



Supporting the Contribution of Higher Education Institutions to Regional Development

Peer Review Report:

Värmland Region, Sweden

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The OECD/IMHE review

This review of Värmland in Sweden is part of the OECD/IMHE project entitled "Supporting the Contribution of Higher Education Institutions to Regional Development", which engages 14 regions throughout 12 countries in 2005/2006. The IMHE thematic review project was launched as a response to the multiplicity of initiatives across OECD countries to mobilise higher education in support of regional development. The aim was to synthesise this experience into a coherent body of policy and practice to guide higher education institutions and regional and national governments. At the same time, the IMHE project was designed to assist with capacity building in each country/region through providing an opportunity for dialogue between HEIs and regional stakeholders and clarifying the roles and responsibilities.

The review process

The review drew on a self-evaluation process initiated and led by the Karlstad University and conducted by a Steering Committee representing the main regional and national actors. The resulting report is available on the OECD website www.oecd.org/edu/higher/regionaldevelopment. The review visit took place in December 2005, at a time when Government initiatives to mitigate the impact of restructuring in the defence industry were due to be announced, and reorganisation of the management of Karlstad University was about to be implemented.

Region: Värmland

Värmland is located in central Sweden on the border with Norway and has a population of approximately 275 000 inhabitants. It is one of the smallest regions under study as part of the OECD project. The main city of Värmland is Karlstad, with approximately 130 000 inhabitants in its labour region. Värmland has a low birth rate and the average age of the population is rising. The movement of people from Värmland to other parts of Sweden has been accompanied by emigration abroad. As a result, the proportion of the age group between 20 and 39 years has declined, while the proportion of the population in the 40 to 64-year-old age group has increased.

The economic life of Värmland has been built on its abundant natural resources. The forestry and steel industries remain important, but they employ fewer and fewer people. Services, including tourism and information technology are growing. Värmland's development is dependent upon attracting investment and people from Sweden and abroad. Värmland has links to Gothenburg in the south, to Stockholm in the east, and to Norway to the west, and the relative priority it gives to developing these will be decisive.

Politically there is abundant evidence of a will to work together for the region's future development. The small size of the region means that collaborative and consultative bodies are relatively easy to establish. Informal networks are strong.

Higher education and the region

Considerable efforts have been made in recent years to foster and promote innovation, both nationally and regionally. There have been some notable successes and in many respects the integration of higher education into the developmental structures of the region is exemplary.

Higher education and research policy in Sweden is nationally led, and equity of treatment across the country has been a guiding principle. Yet even within this small region there are marked differences in tertiary attainment and employment rates between the rural municipalities and the city, and between men and women. Karlstad University is the region's main higher education provider: its student intake is almost two-thirds female.

Karlstad University plays an active role in many aspects of the social, cultural and environmental development of the city and the region, but there is scope for a more comprehensive approach.

Major issues and key recommendations

In the national context, policies that will more unambiguously encourage the higher education institutions - and their staff - to engage with the economic and cultural development of the region are desirable.

The low participation rate of young men from the outlying municipalities needs to be addressed at both national and local levels.

In terms of regional geography, Värmland is caught between maintaining its own identity or seeking strength in greater

collaboration with one or more of its neighbours. Looking further afield, the business links with Europe and beyond will depend on improved transport infrastructure.

For the region, the main political need is to move from consultation to concerted action. Although Värmland is not in crisis, several indicators are moving into the amber zone. Decisive leadership may be required to prevent a slow decline.

In terms of economic development, there is a need to strengthen ties between key regional clusters and national innovation policy.

Karlstad University is justifiably proud of its short history. Like many of its size and age, it is ambitious, but will find it difficult to simultaneously sustain regional, national and international missions. Higher education is an increasingly competitive sector and hard choices need to be made by the institution's leaders and managers. The university should focus its activities on those in which it has clear strengths and on which Värmland's economy can give it competitive advantage.