



Students enjoying “nollningen” (the Freshman Reception) at Halmstad University and in Gävle.

### **From nOllningen (“The Zerofication”) to ”The Reception” - How college freshmen get engaged in Swedish student life (By Jimmy Granström)**

”From the middle to late August, living near a university town in Sweden can feel a bit like living in a Dr. Seuss cartoon”. This description was aptly coined by blogger ”megalagom” behind the blog ”Something Swedish”. Around this time, classes start back up, which means that the ”freshman reception” - previously known as “nollningen (The Zerofication)” - takes place. Regardless of its name, it is an “orientation” that takes place during the first few weeks of studies at a new college program in Sweden. In the past, the term ”nollningen” could have a bad connotation, as its counterpart in the United States is ”hazing”. However, ”nollning” is done in a very different way than hazing in the United States, where it is associated with physical or sexual harassment, abuse, and humiliation to become an accepted member of a sorority or fraternity. This type of ”extreme hazing” is often illegal and not associated with the school, and can range from being kidnapped, beaten, abandoned or forced to commit a crime.

”Extreme hazing” can also occur in Sweden, but more so at high schools than at universities, where the word ”nollningen” has gradually been replaced by ”reception”. The Swedish version of welcoming new students is a lot more open and fun than in the United States, and the intentions are usually as malicious. There have been times when nollningen has gotten out of hand in Sweden too, for example when new students at KTH (The Royal Institute of Technology) did a ”nollningsuppdrag (Zerofication Mission)” which led to parts of Stockholm being blocked off due to a bomb threat. A less dramatic and more typical example of a ”nollningsuppdrag” was when Chemical Engineering students at KTH in Stockholm walked around town warning the public about the dangers of ”dihydrogen oxide”, i.e. H<sub>2</sub>O (water). In general, today’s freshman reception is a lot more benign than ”nollningen” used to be many years ago. The new students starting at KTH in 2021 were surrounded by numerous ”faddrar (sponsors)”, who are older students assigned to make the new students feel welcome in their new environment. One type of sponsors at KTH is ”lekisar (playbuddies)”, who make sure that there is always something fun going on for the new students, from name games to ”Survivor” in KTH version. 900 students work for free so that the new students will feel welcome and entertained during the first two weeks at campus. The coordinators at each department start working in January-February to recruit volunteers, book venues and make plans for the reception in August. It is an immense undertaking which does not quite have an equivalent in the United States.

I earned an M. Sc. in Chemical Engineering (ChE) at the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, where I participated in most of the voluntary "nollningen". The aforementioned Dr. Seuss description would fit perfectly on my experiences during nollningen, featuring a wide variety of colorful overalls, wigs, sunglasses and masks. From the viewpoint of a cynical observer, "nollningen" may seem like a gigantic "nerdfest", but beneath the yellow overalls and black sun glasses of the "phösare" - typically 2nd or 3rd year students who were the "leaders" of the new freshman students until they "earned" the privilege of becoming first year students following the first few weeks of being referred to as a single unit "collective zero" - there was a big heart and a genuine desire to make the first stumbling weeks of college as open, exciting and socially accommodating as possible.

This was particularly helpful for people like myself, who are not "social powerhouses". Also, unlike myself, many people that enrolled at KTH came from towns and cities outside of Stockholm. The type of social setting enabled by the structure of "the zerofication" was probably very helpful in quickly breaking down a sense of "temporary isolation" that some people may have felt when living in a different city for the first time in their lives. During the "zerofication", the "phösare" were not allowed to laugh, as this was part of the "role" they played. However, as soon as the initial part of the "zerofication" was completed, there were big smiles over the faces of these "phösare" for several weeks, as finally they no longer had to put on their facades.

I have conducted research at a couple of world renown universities - with extensive extracurricular activities - since leaving KTH. However, the type of campus-wide combination of department-specific and overlaying interdepartmental social network and coordination that I experienced during my undergraduate studies is something I have only experienced at KTH and during a brief tenure at Umeå University in the spring/summer of 2011. The slight "sacrifice" in individual freedom that comes with sharing the same voluntary uniform, in this case an overall with a specific color for each department, is more than compensated for by the greater bond that it creates, both within and between departments. Steeped in tradition, carrying its own "mythology" and "urban legends", the "zerofication" continues to remain relevant for both old and new students at KTH and other universities throughout Sweden.



KTH ChE students in their overalls



Re-visiting KTH in September 2007



Musikaliska Direktoriets (MD), ChE, KTH



MD's "nollespexet" at the end of nollningen

KTH also offered a rich cultural life, including many theater- and music events that students could participate in. I was deeply impressed by the quantity and quality of creative output on campus, especially considering the fact that the people behind this "mass creativity" were pursuing a very challenging degree in a totally different field. The creative activities on campus ranged from several "spex" ("college parody shows") to singing- and songwriting contests as well as songbooks with lyrics featuring everything from "drinking anthems" to more sophisticated topics, mostly set to the music of famous Swedish- and international songs in different genres. Both department-specific and campus-wide songs were widely embraced, and sung with passion and bravado - but not always in the correct musical key - at various parties and other social events, further enhancing the bond within and between departments. This was an important part of the "social glue" that kept the spirits high for the people who decided to pursue college life at a deeper level (often deeper than the studies themselves).

I have always been a firm believer that one's "valuables" are a combination of private property and possessions as well as public areas and experiences shared with others. After graduating with a KTH degree, or selecting a different path in life, many of us former KTH students have moved on to rewarding careers and privileged lifestyles, from waterfront apartments to nice single family houses with big backyards. However, despite living in small student rooms and apartments at KTH, the kind of exciting environment that was within easy reach (both physically and practically) during our studies is something that I believe offered substantial wealth during our KTH tenures, creating "valuables" to last a lifetime.



KTH students entertaining fellow students and the general public at Östra Station, KTH, Stockholm