



Nordic experiences of audits – possibilities and limitations

Paper presented to the
29th ANNUAL EAIR FORUM
26 to 29 August 2007
Innsbruck, Austria

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Key words

Assessment /Evaluation,
Quality,

Abstract

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Nordic audits have elements of both control/assurance and enhancement, but assurance tends to be emphasized. Audits may be followed by statements of trust, approval or sanctions.

The experience of demands for quality work followed by audits is generally positive. It may be cost-effective, and the main responsibility for the quality of provision stays with the provider. However, the development of systematic quality work in higher education institutions takes time and quality work is sometimes still seen as a burden. Also, the link between systematic quality work and improved quality of provision and outcome, output and impact is unclear.

Nordic experiences of audits – possibilities and limitations

Quality audits in the Nordic countries

Quality audit in the context of higher education may be defined as a process for checking that procedures are in place to assure and improve quality, integrity or standards of provision and outcomes. It may apply to all levels of higher education institutions, from subjects, departments and faculties to institutions. In the context of this paper, we use the term to refer to evaluation of institutional systems of quality assurance and enhancement.

Generally, the Nordic quality assurance agencies concur with the above definition, as far as the objective of evaluation is concerned. They all agree that systems should be in place in institutions for the assurance and development of quality. The Nordic agencies do not impose a particular quality system but the one in place should meet certain requirements: For example, it should be capable of revealing poor quality; it should contain routines for setting goals, for evaluation at various levels and follow-up of results of evaluations; it should contain routines for establishing new provision and continuous assurance and improvement of existing provision. Finally, the Nordic agencies also assume that institutional quality work should ideally follow the “quality cycle”, i.e. is a continuous circular process beginning with stating objectives and plans, followed by implementation, analysis and revision, leading to the establishment of new objectives and plans, etc.

The purpose of audits is then to provide an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of such systems and provide recommendations for improvement. Enhancement is part of the audit procedure in all the Nordic countries. Each country has, however, its own angle, which reflects its particular emphasis and purpose. For example, there is a difference between the Danish approach stressing enhancement, and those of Iceland, Norway and Sweden (from 2007) putting more emphasis on control and linking audit to accreditation.

Criteria and principles

In this paper the term criterion is used mainly in the sense of “reference points that invite reflection, discussion and commentary”, but which should be met, at least at a basic level, for the quality system to be acceptable. In some countries this would rather be referred to as auditing targets or aspects.

The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ENQA 2005) state that “any formal decisions made as a result of an external quality assurance activity should be based on explicit published criteria that are applied consistently”. All the Nordic agencies are working towards bringing or have already brought their audit concepts into agreement with the European Standards and Guidelines. They are thus, explicitly or implicitly, incorporated into the agencies’ audit criteria and targets. All countries use predefined criteria reflecting the national quality assurance system in place and reflecting what is required of institutional quality work. They make these requirements clear and transparent to institutions as well as to experts.

The focus of audits and the criteria in Norway is on the system, its objectives, its acceptance among students and staff and the way in which it helps to develop a quality culture in the entire institution. It is understood that the system should include the collection of data and other information from internal evaluations, which should be analysed and used for decisions on internal resource allocation and prioritisations. The internal process of self-evaluation must include an annual report on quality to the institution’s board. Some of the Danish, Finnish and Swedish criteria are more specific and refer to particular elements of quality systems. For example, the Swedish aspects include a series of quality factors which the other systems do not mention specifically, e.g. internationalisation, gender equality and social and ethnic diversity and among the criteria in Denmark and Finland we find staff development. The criteria in the new Swedish system also attempt to link quality plans and activities to results of a quality work in the sense of improved performance and long-term effects (e.g. employer satisfaction and employment rates). Thus, the audit model requires institutions to conduct investigations

and surveys and monitor progress in terms of output, outcome and impact to be able to demonstrate progress in terms of enhanced quality. This is a notoriously problematic area, needing further development. A direct cause – effect relationship between improved quality work and student performance is hard to prove.

In Iceland the focus is on the compliance with the higher education act both with regard to internal quality systems and administration and organisation, organisation of teaching and research, staff qualification requirements, admission requirements and students' rights and obligations. Further, expert panels are to report on expertise and competence in a particular field of study, cooperation and support of the university in the field of research, teaching staff and experts in any particular field. Also they will comment on special attention to fields of research and the status of fields of study and subdivisions in national and international comparison.

In Denmark the criteria are statements about a mature and well-developed system for quality assurance and development. Each criterion should be reported on in the self-evaluation report. And in the final audit report the panel will give its assessment of how the university meets each criterion. The assessment and the audit report focus on how and to what extent the university's quality work fulfils the demands of the criteria, and not only on the more simplistic "if".

Finland and Sweden are quite explicit in determining different levels of performance. In the Finnish model four levels are described for each criterion: absent, emerging, developing and advanced, and criteria are developed for each of them. The new Swedish system distinguishes three levels: initiated, under development and developed, assuming, on the basis of the two previous audit cycles, that the implementation of each criterion has been at least initiated. In both countries the different criteria are intended as indicators to facilitate the experts' discussion.

Formal consequences of audit

In Nordic audits, the control/assurance element and the enhancement objective are both present. It is not a question of either – or, but a matter of degree. A shift of emphasis seems to point in the direction of assurance. This is reflected in the formal consequences of audit results.

Norway and Iceland apply formal sanctions on those institutions whose quality assurance systems are not up to the expected standard. In Iceland, the Minister of Education decides whether the institution retains its accreditation for the evaluated field of study. Quality audits in Norway result in a judgement of the extent to which the system as a whole is satisfactory and indicate areas of development. If fundamental deficiencies in the quality assurance system are found the institution is granted a time limit of six months to rectify matters. The QA-agency will then conduct a new audit. If the institutional quality assurance system fails approval again, the institution will lose its right to start or to apply for approval of new provision. After one year the institution may ask for a new audit. Also, on the basis of the audit report, the agency may initiate revision of given accreditation (of a study programme, of a department or of the institution itself).

In both Sweden and Finland, an incomplete or unsatisfactory quality assurance system will result in a re-audit, in Finland after two years, in Sweden after one year. In Sweden the head of the QA-agency will express either 'full confidence', 'confidence' or 'limited confidence' in the quality assurance programme and its implementation. Re-audits will concentrate on the improvement measures proposed by the experts. In neither of the countries have re-audits taken place yet. The first re-audit in Finland will take place in 2008.

Although there are no formal consequences in Denmark, and only limited consequences in Finland and Sweden, a negative outcome of an audit is expected to have an impact on the reputation of an institution, and thus to affect indirectly e.g. external funding and student intake. On the other hand, a negative outcome of an audit might stimulate the institution's work on educational quality.

Audit is, however, only one of several different evaluation methods. The many approaches may be seen as a burden on both higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies. However, the different methods also supplement each other in various ways.

Comparisons regarding methodology

The general audit methodology in the Nordic countries is based on the principles of the European Standards and Guidelines and there are no major differences among the countries.

Self-evaluation or similar documentation

Self-evaluation and the preparation of a self-evaluation report are common procedures in academic evaluation, in some of the countries required by law. They give the unit under review the chance of looking at their quality systems and assessing what works and what could be improved. They also provide a sound basis for the work of the expert teams. The Nordic quality assurance organisations provide some kind of guidance or guidelines to the institutions in connection with the self-evaluation.

Self-evaluation is part of the Danish, Icelandic and Swedish audit process. In Finland and Norway, however, it is replaced by providing existing material from the institutions' own quality systems. In both cases the information required by the agencies is quite similar. It should be both descriptive and analytical and provide evidence of how quality work is implemented and linked to institutional strategy. Ideally, it should give an account of the results quality work produces in various dimensions, address challenges that have been identified and suggest ways forward.

The composition of the external expert panels, and their roles and mandates

Expert panels consist of academics with experience of leadership in higher education and sometimes also subject area specialists. In Iceland relevant academic expertise is a criterion for the selection of experts. This is partly due to the fact that audits in Iceland are conducted at field of study level. This is also true in Denmark in cases where audits are carried out at faculty level. In Norway one panel member should have qualifications at the level of professor, but relevant professional knowledge is not a criterion. In Finland the academic experts represent different higher education sectors (universities and polytechnics) and different staff groups (management and administration, teaching and research and support services).

Competence from the field of quality assurance or evaluation in higher education is regarded as important. In the Nordic countries at least one member of an audit panel usually has such competences. These persons have different backgrounds, such as researchers within the field of quality assurance, quality assurance managers from institutions etc.

Audit panels in the Nordic countries include a student. Those appointed have usually served on boards or committees of higher education institutions or other decision-making bodies. In Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden where there are national student unions, the student experts are nominated by these organisations, but appointed by the agencies.

International presence on panels is important. All countries have Nordic experts and some also recruit experts from other countries. In Iceland, all quality evaluations are done in English with experts recruited from foreign countries. This is to get an international perspective and to ensure that a wide pool of experts is available for the task. In Finland and Denmark, institutions may choose between a domestic and an international audit panel.

In all countries except Norway, the external stakeholder perspective has been emphasised, and it has been customary for one expert to come from outside the academic world. He or she may be a representative of employers in business and industry or of the community at large (civil service or local government).

Finally, it should be added that the Nordic countries have a strong tradition of gender equality and it is taken for granted that panels aim at having an equal representation of men and women.

Experts are prepared for their task in several ways. They need to be informed about the context of evaluation, the specific audit methodology, their role as auditors and ethical concerns. Internationally recruited team members and stakeholders will also require a briefing on the higher education system and the relevant legislation in the country. Introduction sessions are fairly brief.

The experts carry out their tasks within national models of external quality assurance and their work is regulated by mandates given by the agencies. Hence, the Nordic countries vary in respect of the expectations and the range of (academic) freedom of the audit experts. In all countries the audit model defines the information and documentation the audit panels get from the institutions to be evaluated. However, the panels may request additional information when needed. There are predefined procedures with regard to the groups an audit panel must meet during site visit, but the panel may decide to meet with other groups or units as well. Typically, the agency and the audit panel work together to prepare the site visit.

The chairs of the panels have special obligations besides chairing meetings. These include the preparation of the site visit, in some cases a pre-meeting with the management of the institution, and in most countries overseeing the process of writing the audit report. However, the audit experts are all responsible for the outcome, and naturally they are fully responsible for the conclusions and advice included in the reports.

Site visit

The aims of the site visit resemble one another. It is a question of providing a clear and detailed picture of the institutional quality work and/or quality assurance system by supplementing the information and analysis given in the self-evaluations and/or other documentation. The site visit is intended to be an interactive event contributing to the development of the quality assurance system and, if possible to find examples of good practice to disseminate to other universities and colleges.

The site visits include dialogues between the panel and various groups in the institutions under review. The feedback from the evaluated institutions often points out that these meetings and dialogues are constructive and useful.

In all the Nordic countries the duration of the site visit is 2 – 5 days. The number of persons who are interviewed varies with the length of the visit and the size and complexity of the institution or faculty, and may be as large as 200. The visits usually begin and end with a meeting with the representatives of the leadership and management of the institution. Also the representatives (e.g. the teaching and administrative staff) of various units within the institution and its departments are interviewed. Some of the most important meetings are with students. Often, though not in all the countries, panels also meet external stakeholders, e.g. business and working life representatives, if applicable, and external members of the institutional boards and graduates in order to collect views on the relevance of the institution's work on quality. Time permitting, various facilities such as lecture theatres, laboratories and libraries may also be visited.

The audit panel's report

In all the Nordic countries the quality audit like all national evaluations always results in a public report. It is common practice that the report should follow a relatively uniform structure and relate to criteria set up by the agency in each of the Nordic countries. The structure of the report usually involves a description of the audit process, a description of the institution and its quality assurance system and its implementation and finally the result of the audit. The enhancement aspect requires recommendations on how the quality system should be improved. The report should, therefore, focus and elaborate both on how and to what extent the quality work is acceptable, and on what improvement is desirable or needed.

It is common practice, and in Denmark required by law, for the higher education institution in question to get a chance to examine a draft of the report to check for factual errors and misunderstandings. Neither in Finland, Iceland, Norway nor Sweden does this draft include the panel's final conclusion.

The published reports in Finland, Norway and, from 2007, in Sweden include a decision taken by the relevant agency as to the acceptability of the quality system and its implementation. Norwegian reports also include a formal statement on the report by the evaluated institution.

Feedback on processes and results is seen as important and for this reason feedback conferences are commonly arranged at which experts and representatives of institutions participate. In Finland the QA-council's decision with regard to the audit is followed by a publication conference at the evaluated institution. The chair of the audit panel presents the results. NOKUT has annual conferences with the tertiary education sector, to which the audit experts are invited. The audit experts are frequently asked to contribute to seminars at the conference.

Findings and effects

One general and very obvious conclusion is that the implementation and general acceptance of systematic quality work in higher education institutions takes time.

The five countries are at different stages of development of both quality work as a development strategy in institutions and the development of audit as a method of evaluation. Denmark has recently taken up the method. The same goes for Iceland. Audits have demonstrated that in Denmark institutions have not yet fully developed systematic quality work as a tool for continuous improvement. Further, auditors stress the role of managements to lead the development of quality work and clarify the advantages.

In Finland feedback collected from both auditors and institutions after ten audits, shows a general contentment on the part of the institutions with regard to information, audit material, the audit panel's visit, criteria, and the reports. There is agreement that the process has helped to improve quality assurance of basic operations. Audit panels appreciated the model including the division of work within the panel and use of the criteria and the shared responsibilities for writing. There were, however, certain reservations about the size of the material submitted by the institutions. The role of management seems crucial to the acceptance and success of institutional quality assurance.

In Norway institutions have developed quality assurance systems. Studies on the reports show that the audit panels often advise the institutions to improve their annual reports on educational quality, the follow-up of evaluations, the design of student questionnaires (particularly end-term course evaluations) and routines for feedback to students. Sometimes it is also difficult to achieve broad participation on the part of students and teachers. It is the impression, however, that students know how to use the quality assurance system with the help of their representatives or those responsible for quality assurance at the institutions, whenever necessary. An analysis of institutional statements on audit reports indicates that almost all audited institutions find the exercise useful for further development. Only three out of 35 institutions raise a discussion on the principles of the audit or the validity of the methodology.

A study of the impact of the first two cycles of audits in Sweden shows that they have probably given rise to developments in leadership and organisation of internal quality work. The same goes, to a

slightly lesser extent, for e.g. student influence, policy and strategy evaluation and follow-up. It is worth noting, however, that the implementation of the quality cycle (setting objectives – implementing – evaluating – setting new objectives) had been achieved in only a minority of the institutions.

Strengths, challenges and developments

General

The development of systematic quality work in higher education institutions takes time. This may be deduced specifically from the experiences in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Functioning quality work is not always at hand in all institutions even after many years. And it still does not have the full acceptance of the academic community. One reason for this may be that the systems that have been developed have not been capable of making life easier for the teaching staff. Instead, quality work is still seen as a burden on top of everything else required of a university teacher, at a time of dwindling resources and lack of time for research.

Secondly, the link between systematic quality work and improved quality of provision and outcome, output and impact is unclear. There is little, if any, incontrovertible evidence that it leads to higher quality. We do know that it involves routines that may contribute to better management, leadership and decision-making, better knowledge of the opinions and performance of students and staff, better relations with internal and external, including international, stakeholders and partners and, last but not least knowledge of the quality of provision. But the link is still not obvious and thus the validity of the model may be challenged.

Yet, the experience of the Nordic countries of demands for quality work and for national audit of the institutions' efforts is, on the whole, positive. In an international context, it helps institutions to live up to the European Standards and Guidelines, which will facilitate international exchange and collaboration.

It is reported that site visits in audits inspire discussions on the quality of teaching, research and management and quality work within the whole institution to be evaluated. The audit panel's report will always include recommendations on further development of an institution's efforts to improve educational quality. Audits also contribute to transparency of institutions' quality operations through demands for systematic documentation and their insistence that the staff should work in the direction of joint quality goals. Most importantly, perhaps, these demands also help institutional leadership at various levels to set priorities and thus to make efficient use of the institution's resources. Hence, the model holds the potential of inspiring the quality culture of the institutions of higher education, and is appreciated by many institutions for this reason.

A discussion that often arises in the context of external quality assurance is the costs of quality work and, in particular, quality audit. One answer is that it is important for students, prospective students, stakeholders and those who fund higher education to know the quality of what is provided and whether money is well spent, not least in international comparison. Thus, external assurance is important, but it ought to be at a reasonable level and costs in terms of money and efforts. Audit calls attention to and puts the responsibility for quality where it belongs, i.e. at the higher education institutions, and allows them to demonstrate that they have the tools to assure and enhance their provision. For both quality assurance agencies and institutions it is probably the least costly form of external interference in comparison with subject and programme evaluation.

Methodology

Self-evaluation

Not all the Nordic countries require a specific self-evaluation process prior to the external audit. It may be argued that there is no substantial difference between requiring a self-evaluation process and report and requiring existing material. The material demanded by the agencies in Norway and Finland is such documents as describe quality assurance procedures and demonstrate their impact. It is required that on the basis of a quality programme, activities such as evaluations, taking account of performance

indicators, procedures based on interpretations of information derived from the results of quality work, etc. should be in place. This is meant to make such procedures and processes a normal part of everyday academic life, and to put less of a burden on institutions regarding external audits.

On the other hand, the self-evaluation process required in Denmark, Iceland and Sweden is intended to activate the institution as a whole and at best contribute to the improvement of processes and results. It is a process required once every five or six years depending on the length of the evaluation cycle. It is a major effort by the whole institution and may thus have a lasting effect on quality work. If the institution has a well functioning quality assurance system, it is a matter of putting what already exists together in a report, which is part of a regular process. In those Nordic countries where self-evaluations are not mandatory an annual report on quality work is demanded, which in many ways resembles what is required in a self-evaluation. It may, therefore, be argued that the differences between the two models are not overwhelming, provided that systems are in place.

The criteria

The use of predefined criteria for decisions based on external evaluation is required by the European Standards and Guidelines. They are a condition for institutions knowing on what grounds they will be assessed, and for expert panels to know on what they are going to base their judgements. There is, however, a risk involved in applying the criteria too rigidly on the part of both institutions in their quality work and experts in their judgements, and thus to limit creativity and development in quality work. A narrow interpretation of criteria by institutions and expert panels may lead to unwanted standardisation of quality work. Hence, it is preferable that criteria should rather be generic and, to a certain extent, open to interpretations both in the self-evaluations and in the work of the expert panels. This is, however, a matter of balance. If the interpretation varies too much, there is a risk that institutions are not evaluated on the same bases and that panels transgress their mandate.

The site visits

The objective of site visits is for the panels to be able to see what the relationship is between assumptions they have made when reading the self-evaluation reports or the annual quality reports and what they may have learned when discussing with different categories of staff at the institution under review. However, the problem of drawing correct inferences is that no matter how many staff members they meet, they are only a limited part of the whole staff. One way of overcoming this problem has been discussed by the Danish Evaluation Institute who have considered supplementing the self-evaluation report with a questionnaire survey among staff and students. The purpose of such a survey would be to learn about the opinions and practices from more people and thus get a more qualified basis for assessing the information of the self-evaluation report and in the end the comprehensiveness and effectiveness of the quality system.

In Norway, some auditors have brought up the idea of two separate rounds of site visits to the institution under evaluation. The first round focusing on overall means and strategies and mostly including meetings with leadership, and the next site visit going into the actual details of the institutions work on educational quality. Naturally this kind of change is a question of resources and effectiveness.

Final thoughts

A trend that has been discussed in this paper is a development from a largely enhancement oriented approach towards a more assurance oriented model linked to accreditation. This is very clear in Iceland, Norway and to a slightly lesser extent in Sweden. It is a trend found also in other countries, and seems to indicate a conviction that putting pressure on higher education institutions to develop their own quality assurance systems is effective.

Yet, other methods are used simultaneously: thus, in Sweden there is also programme and subject evaluation of all provision leading to a degree (although with a lighter touch than earlier). In Iceland all fields of study must also be accredited. In Norway revision of accreditation of programmes may take place on the basis of indications of poor quality or as broad national programme revisions. In Finland

other forms of evaluation also take place, and in Denmark, audit does not cover all of the higher education system and accreditation is still the pre-dominant external quality assurance method.

Thus audit is not felt to assure quality on its own. And this seems to be a general European stance, except in the United Kingdom. But it must also be taken into consideration that the emphasis put on different evaluation methods changes on the assumption that using the same model over and over again does not contribute to improvement in the long run. And this is recognised in the Nordic countries where, in the last 10 to 15 years, there have been many changes in the external quality assurance systems, all in the interest of improving quality and of providing information to all those with an interest in higher education.