

Motionens nummer 39

Motion till SULF:s kongress 2021

Employer accountability for the work environment of researchers, teachers, and doctoral candidates

The lack of base financing is a big contributor to a toxic and insecure work environment at higher education institutions (HEIs) in Sweden. Financial uncertainty has contributed to precarious employment conditions and psychosocial work environment for teachers and researchers¹. However, funding is not the only issue. As academics, we have developed a competitive culture which encourages personal overwork, lack of self-care and glorifying burnouts. This culture actively worsens the quality of work life, quality of education and research outputs of researchers, teachers, and doctoral candidates.

Lack of accountability is an enabling factor in all of these issues, as discussed in SULF's report "*Playing to the Gallery?*"². The report shows that none of the surveyed HEIs can show that all staff recruitment processes comply with recruitment regulations.

The current accountability mechanisms to ensure that HEIs enforce their employer responsibility lack an incentive/reward structure to effectively fill the policy-practice gap. This deficiency also leads to failed attempts to sustain efforts combating the persistence and cycles of toxic work culture and unethical practice, as the academic system of fixed-term employments pervades. Establishing an incentive/reward structure, at departmental level (closer to actual behavioural change), that motivates HEIs to fulfil their employers' obligations and responsibilities proactively and systematically can accelerate the change needed for all employees but specifically doctoral candidates.

Based on institutional/systems change literature, one way to go about this is to establish a starting checklist of 3–5 key accountability measures that correspond to pressing workplace issues as discussed in existing SULF research; and request all HEIs to report regularly (e.g. annually or biannually) on the checklist at departmental level.

¹ Universitetsläraren. Higher education – a gig economy.
<https://universitetslararen.se/2021/06/17/higher-education-a-gig-economy/>

² SULF. Ett spel för galleriet? Om anställningsprocesserna i akademien.
<https://sulf.se/rapport/rapport-ett-spel-for-galleriet/>

We recognise that this kind of evaluation would be difficult to enforce, and we suggest it should be used more for motivation than punishment. The checklist can subsequently be reviewed, assessed for its effectiveness (e.g., against work environment surveys) and expanded in every SULF Congress year. The best-performing and non-performing departments and HEIs are to be profiled locally and nationally through SULF related publications and media messages to take advantage of the existing competitive culture and peer pressures to improve work and study environment. Examples of similar efforts can readily be found in other countries, for example the UK, where students rank their universities for student welfare³.

The SULF Doctoral Candidate Association therefore submit:

- that SULF identify accountability measures relevant to the academic work environment in Sweden;
- that SULF work together with higher education institutions to improve accountability for the work environment of researchers, teachers, and doctoral candidates;
- that SULF publish HEI rankings based on accountability measures for work environment, to publicise which HEIs are performing, and which are not.

For the SULF Doctoral Candidate Association
Jenny Iao-Jørgensen, Chairperson

³ Times Higher Education. Student Experience Survey 2018: best UK universities for student welfare. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/best-universities/student-experience-survey-2018-best-uk-universities-student-welfare>