels. Some recent changes to how the university's institutions are structured have also increased the need for more student representatives.

The work we do has for a long time been isolated to our own university. This year we are broadening the horizon by working together with other similar organizations in Sweden and exchanging experiences and solutions to various problems in a way that we haven't done before.

## What will be important in the future?

The report on the abolishment of the compulsory students' union membership and its future is closely related to well formal student influence can be organized. At present time all student representatives are appointed through the students' unions. Much of it is organized through the employees at the students' unions. If the unions financial possibilities to hire people full time is changed to the worse then much of the formal influence will be threatened, at least during a transitory moment before we can find other solutions. This is a real possibility as many students are not aware of the work students' unions do for them. Making sure that students know the benefits of being a member in a students' union is something which the unions have not been very successful at. This must improve and should have been done long before the abolishment.

In order to preserve the level of student influence the students' union must walk a fine line between focusing on quality assurance procedures and more "PR-friendly" activities. Student influence and quality assurance might not be something that a majority of the students would pay for and that would directly affect our possibilities to continue our work for a better education in all aspects.

While there is room for improvement in terms of making students aware of the work we do, the university is very much aware of it. In the student influence policy it is clearly stated that the students' unions must remain as distinct partners regardless of the abolishment of the compulsory membership. A statement we are happy to hear.

It must be remembered that the university and its students ultimately share the same goal; the best education possible. We will surely disagree about certain issues from time to time, but there is too much to lose in not working together.

*UmePedagogerna*

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