

Chapter 1

Quality Assurance in Norwegian Higher Education: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This chapter starts out by exploring why five higher education institutions failed to meet nationally agreed criteria for the approval of their quality systems. In order to achieve this, the review panels' reports were examined with a particular view to data analysis and data application. The reports were readily available online and represented an excellent data source for research purposes. Panels found that institutional quality reports were descriptive rather than analytical, that quality procedures were unsystematic and conclusions often missing. Unfortunately, the panels failed to come up with radically new approaches that could potentially alter that situation. Rather, the recipe seems to be more of the same, in particular student evaluation of teaching. With this as a backdrop, this study provides conceptual tools that might change the actors' approaches and thus empower those undertaking quality reviews locally. The alternative could otherwise be sustained frustration and wasted efforts.

INTRODUCTION

The Universities and Colleges Act (§ 1-6) stipulates that all higher education institutions in Norway should have a satisfactory internal quality assurance system. Within the framework of national regulations, local institutions enjoy freedom to tailor their system according to professional profile and a range of other factors. To help ensure that systems meet set quality standards, the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) is mandated to review institutions' quality systems using specified criteria (Universities and Colleges Act, § 2-1). NOKUT is a professional, public body, which in addition to its supervision mission, aims to stimulate quality efforts more broadly. It therefore serves as both a supervisory body and resource unit for higher education.

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To carry out the statutory mandate of the Ministry, NOKUT makes use of expert committees to evaluate institutional quality systems. This started in 2003, while NOKUT in its second phase of evaluation from the spring of 2009 changed its practice by placing greater emphasis on the institutions' use and benefit of quality assurance systems. However, the responsibility of the expert committees is still to judge whether or not systems may be approved based on criteria set by NOKUT. The external panel review consists of an evaluation of the quality system and the institution's active use of it. This is a challenging because there is a widespread distrust to such undertakings among academic staff. Furthermore, there are concerns over the bureaucratic nature of some of the current quality initiatives, sometimes with little evidence of real improvements in student learning, as exhibited in the following quote: "While forces of accountability are strong, those devoted to improvement, including the promotion of innovation, are fragmented" (Newton, 2001, p. 222).

Given the fact that institutional quality initiatives occupy significant resources, it is surprising to note that this domain often remain both under-researched and under-theorized. While there is an abundance of good intentions around, there is less of evidence to inform policy decisions and practical interventions; "... in reality, we can point to very little research into how 'quality policy', or other areas of strategy designed to improve learning and teaching have been used, how this has impacted on academic practice (Newton, 2002, p. 1-2). This study aims to bring evidence of the application of data for quality enhancement purposes. The Norwegian quality framework features five criteria to guide review panels' examination of quality systems; however, this study places an emphasis exclusively on the last two of them:

- Stimulus to establish a quality culture, if commitment to quality is encouraged by the institution;
- Whether the objectives, responsibilities, processes and actors that are part of the quality system are clearly described, and how the quality assurance system is tailored to meet the institution's needs;
- Securing and evaluating the quality of study programs based on data from multiple sources, and whether there are quality assurance procedures for new study programs;
- Analysis, assessment and reporting: whether data are being analyzed, assessed and presented to the responsible boards and management level;
- Use of knowledge for improvement: if improvement measures are rooted in a proper quality analysis.

To ensure reasonably professional judgments, each review panel recruited people with varied backgrounds and competencies. The following items exhibit competency requirements:

1. Experience with quality work or evaluation;
2. At least one should have experience at managerial level of higher education;
3. At least one should be linked to a relevant institution abroad;
4. There should be one student with experience from governing bodies or student unions;
5. There should be at least one panel member with professorial competence.

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