



## Staying ahead of the curve

How global digitisation affects  
Swedish higher education

### A Collabco White Paper

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**“Internationalisation of the higher education sector is contributing to new contacts, enriching knowledge exchanges, and increasing diversity and understanding between countries and societies. It builds strongly needed networks with foreign students and researchers,”** Helene Hellmark Knutsson, Swedish Minister of Higher Education and Research [2013]

Sweden punches well above its weight when it comes to higher education. With a population of just 9.5 million it's globally one of the countries with the highest expenditure per student and a high educational level to match. In addition, by far the largest proportion of funding (80%) comes from public sources, and education is free of charge for all students at the point of learning, except for those that come from countries outside of the EU and Switzerland. Five of its universities were in the top 200 in the QS World University ranking in 2015/16 and in terms of the numbers it employs, higher education is the largest public sector service provider in the country.

However, since 2011 when fees were introduced for international students, the country has seen a sharp decrease in the number of foreign learners coming to Sweden to study. Industry and university heads argue that the only way it can compete internationally is to offer scholarships to entice more foreigners. But competing globally in today's technologically advanced world means much more than simply paying for education. Whilst other countries are seeking to drive up levels of student satisfaction in order to compete – many of them in fee paying systems – can Sweden afford to ignore the global competitive factors that attract international students to their doors?

Domestically as well as internationally, students are changing and their expectations are growing. The millennials: those born after 1980, are digitally savvy, own their own devices, use social media almost ubiquitously and covet a work life balance. They have high expectations that technology can provide benefits associated with remote working and the ability to collaborate with colleagues or friends from anywhere - and that includes in their learning. Compounding that, most foreign applicants come from technologically advanced nations including China, India, Malaysia, USA and Hong Kong. They arrive in Sweden expecting a learning experience that technologically matches their lives outside of the university.

Although Sweden has advanced 'back-office' technology embedded in its universities for performing administration required by central government, it has yet to achieve a digital learning environment that meets the expectations of both students and teachers. It is not alone – many countries have yet to achieve the same, but without acknowledging that global competitive forces are at work, and the need to adapt accordingly to stay ahead of the curve, Sweden runs the risk of getting left behind.

Competing for foreign students is perhaps the largest incentive for the Swedish government to consider the

benefits of a truly digital campus and how best to deliver it to students and teachers. In this white paper we consider the global forces at work and the opportunities for staying ahead of the curve.

## Forces at work:

In 2013 a US foreign student who had been studying in a Swedish university for two years decided to sue the university she had been attending, as the mathematics course allegedly did not match the level of quality promised. As an international student she had been subject to paying fees in Sweden and wanted them refunded so that she could find an alternative course elsewhere and continue studying. She alleged that the course professors had poor English skills making communication difficult, there were not enough computers for parts of the course, the room was too crowded and the professors were not helpful. She raised her concerns over her two years of study, but to no avail, so sought legal representation.

Details aside, this was uncharted territory for the university in question, and also for Swedish higher education as a whole, since fees for foreign students had only been introduced in 2011. But it raised the question of how Sweden, providing a traditional non-fee based HE system for its domestic students, could provide a quality education to rival any around the world for those paying for the privilege. It was a shot across the bow, and it highlighted some of the global drivers for change.

## Student satisfaction, engagement and retention:

Sweden strives to deliver a quality higher education regardless of who is paying the fees, but the introduction of them for foreign students in 2011 ultimately changed what had been education for the 'public good' into a 'consumer good'. This opened a can of worms in terms of delivering a total university experience, not simply an academic qualification. Student satisfaction, engagement and retention are major forces for digital change in global higher education and to keep pace with other global players, Swedish universities will have to increasingly demonstrate student satisfaction levels to remain high up in the world rankings and attract the best students to their courses and once enrolled, keep them engaged until they successfully graduate and beyond. Technology helps to reduce student attrition rates by reducing the isolation that some students feel when studying independently, creating a social aspect to learning and simply making life easier.

Smartphones and tablet computers enable students to remain engaged with each other as well as with teaching staff. They help to reduce 'friction tasks' – everything students must do in order to learn – such as visit the library and buy books, top up credit for university services or simply find a bus timetable. Students can get academic help from colleagues on their course, access university clubs or groups on campus, share photos and videos with friends socially, access financial aid information where relevant, and download their schedules, getting updates if lecture times change or rooms alter. Technology makes life easier, which in turn allows them to enjoy and engage in their learning more easily. Student anxiety is reduced as they have the ability to get real-time feedback and information directly to their device keeping them informed and their studies on track. Even those students who have been unable to attend class or are not able to live on campus can remain engaged digitally, driving further student retention.

## Employability:

Universities have a job to do in terms of preparing learners for the world of work. Student satisfaction surveys affect university rankings and take into consideration not just course quality, but assessment, feedback and employability. Academic achievement is important, but the softer skills that students learn in higher education in terms of meeting deadlines, managing their workloads, interacting with colleagues and delivering a successful outcome are just as important for the world beyond education. Employers demand more than just a degree; they demand real-world skills that are delivered using real-world digital tools. Cloud computing, data analysis, mobility and social media are the four main drivers of global computing today and dominate every workplace. Universities must keep pace with these changes to remain relevant, especially since an increasing number of Swedish students break their degrees for work placements and therefore have experience of business already. Those students with exposure to the latest workplace technologies have much greater expectations returning to higher education, and thus feel greater disappointment and frustration at a costly university 'experience' not in keeping with their working life.

## New sources of competition:

Increasingly, there is also the threat of new sources of competition that come from the ubiquitous availability of knowledge sharing which has opened up the field to those who can provide digital learning. Traditionally and culturally, Swedish students tend to study at the university closest to their home, but digitisation provides new endless possibilities – anywhere with an internet connection is now a potential seat of learning and theoretically anyone can provide it in the future – even Google or Facebook. Qualifications that can be offered digitally and delivered in partnership with corporate sponsors may also appeal to the faster-moving millennials who want more skills-based, vocational courses than perhaps traditional domestic universities can provide. Where international students

must pay fees, the question of return on investment will naturally occur leaving those with no digital offering behind.

Those Swedish institutions that adapt to digital change will be ahead of the curve in terms of understanding what students want, what draws them in, enables them and keeps them engaged. The quest to attract the best international students will ultimately drive some of these changes, but once digitisation is introduced, the benefits of digitisation will be reaped domestically and internationally keeping Sweden ahead of the curve.

## Cultural change:

Modern-day Sweden is known for its sense of social justice and fairness. It has the highest level of wealth equality in the world, one of the world's lowest gender pay gaps, publically funded healthcare for all, and equal rights, and in higher education there is a 60%-40% split women to men studying. Culture plays a huge part in Sweden's psyche – it's part of its DNA to be progressive – and higher education is not immune to this.

Digitisation offers Sweden a way to attract foreign students to its universities, offer a progressive medium for all students and teachers and ensure its future industrially, linking alumni into their communications programmes beyond the university. Change in HE requires a complete top down shift in thinking in order to create a unified digital culture right across the sector. Is Sweden up to the job? The Swedish government has certainly demonstrated its ability to think out of the box in many other areas of its society; so digital change for students and teachers is more than achievable in a centralised tax-funded system.

It requires clear vision for what the future of Swedish universities looks like based upon the technology available, and it will require significant resources to make those changes. Social media, VLEs, email, apps, intranets and all other content must not exist in isolation but be accessible to all on any device in real-time. Get it right and internationally as well as domestically students will benefit from the changes right across their learning experiences and Sweden will stay ahead of the curve.