

Umeå University  
StudentCentrum  
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POLICY

## Policy for student influence at Umeå University

### Introduction

This policy for student influence was adopted in its original form by the university board on 9 December 2002. The policy is based on the common view that *all* activities concerned with education at the university shall be based on cooperation between the university's staff and students. This cooperation shall in turn be based on a striving for mutual trust and assumption of responsibility.

The policy is based on the legislation which governs student influence and student participation and its purpose is to concretize what this actually means – and ought to mean – at our university. However, the practical application takes place in the daily work done at departments, faculties and by the university management and each respective university administration. Therefore it is our hope that this policy will form the basis for constructive discussions between the students on one side and the university's teachers and other staff on the other side with the aim of implementing this policy.

This edition was revised in the autumn of 2006 in collaboration with the university's student unions and was established by the vice-chancellor.

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## Quality efforts – a joint matter

*Quality efforts are a joint matter for staff and students at institutions of higher education.*

*(Chap 1 Sect 4 Higher Education Act)*

*”All activities which affect the students’ education and situation at the university shall be based on cooperation between staff and students and be characterized by a striving towards mutual trust and assumption of responsibility”. (Extract from Umeå University’s strategy for quality development).*

The students’ experiences and views are resources which must be made use of in *all* development work. This must be done when planning, carrying out and evaluating the university’s activities. The students can influence the university’s activities in several different ways: through direct participation in education, through representation on various bodies and through their organizations. In addition to questions which can be directly related to education and quality development, there are also many questions of a more general or comprehensive nature which affect students. The students’ possibilities to participate and influence must therefore be seen from a comprehensive perspective.

The quality of education is created in everyday work. Because quality efforts are an important matter of concern for every department at the university, it is important that students are included in the discussion forums and any work groups dealing with development work at departmental level. Here the student unions also have an important mission to use their assembled knowledge to support the student representatives’ work at the departments. It is also important that there is swift and distinct feedback from evaluations and results of different measures. Understanding what consequences earlier evaluations have led to is often a prerequisite for active participation in coming evaluations. Changes that have failed to appear must also be explained.

Active participation in the evaluation, follow-up and development of one’s own education can constitute a quality-raising element insofar as the students are trained in applying an evaluative and interactive way of working. Thus, students are not merely exerting influence in order to improve education in the future; their participation in itself – if correctly formed – constitutes a surplus value.

An important prerequisite for successful student influence is that the students take on an active and committed role both as individuals and as a collective. *All* students have

a joint responsibility to influence and develop education. However it is also important that the university encourages the students in various ways to play an active role in their education and in the university's work in general. It is the university's responsibility to point out to the students at an early stage that higher education, in order to be successful, requires their active participation.

## The students' entitlement to exert influence

*Students shall be entitled to exert influence over the education in the institutions of higher education. The institutions of higher education shall work towards students taking an active part in the work with further development of the education.*

*(Chap 1 Sect 4 a Higher Education Act)*

Student influence can only be realised if the students take on an active and committed role as individuals and as a collective. It is important that the university encourages the students to become actively involved in the teaching and in the university's work in general. A prerequisite for this is that the students feel that their views, opinions and proposals are wanted and are received with interest and respect.

It is the university's responsibility to introduce all new students to the way the university works, especially regarding their possibilities to influence their studies and study environment. Such an introduction ought to be done in cooperation with the student unions. If there are major changes taking place within the organisation, all students shall be informed in a similar way. It is also the university's responsibility to provide an introduction and information to new student representatives at university, faculty and departmental levels and to members of union activities. The student unions have a similar responsibility to provide information to university staff. It is advantageous if these introduction and information meetings can be coordinated.

In order to facilitate student influence through information and consultation, regular meetings must be held between student representatives and staff with decision-making and processing functions such as the vice-chancellor, pro-vice-chancellor, faculty deans, university director, certain unit managers within the university administration, directors of study, administrative officials etc.

The university shall facilitate in practical ways for students to carry out union work during their own education – either at the same time or by taking a break in their studies – for instance by:

- helping student representatives to adapt their timetabled lessons to the commissions of trust in question (when possible),
- facilitating for student representatives who have missed part of the teaching to make up for missed parts of the course,
- giving students with substantial commissions of trust priority regarding work placement or clinical duties in Umeå or in immediately adjoining municipalities *and by*

- accepting that duties as student representative are legitimate reasons for absence from obligatory parts of a course on condition that the missed parts can be made up for or that the absence is so limited that it does not curtail the course.

The university also has a responsibility to secure influence from students located in other places and from distance education students.

It must also be possible for students to obtain a written certificate from the vice-chancellor, faculty dean or head of department testifying substantial commissions within the university. There is a template for such certificates. However, certificates may be formulated in a different way.

The student unions and the university also have a joint responsibility for stimulating participation in the student unions and their appurtenant union elections. Special union days ought to be arranged presenting the activities of the student unions. The student unions' role as distinct cooperation partners must be maintained no matter whether membership is obligatory or not.

## **Membership of a student union**

**A student at an institution of higher education must be a member of the student union at that institution of higher education.**

*(Section 4 Ordinance on student unions, “nation clubs” and student associations at institutions of higher education)*

**If a student does not apply to join a student union, “nation club” or other student association that the student is obliged to belong to or if he/she fails to pay the fees, the governing board of the institution of higher education may decide that the student is to be suspended from teaching and examinations until such time that the student has fulfilled his/her obligations. The governing board may also decide that the university course certificate or doctor’s degree certificate shall not be given to a student until the fee has been paid.**

*(Sect 20 Ordinance on student unions, “nation clubs” and student associations at institutions of higher education)*

The university board may provide, under the ordinance on student unions, “nation clubs” and student associations, that membership fees to student unions must be paid before a certain point in time. The university board is responsible for helping the student unions to ensure that the students fulfil their obligations in relation to the student unions at each respective place of study, which is manifested in the fact that the board may, as a last resort, suspend a student who has not fulfilled his/her obligations.

Every term, the student unions at Umeå University check that the union fee has been paid. This is done with the help of the university’s student register which shows whether registered students have paid the fee.

The students paying the union fee is a prerequisite for the student union work that is done by the unions. Checking that union fees have been paid is a major help to the student unions from both an economic and legitimacy point of view. If this checking-up did not work, firstly the individual student would suffer and in the long run the student unions and the university.

The departments and administration involved shall inform students at the start of each course that the student must be a member of a union and facilitate for the unions to spread information about their work.

## **Representation on the governing board, faculty board, artistic development board and disciplinary board**

*Teachers and students at the institution of higher education shall be entitled to representation on the governing body.*

*(Chap 2 Sect 4 Higher Education Act)*

*The students shall be entitled to representation on the governing body by three members*

*(Chap 2 Sect 7 Higher Education Ordinance)*

*Students at the institution of higher education shall be entitled to representation on the faculty board.*

*(Chap 2 Sect 6 Higher Education Act)*

*Students shall be entitled to representation on the faculty board by at least three members.*

*(Chap 3 Sect 3 Higher Education Ordinance)*

*Students shall be entitled to representation on the artistic development board by at least three members.*

*(Chap 3 Sect 6 Higher Education Ordinance)*

*Students shall be entitled to representation on the disciplinary board by two members.*

*(Chap 10 Sect 4 Higher Education Ordinance)*

*A student union at an institution of higher education may, if no other provisions have been specifically made, appoint and remove student representatives to/from the bodies at the institution of higher education where students are entitled to have representatives.*

*(Sect 16 Ordinance on student unions, "nation clubs" and student associations at institutions of higher education)*

In the *Higher Education Act* and the *Higher Education Ordinance*, it is specifically stated that students are entitled to representation on the university board, faculty boards, the artistic development board and the disciplinary board. In the special *Ordinance on student unions, "nation clubs" and student associations at institutions of higher education*, the government states that it is the student unions themselves who appoint and remove their representatives. This means in reality that the university always approaches the unions with an enquiry regarding student participation but it is the unions themselves who decide *who is/are* to represent the students.

It is the responsibility of the student unions to appoint their representatives themselves. Thus, the university itself cannot decide that the places are to be allocated in a certain way or that one particular person is to be appointed. Sometimes a certain allocation may be appropriate for various reasons, e.g. to ensure that there are both undergraduate and postgraduate students represented, or for instance if the person

responsible for a body which involves students with different lines of study proposes a certain allocation. Nevertheless, it is the union(s) concerned who decide(s).

It is the responsibility of the students to ensure that student representatives are appointed to the bodies on which the students have been invited to have representation. The student unions ought to establish routines for how student representatives are appointed. When waiting for new student representatives to be appointed for a term of office, the university will summon the previous ones unless the student union in question informs that that is not to be done.

### *The board*

The student unions independently appoint student representatives to the university board.

### *Faculty boards*

The student unions independently appoint student representatives to the faculty boards.

### *The artistic development board*

The student unions independently appoint student representatives to the artistic development board.

## **Representation on other decision-making and processing bodies and at consultations concerning processing and decisions made by an individual official**

*Students at institutions of higher education are entitled to representation on all decision-making and preparatory bodies at the institution of higher education whose activities are of importance to educational programmes and the students' situation. If a decision or preparatory work is to be undertaken by one single person rather than a body, information shall be given to and consultation be held with a student representative in good time before the decision or conclusion of the preparatory work. (Chap 3 Sect 9 Higher Education Ordinance)*

Students at Umeå University are entitled to representation on *all* decision-making and preparatory bodies which are of importance to the educational programmes and the students' situation. There are two reasons for this: *partly* because they have the legal right to be represented, and *partly* because by being present and active, they help to improve the quality of the process and decision. This entitlement applies both at central university level and at faculty and departmental level.

Information about all permanent decision-making and preparatory bodies shall be available at the university's, faculty's and department's respective websites and must be updated regularly. At each level there must be people who are specifically responsible for updating the information on these pages. It must be stated what responsibility the body in question has and who its members are. When a new body – temporary or permanent – is established, the student union concerned must be offered representation on it.

Some examples of decision-making bodies are the university board, the faculty boards and the departmental boards. Some examples of preparatory bodies are the Dean Council, the Admissions Council, the Quality Committee and also more temporary investigations and consideration groups.

The students therefore have the right to be present in those contexts where matters of importance for educational programmes and their situation are dealt with. In some cases it may be difficult to define what these matters are, but there can only be a limited number of matters where it can be said in advance that they are of absolutely no importance. For instance, questions concerning budget, resources and administration may be of great importance for the students' educational programmes and situation. The starting point is that it is the students who decide whether it is relevant for them to participate in a certain body or not. However, one exception is the staff disciplinary board whose composition is specially regulated for the entire state

sector. All bodies that submit some kind of information document to facilitate a decision which is not purely factual are to be seen in this context as being preparatory bodies. The same thing applies to bodies where the proposed decision is discussed before the decision is taken by a preparatory body or an individual decision-maker.

In a similar way, some matters may be viewed by the students as being less important or appropriate. For instance it could be a matter of a forum where internal staff and work place issues are discussed. In individual cases, this can be solved by the student representatives leaving the meeting during such points. However, as far as possible, such matters should be kept apart so that questions where the students have a right to exert influence are not discussed in the same forum as, for instance, internal staff issues.

It is also important that the students' possibilities for participation and influence do not cease by decisions not being made in bodies with members but instead by the head of a department or some other individual official. The university's decision-making officials therefore have an obligation and a responsibility to inform and consult with students in good time regarding issues that are of importance to them. For such decisions, it should be noted that consultation about the case has taken place. This routine applies to decisions taken by the vice-chancellor, the faculty deans, heads of department and unit managers within the administration or by persons delegated by them to make decisions.

Being able to exert influence early on in the decision-making process creates good prerequisites for real student influence. Students are entitled to representation on all preparatory bodies such as executive committees, work groups, project groups etc which handle issues which in some way are of significance to the students' educational programmes and situation in other respects. If preparation is done by an individual official, there must be consultation in good time.

The student unions prioritise which bodies they wish to have representation on. The unions should inform the university as soon as possible about which bodies they intend to prioritise concerning representation. The aim of the student unions is often to participate in all bodies but in some cases they lack representatives. In order to facilitate the work of each respective group, a lack of representatives must be notified without delay. For its part, the university is obliged to remind the student unions which bodies lack student representatives.

## **The development of student influence in the university's annual report**

*In its annual report, the institution of higher education shall give an account of the measures taken to promote student influence and describe the distribution and development of student influence from a gender perspective. In conjunction with the annual report, any student union at the institution of higher education has the right to present an account of the union's views on the development of the institution and its results. The institution shall deliver the union's account to the Government along with the annual report.*

*(Chap 1 Sect 7 b Higher Education Ordinance)*

In its annual report, the university shall give an account of the measures taken to promote student influence. In this context, it is important that all three levels – university, faculty and departmental – are included in the account. Moreover, the university's student unions are welcome to present their own accounts of their views on the development of the university and its results. The student unions themselves decide whether to submit a joint report or separate ones.

The university must inform the student unions of its schedule in good time before work starts on the annual report. The unions' accounts must also be included in the final version of the annual report.

## Course evaluations for participation and quality development

*Institutions of higher education shall give students who are participating in or have completed a course an opportunity to present their experiences of and views on the course through a course evaluation to be arranged by the institution of higher education. The institution of higher education shall collate the course evaluations and release information about the results and any action occasioned by the course evaluations. The results shall be made available to the students.*

*(Chap 1 Sect 14 Higher Education Ordinance)*

Course evaluations are an important tool for the students' and teachers' participation in quality efforts, for the development of teachers' teaching skills and for the students' learning. Evaluations should deal with content, performance, examination and issues concerning the student's psychosocial environment.

All students who are participating in or have completed a course shall be given the opportunity in a course evaluation to present his/her experiences of and views on the course and be informed of the results and any action occasioned by these. Information shall also be released about decisions not to take any action. Other persons involved in the teaching should also be given the possibility to present their experiences and views through a course evaluation.

In addition, all study programme students must be given the opportunity to present their experiences of and views on the programme as a whole.

Students should be given the opportunity to discuss improvement measures with the teacher, based on the results of their own course evaluation. At the commencement of a course, the aim and form of the course evaluation should be discussed, and feedback given on course developments which were occasioned by e.g. earlier course evaluations.

Students must aim to be as constructive as possible in any criticism given in the course evaluations. Naturally, there must be no personal attacks and insulting statements. It should be equally natural to give positive comments as negative ones. Positive comments are as important as negative comments and they must be included in order to create a balance. If no positive comments are given, there is a great risk that incorrect decisions are taken concerning the design of the course and the course literature. This point must be clearly pointed out when information is given.

The starting point should be that the students agree with the teacher whether the course evaluation is to be done anonymously or not. However, a student who wishes

to give his/her opinions anonymously always has the right to do so without being questioned.

Evaluations are to be done of all undergraduate courses and study programmes. Course evaluations are to be an integrated part of the course and be adapted to suit the purpose of the evaluation and the course's contents and execution. In order to support the students' learning and attainment of goals during an ongoing course, regular check-ups or evaluations should be done during the course. If a course is divided into several independent parts lasting several weeks, an evaluation of each part shall be done.

The faculty board has the overall responsibility for ensuring that all study programme students are able to present their experiences and views of the programme they are participating in or have just completed. The faculty boards are also responsible for stimulating and following up the course evaluation work at departmental level.

Each department is responsible for carrying out course evaluations and course development as part of its systematic quality efforts. Course evaluations shall be planned, carried out and followed up in cooperation with the students. The students must be motivated and encouraged to take part in development work.

A summary of the evaluations must be given as feedback to those who did the evaluation and must be made available on the department's/study programme's website and be saved for at least three years. The department is responsible for ensuring that the result is easily accessible and that the students are informed of their whereabouts and that they have the possibility of viewing them. Students' evaluations must be saved in accordance with the stipulations of the Archives Act.

Study programme and course evaluations must be included when departments and faculties plan activities. Both the work involved in course evaluations and their results can be used as in an information document for the assessment of a teacher's teaching skills.