

# Quality Audits in Norway<sup>1</sup>

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## **The role of audit in the Norwegian quality assurance system:**

The institutional quality audit occupies the central position in a system of external quality assurance of higher education that balances the use of several mechanisms. NOKUT will carry out the following types of evaluations/assessments:

- **Quality audit**
- **Accreditation (initial) - a) institutional and b) programme/course**
- **Revision of accreditation**
- **Evaluations to make general assessments on the quality of Norwegian HE**

Of these, the latter have a clear research and development orientation. As such, they will not be directed at specific institutions or programmes in order to assess if quality is satisfactory. Nor will they be 'systematic' in any way. More typically, they will be used to investigate specific aspects of quality in a representative sample of institutions.

*Quality audit* is the basic, cyclic element in the Norwegian system of external quality assurance. It refers to a (recent) legal demand that all accredited institutions of higher education must have an internal quality assurance system for educational activities that meets certain quality criteria. The institutions must have their quality assurance system and quality work evaluated at least every 6 years. Although Norway has an accreditation-based system, the quality audit is not itself an accreditation mechanism.

Since Norway introduced official accreditation from 1 January 2003, such accreditation links institutions and provision to national degrees and diplomas. On the date of the transition to the new system, all state-owned universities and university colleges were automatically given status as accredited. Similarly, all recognized provision in unaccredited institutions is considered accredited.

*Institutional accreditation* has three categories: university; special field university and university college, with different powers to award degrees for each category. Accreditation procedures take place when an unaccredited institution applies for accreditation in any of the three categories, or an accredited institution applies for accreditation in a 'higher' category.

*Programme accreditations* take place when an institution applies for the accreditation of a new course or programme that the institution's status doesn't allow it to provide automatically. Unaccredited institutions must undergo accreditation procedures for all new provision at all levels, whereas university colleges must do it for all new provision beyond the bachelor level. Universities and special field universities (e.g. a school of

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<sup>1</sup> Outline of speech given to a seminar hosted by the Finnish Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Helsinki, January 2005.

veterinary science) possess full rights to award degrees at all levels without specific programme accreditation.

*Revision of accreditation* may concern whole institutions (presumably in rare cases) or individual programmes. The important thing to notice is that accreditations in Norway do not expire after a given number of years, and that institutions are not systematically supposed to undergo revision procedures. In principle, accreditation is granted ‘once and for all’ and revision is only supposed to take place either on indications of weak quality or as random tests. In many ways, the Norwegian accreditation system can be described as ‘accreditation light’.

The function of the *quality audit*, then, becomes all the more important. The audits make up the permanent cyclic element in national QA and are expected to serve as the main signpost to revision procedures through the detection of ‘indications of weak quality’.

### **Rationale behind the choice of audit as a central element:**

The choice to make quality audit – and not cyclic accreditation revisions – the basic element rests on a considerable element of **trust** in higher education. Norway is a small country, with a comparatively coherent and transparent HE sector. Quality is not seen to vary *significantly* throughout the sector, at least not within each of the three categories of institutional accreditation. When this is the present-day status analysis, it is not considered likely that grave quality failures will be *more* of a challenge when stricter demands and more systematic external assessments are introduced.

The institutions themselves carry the **responsibility** for the quality of their own educational provision. They must therefore be required – and indeed expected – to carry out robust *internal* quality assurance, in their own interest. By making quality assurance rest basically on the quality assurance work in the institutions themselves, it is believed that a quality culture may develop more easily through a feeling of participation and institutional ownership.

Given this responsibility, the institutions must also be given the **freedom** to design their own QA approach within a wide – if also demanding - frame of reference. External quality assurance should assess whether internal quality assurance works effectively and convincingly, but otherwise be careful not to give detailed instruction as to how it should be done. In this view, freedom is the corollary of responsibility. But freedom in deciding how the institution’s quality work will be exercised is also supposed to foster a sense of **ownership and broad participation** among the institution’s staff and students.

Institutional audit is seen as ‘**economical**’ in the sense that it requires less resources and bureaucracy than for instance cyclic programme accreditations. Institutional audit approaches the institution’s educational quality and quality work in a generalist (nor discipline-specific) way. As such, it links external quality assurance directly to via **quality management** to institutional leadership and governance.

As the audit addresses educational quality only indirectly, it poses less of a ‘threat’ to the evaluated institution. This is underscored by the fact that the frame of reference is too general to invite any kind of explicit comparison or ranking among institutions. The audit *does* make quality assessments, but the lack of a ‘measurable’ outcome invites the institution to take a less defensive – or instrumental – approach to the evaluation and offers a better chance for **improvement-oriented dialogue** between auditors and the institution about the current status and future developments.

### **The purpose:**

As from 1 January 2004 Norwegian HE institutions are demanded to have quality assurance systems in place that meet certain defined demands. The audit will **evaluate the institutions’ QA systems** against these demands and assess whether they are in fact satisfactory or not. If the assessment is negative the institution will not be allowed to open new programmes/courses until shortcomings are corrected.

Procedure and practice as well as system are involved here. Therefore, the purpose of evaluating the QA system may be paraphrased like this: **to audit the quality assessments that the institution itself makes of its educational provision.** If auditors conclude that they have reasons to doubt the quality of certain programmes (because quality assurance is too weak, or because there is documentation that directly indicates failing quality) this may lead NOKUT to launch an evaluation that revises the accreditation of that/those specific programme/s.

### **Conditions for realistic audits:**

In order to make legitimate assessments of an institution’s QA system and quality work, there must be **a frame of reference** – or standard, consisting of a set of evaluation criteria – against which the system and performance of the institution can be evaluated. The challenging task is to formulate evaluation criteria that will secure robust internal quality assurance, while still leaving real choice for the institution in designing their own QA system.

The evaluation criteria must go further than just identifying the characteristics of a satisfactory QA system as such. It is fully possible for an institution to have a ‘perfect’ system on paper and still not use it properly. Therefore, the criteria must also address the way quality work is actually performed. The institution must be expected to be able to present **documentation** that their QA system is **comprehensive, effective and reliable.** One must never forget what it is that the quality assurance system is supposed to protect and develop: *every single programme that the institution provides for its students.* The crucial questions that the institutional leadership must ask themselves are these: Is the quality of all our provision satisfactory? And: how can we know that it is? Similarly, the external auditors will ask: How can you know that the quality of all your provision is satisfactory? And: how will you convince us that it is? The internal QA system is there to make it possible for the institution’s board and leadership to accurately assess the quality of the education that their institution provides. The same documentation that the institution needs for this purpose must also be available to the auditors, so that they can assess the institution’s own assessments.

The great challenge is to be able to audit in sufficient breadth and depth in large and diversified institutions. If audits become too superficial or prove inefficient as tracers of indications of weak quality, this type of external QA may easily be accused of 'lacking teeth'. This challenge must be met from two sides: through evaluation criteria that demand of institutions that they provide sufficient documentation and through the qualities of the audit procedure itself.

### **Procedure:**

The Norwegian audits are not based on the kind of self-evaluation that institutions are usually asked to prepare in advance of an external evaluation. Rather, the external audit goes direct into the documentation that the institution's own QA system has created. The evaluation criteria relating to internal quality assurance have been formulated with this in mind. It remains to be seen over the next couple of years if this approach is effective.

#### Scrutiny of documentation:

Some of the documentation – including a coherent presentation of the QA system, annual quality reports and some key figures and summaries relating to the educational activity on institutional and faculty levels - must be submitted well in advance of the auditors' visit at the institution. The auditors will study this material individually.

More detailed documentation on the quality assurance of each individual study unit (courses or programmes) must be available for the auditors at their site visit, which may take from two to four days, depending on the size and complexity of the institution. The auditors will 'drill down' into this material, following trails that they find interesting.

#### Interviews:

During their visit the auditors will conduct interviews with representatives of the leadership, ordinary faculty, administrative personnel and students, following hypotheses and 'leads' that have emerged from the scrutiny and analysis of the written documentation. The interplay between written material and interviews – and between hypotheses and analysis - demands that panels have sufficient time at the institution; time to follow trails in the documentation and to sum up their impression between interview sessions.

#### Conclusions and report:

The auditors will give their conclusions and recommendations in a public report,' with an assessment of how the institution stands in relation to each of the (ten) evaluation criteria. A NOKUT officer acts as secretary to the panel and writes the report, following an outline template.