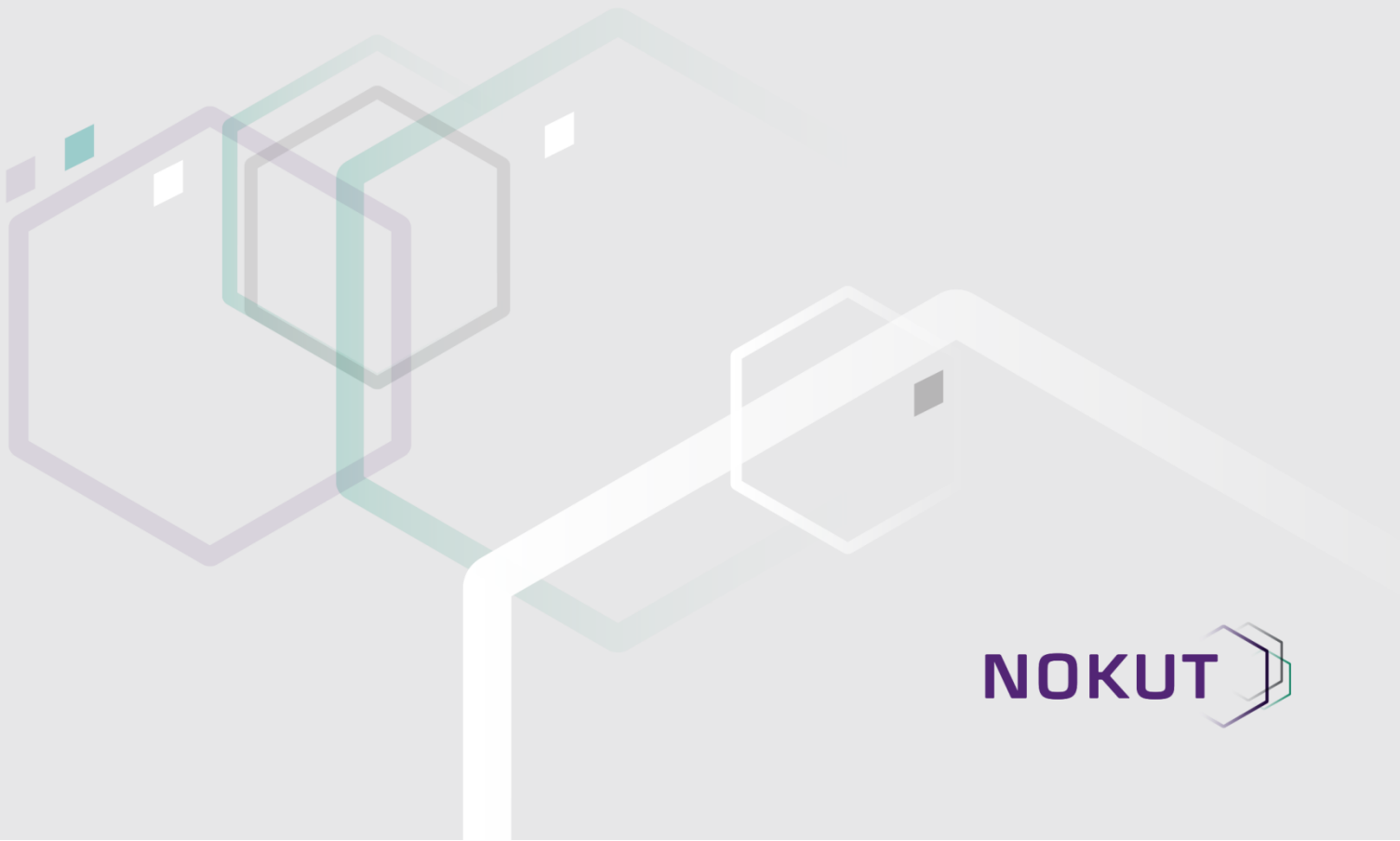


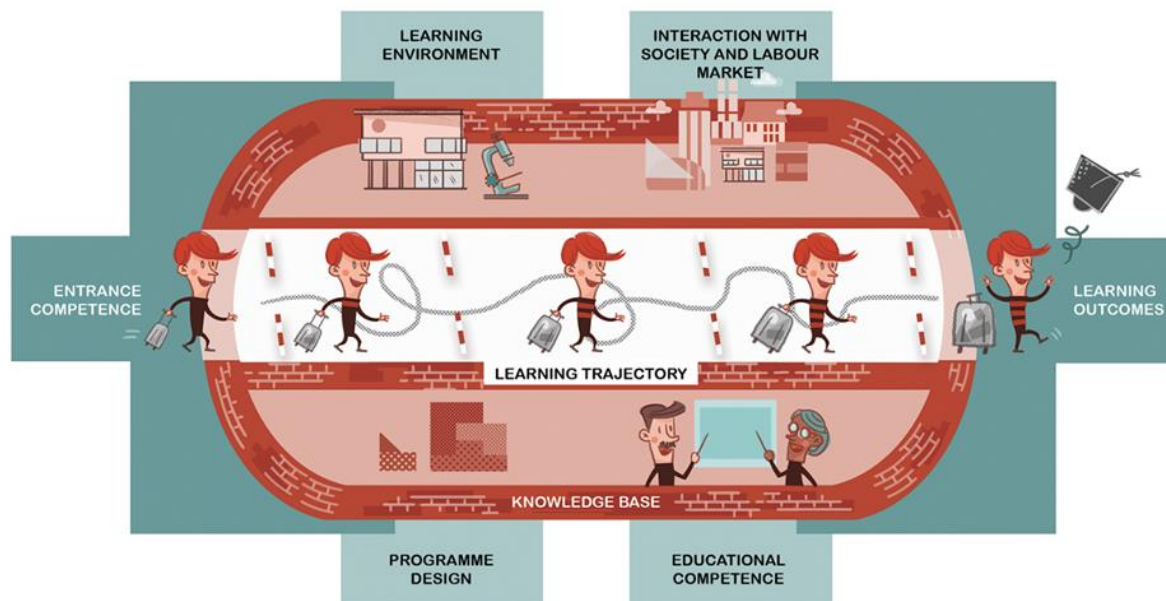


Quality areas for study programs

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Introduction

This document describes NOKUT's goals for improving higher education, focusing on the study program level. The document is intended as a way for NOKUT to communicate with higher education institutions and society in general about educational quality and the challenges it involves. To make communication easier, we need to break down the abstract concept of 'educational quality' into more specific and concrete ideas. Here, we do this by describing a set of quality areas for study programs. These quality areas will form the basis for NOKUT's evaluations and descriptions of educational quality in the sector, and they will appear in NOKUT's supervisions, evaluations, research, and indicator development.

In working to secure and improve educational quality, NOKUT's aim is always to ensure that students' educations have a high academic standard and are relevant for their future work and learning. The results of any learning process will usually depend more on each student's ability, motivation and effort than on the educational institution where it takes place. For this reason, final results alone are not evidence enough to determine an institution's educational quality. When evaluating educational quality, NOKUT emphasises how institutions create conditions for learning and how they motivate their students, over and above the learning outcomes themselves.

A good study program is designed and put into practice in a way that helps students achieve their learning outcomes in a reasonable amount of time. It should also help provide the skills and abilities that society needs, both now and in the long term. Finally, it contributes to the student's personal development or (in Norwegian) *dannelse*, here understood as 'the ability to see oneself as a member of

a wider local, national and global community, and the recognition that one's own powers and talents are at the service of the common good'.¹

The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)² discusses the facilitation of student learning:

*Institutions should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach.*³

This means that NOKUT's approach to higher education is student-centred, and uses a broad understanding of the processes that lead to learning. NOKUT focuses on eight intrinsically connected quality areas:

- knowledge base
- learning trajectory
- initial competence
- learning outcomes
- educational competence
- interaction with society and the workplace
- learning environment
- program design and program leadership

Internationalization is an integral part of each quality area. Providing education at a high international level requires institutions to be aware of how internationalization can strengthen their work.

This document sets out the quality areas in the following way:

First, it presents the necessary conditions for education to take place at all: that the students become part of an academic environment where, together with the academic staff, they acquire and create academic knowledge at a high level.

It then describes the learning process, from student admissions, through the learning trajectories where knowledge is created and acquired, to the achievement of learning outcomes.

The third set of quality areas describe the factors that need to be in place in order for students to learn. Finally, all these factors come together in the final quality area, program design.

¹From the Norwegian *Dannelse* Committee for Higher Education, 2009, page 10, item 8 in a list of the characteristics of personal development or *dannelse*: <http://www.uib.no/filearchive/innstilling-dannelsesutvalget.pdf>

² As part of the Bologna Process, Norway has undertaken to comply with the provisions set out in ESG. ESG applies to universities and university colleges' internal quality assurance of their own higher education programmes (Part 1), the external quality assurance of higher education (Part 2), and the quality assurance agencies' quality assurance of their own activities (Part 3).

³ ENQA, *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG), Brussels 2015: http://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/ESG_endorsed-with-changed-foreword.pdf

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1 Knowledge base

All higher education should draw on the very best of research, academic and artistic development work, and experiential knowledge.⁴ By a *knowledge base* we mean the foundation of knowledge that each subject discipline rests on. This is not a static entity, but changes and develops through contact with the other quality areas and with the wider academic community.

One of the main tasks of higher education institutions is to create academic communities where staff and students work together to maintain and develop a relevant knowledge base. Academic environments must be able to link the results of their own research and development with other knowledge in the field, and they must be able to produce new knowledge.

A student-centred academic community will make a deliberate effort to include their students in a living scholarly culture that focuses on research and development work and makes use of the subject discipline's research skills and methodology. Innovation and critical reflection are characteristics of a strong academic community. A good knowledge base gives students the capacity to change, develop and innovate. Subject-based student exchange arrangements, and periods of practice work in Norway and abroad, can give students broader perspectives on their field of study, as well as opportunities to specialize. A sufficiently large and robust academic community can give students access to different aspects of the field's knowledge base, and introduce them to the different perspectives and methods the field uses.

A strong academic community also stays up-to-date on and initiates research on education and learning. In this way, it can create teaching and assessment methods that keep students close to developments in their subject discipline's knowledge base.

A strong academic community provides its students with updated curriculums and state-of-the-art teaching and assessment methods. It makes students aware of how their subject discipline has developed, how it can respond to societal needs, and how it relates to other disciplines. Students learn how new knowledge is created and established. This lays the groundwork for them to make further innovations in the field.

Creating a good knowledge base requires:

- academic communities that steadily maintain and develop the educational institution's
- knowledge base, drawing on the newest research and development
- academic communities that do research on teaching and learning
- students who are actively included in the institution's knowledge development

⁴ <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/2005-04-01-15>

2 Learning trajectory

NOKUT describes a student's life at an institution of higher learning, from admission to diploma, as the student's *learning trajectory*. A successful learning trajectory is the sum of the student's connections and collaborations with others. In good learning trajectories, the students are conscious of their own process of learning, and develop sound strategies for learning.

This term puts the emphasis on how students learn within an academic and social community. Over the course of a program, students become part of an academic environment where they learn in interaction with teaching staff, fellow students, support services, the professional field, professional organizations, and society in general. In this learning community, the students grow in knowledge, experience, and personal development.

The institution draws up a plan for the students' learning in its program and course descriptions, and when the students begin their studies, the process of integrating them into an academic culture and a learning community begins. Students learn to master concepts and discover methods of tackling academic challenges. Throughout their learning trajectory, their academic abilities and attitudes face challenges, and these challenges promote their academic and personal development. As well as taking part in learning activities arranged by teaching staff, students learn in other arenas, such as study groups, student politics, practical training periods and exchanges, and project work.

A key condition for good learning trajectories is that students are motivated and dedicated, and that they put sufficient effort into their studies. Good teachers motivate the students, and set clear expectations for their level of commitment and effort. The students' efforts are met with feedback and individual follow-up from the academic staff.

National and international student mobility can be a useful way for students to become more independent and get to know new perspectives, practices and learning arenas. This, in turn, benefits the student's personal development and learning trajectory.

Good learning trajectories:

- are created collaboratively by students, academic staff, support services, the professional field, professional organizations, and the wider society
- make students conscious of their own learning, and of good learning strategies
- take place in an inclusive and motivating learning environment with a feedback culture that works well
- create opportunities for mobility between institutions, both nationally and internationally.

3 Initial competence

The prior knowledge that the student brings to the start of the program, as well as other qualities like motivation, experience and ability, are what we call the student's *initial competence*. Initial competence is not just a measure of the student's general level of competence when starting a higher education program. It also has to do with how far this competence is appropriate to the program in question, and with the student's motivation for choosing this education.

The competence and experience students already have is important when it comes to learning something new. A good study program helps students to relate their new knowledge to what they already know. Students' initial competence is important at every level of education, and the different levels need to work together to give the students the best possible start to their learning trajectory.

Many factors play a role when a student applies for admission to a study program, including the student's own interests, prior knowledge, trends in society, geography, the labour market, and the reputation of the program or institution in question. A good study program will make active efforts to recruit a diverse student body, composed of students with the right initial competence who are highly motivated to undertake the program.

A successful study start also requires good admissions procedures and clear information before the study program begins, and requires both a social and an academic welcome process. A *good study start* helps students develop motivation and good learning strategies. This is also important in the transition from BA to MA studies, and from MA studies to doctoral work. A good academic environment quickly introduces students to the knowledge culture of their field, and takes their different backgrounds into account. The academic environment is aware of the students' initial competences, and uses this to plan the study program.

The best possible start to a learning trajectory entails:

- recruitment and admission procedures that attract students with the right initial competence
- that both potential applicants and new students get up-to-date and relevant information about the study program
- a focus on a good study start as the beginning of the student's personal learning trajectory
- a focus on developing students' ability to learn and on establishing good learning strategies.

4 Learning outcomes

Each quality area in this model contributes in different ways to the student achieving (at least) the intended learning outcomes.

The goal of this model is for students to achieve good learning outcomes. The descriptions of these outcomes should give a good idea of the abilities, skills and knowledge that students will bring to their future work or studies. A good study program will use teaching, learning and assessment methods that are well suited to reaching the desired outcomes. This means that awareness of the program's learning outcomes can help strengthen the study program.

Learning outcome descriptions need to give a clear picture of the competence the institution wants students to have on graduation. A good learning outcome description is one that students, employers and educational institutions in Norway and abroad can easily recognize and understand. In writing the learning outcome descriptions, the program's academic community works with former students and outside sources to make sure that the descriptions work outside academia. If learning outcomes are to work well, the academic community needs to be invested in and have ownership of the learning outcome descriptions.

A conscious use of learning outcomes entails:

- focusing on all the quality areas, and seeing them in connection with each other
- developing learning outcome descriptions in collaboration with relevant outside sources (like representatives from workplaces and the wider society), and making sure these descriptions make sense in an international context
- ensuring that the academic community contributes to and feels ownership of the learning outcomes
- teaching, learning and assessment methods that help students achieve the learning outcomes
- assessment methods that determine whether students have achieved the learning outcomes

5 Educational competence

Facilitating others' learning is a demanding task that requires both academic and didactic competence, and depends on good educational leadership. Educational competence also means being able to adapt aspects of an academic field to create a course of study that has a relevant profile and is pitched at the right level.

For educators, a good basic level of educational competence is a starting point for further development and qualification, and subject and program leaders have a responsibility to ensure that this happens.⁵

The quality of teaching has great importance for the quality of students' learning. A good teacher is able to use student interaction to motivate and inspire students to learn. When students take part in shaping the teaching and learning methods used, they are likely to feel more in charge of their own

⁵ A set of national guidelines govern basic educational competence in the HE sector:
http://www.uhr.no/aktuelt_fra_uhr/nasjonale_veiledende_retningslinjer_for_universitets-_og_hog

learning trajectory. Teachers also depend on their colleagues and academic community to discuss and help evaluate their teaching.

In academic communities where educational competence is a priority, the whole community, including students, is involved in an ongoing conversation about how to teach, learn, and assess learning. The academic community also engages in research or development work related to its teaching practice, and collaborates with other academic communities nationally and abroad. The development of digital competence for students, staff and support services is also an important feature of educational competence.⁶

With a good level of educational competence, an educator can:

- translate aspects of an academic field into a course of study that has a relevant profile and is pitched at the right level
- make use of appropriate teaching and assessment methods that emphasise student learning
- conduct research and development work on teaching and learning
- use their knowledge about teaching and learning to create a good learning environment and good study plans

6 Interaction with society and working life

Study programs should be relevant in the sense of providing the competence society needs now and in the future, and in the sense of allowing students to gain knowledge and skills they will need in their future learning and working lives. Conversely, higher education institutions, academic staff and students can stimulate societal innovation by spreading knowledge of the most recent developments in relevant academic fields.

Forums for interacting with the professional field can contribute to making study programs more relevant and flexible. These forums should have influence over both program portfolios and the content of individual study programs. Feedback from former students, for example through an alumni network, is another useful resource in developing study programs.

Different study programs will have different challenges and needs when it comes to contact with society and working life. Each academic community needs to consider how and how far such contact can help improve its study programs. Collaboration with society and working life might involve, for instance, the use of teachers from outside the university, periods of practical training, specific course components addressing topics in the professional field, or MA and BA theses conducted in collaboration with the professional field. Contact with society and working life helps students see how they can use their knowledge, skills and abilities in the professional field, and allows them to share what they know with the world outside the university.

Useful interaction with society and working life entails:

⁶ Fossland, 2015 p. 19: “Digital competence in higher education involves academic and practical knowledge, skills and general competence related to using and facilitating the use of digital technology. This includes the ability to evaluate learning resources critically, as well as procedures for producing content, activities and assessment forms that are relevant for students’ learning.”

- suitable forums for contact with society and working life
- systematic work to ensure that individual study programs and the program portfolio as a whole are relevant to society and working life, today and in the future
- the active use of feedback from former students and alumni networks in the preparation of study programs
- creating conditions for students to learn through contact with society and working life, and for society and working life to benefit from student contact

7 Learning environment

A learning environment is the sum of all the factors that affect students' physical and mental well-being and their ability to learn.

The other quality areas affect an institution's learning environment in a variety of ways. For instance, educational competence and research can help institutions find out how to create a good learning environment, while the welcome phase at the start of the study trajectory is important to students' well-being and sense of belonging.

A learning environment is composed of physical, organizational and psychosocial factors. NOKUT uses the term 'learning environment' to describe how these factors affect not only student welfare, but also how they affect learning, student involvement, student democracy, and student ownership of learning.

Results from different evaluations, such as the national student survey *Studiebarometeret* and local student surveys, will provide useful information for developing a learning environment.

Physical surroundings affect learning. A good learning environment facilitates and provides training in forms of teaching and assessment beyond the traditional lecture/classroom model. Changing the physical environment and teaching methods can often make it easier to introduce aspects of R&D in learning. In this way, the physical premises can help transform the content of a program. Even early-stage teaching can become more project- and collaboration-oriented, with a work flow more similar to the one students will encounter in research and development projects, as well as in their future work.

A good learning environment involves practical application of teaching and assessment methods other than traditional lectures/classroom-based teaching, like flipped classrooms, problem-based learning, team teaching, courses in debate, drama or role-play, learning workshops and learning by doing.

A good learning environment entails:

- making use of knowledge gained through research and development work on teaching and learning
- practical arrangements for the use of new teaching and assessment methods
- student involvement, student democracy and student ownership of learning
- continually improving the physical, psychosocial and organizational conditions that students live and work under

8 Program design and program leadership

A good program design unites many of the factors that contribute to good learning and to students achieving good learning outcomes.

Designing a program is a complex task that requires good educational management, as well as input from students, academic staff and administrative staff, support services, professional organizations, and the wider society. For a program design to be successful, it needs defined roles and a clear division of responsibility for everyone involved, and a sound basis in pedagogy and subject didactics.

A well-designed study program contains good and relevant learning outcome descriptions that are at the right level of the National Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning, and that are adapted to the distinctive nature of the discipline. The learning outcome descriptions correspond to the teaching and assessment methods used (see the new item in ESG on student-centred learning). The program encourages students to be active learners. Program design and leadership is an arena for students, academic staff, and the wider university and society to discuss the discipline and its development.

Study plans and course plans should state when and how student exchanges can take place, and with which partner institutions. A carefully constructed program design will also take into account how to accommodate credits awarded for earlier studies and study exchanges.

A well-designed study program contributes to improve student learning, creates close links between R&D and teaching, and contributes to effective administration. It ensures that the study program delivers on its promises, in particular that students are able to achieve the set learning outcomes. Periodic assessment of study programs means that the programs, and other factors that play into students' learning trajectories, continually improve. Such assessments help to ensure that the program and the students' learning correspond to the needs of both the student and society.

A good program design:

- has learning outcomes that correspond to the teaching and assessment forms used, in such a way that students can achieve the learning outcomes
- is evaluated regularly, with the evaluation results used for continual improvement
- has learning outcomes that are relevant to society and the professional field