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THE QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN NORWAY

Director General Oddvar Haugland

Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT)

1 Introduction

This article intends to give a brief view on the structure of the quality assurance system in higher education in Norway. Emphasize will be on the main framework comprising legal basis, aims and objectives, institutional responsibility for quality assurance, as well as NOKUT- a national independent agency responsible for operating the System with certain instruments, standards and criteria, processes and procedures. At the end there will be some reflections on how integrated and effective this system has proved itself, combined with several challenges and expected future developments.

Norway has traditionally been a country that has used very small resources on quality assurance in higher education. Up to the early 2000's the recognition of new programmes of study was usually carried out by the Ministry of Education and Research with limited use of expert panels. The new independent accreditation body called Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) started its activities in 2003. NOKUT is, by law and also through a lump-sum funding, secured an independent status.

Norwegian higher education has strong ambitions for the future. According to the Act relating to universities and university colleges of 1 April 2005, higher education institutions must offer programmes of study at a high

international level and on the basis of excellence within research, academic and artistic development work and empirical knowledge.

To follow up these strong ambitions in higher education, Norway has established a complex system for quality assurance. The system is in some ways a dualistic system, containing both rigorous requirements that the institutions in higher education must meet certain quality arrangements and the assumption of confidence in the institutions. The quality assurance system consists of a mixed set of instruments such as demand

- for a recognized internal quality assurance system at all higher education institutions,
- accreditation of institutions and programmes of study, and
- general evaluations to assess the quality of higher education.

2. Legal basis

The Act relating to universities and university colleges of 1 April 2005 regulates both state-owned and private-owned institutions and their right to establish programmes of study and award national degrees. This Act, chapter 2 and 3, also regulates quality assurance in higher education.

The Ministry of Education and Research has laid down Regulations concerning accreditation, evaluation and recognition pursuant to the Act relating to universities and university colleges [=Fachhochschule] of 8 September 2005. The scope of the Regulations encompasses consideration of applications and determination of standards for accreditation of institutions and programmes of study, requirements regarding quality assurance systems at universities and university colleges, joint degrees and establishing an appeal board to decide on appeals against decisions made by the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT).

NOKUT has stipulated Regulations of 25 January 2006 relating to standards and criteria for accreditation of programmes of study and criteria for accreditation of institutions in Norwegian higher education pursuant to the Regulations concerning accreditation, evaluation and recognition issued on 8 September 2005 by the Ministry of Education and Research pursuant to the Act relating to Universities and University Colleges. NOKUT has also stipulated criteria for evaluation of the institutional systems for quality assurance.

3. Aims and objectives

The overarching aim of the quality assurance system in Norway is to ensure that the quality of higher education is at a high international level and can develop towards further improvement. The system should be capable of

revealing cases of deficient quality and otherwise of detecting good and bad quality. It shall provide the institutions with a basis for self-assessment and development and contribute to developing a strong culture of quality in the institutions. The system shall use instruments and other arrangements which are capable in an effective way to fulfill the aims and objectives.

4. *Institutional responsibility for quality assurance*

A basic element of the quality assurance system is that the universities and university colleges are fully responsible for quality assurance in all aspects of their activities. The institutions shall have a satisfactory internal system for quality assurance. Student evaluation of programmes of study shall be included in these systems. Properly speaking, there is nothing new in this responsibility as such. What is new is that this responsibility is based on the Act relating to the universities and university colleges. The institutions will now be required to demonstrate how responsibility for quality is followed up with actual quality assurance.

5. *Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT)*

To take care of quality assurance of higher education at the national level the Storting (Norwegian Parliament) established the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT), founded in the Act relating to universities and university colleges 1 April 2005, chapter 2. Based on prior legal instruments, however, NOKUT has been in operation from 1 January 2003.

5.1 *Purpose and responsibilities*

The Act relating to universities and university colleges, states that *NOKUT shall be a professionally autonomous state body which, by means of accreditation and evaluation, shall monitor the quality of Norwegian institutions that provide higher education and recognize qualifications awarded by institutions not subject to the Act relating to universities and university colleges. Accreditation and evaluation activities shall be designed in such a way that the institutions can benefit from them in the course of their quality assurance and development work.*

This is a clear statement that NOKUT is primarily a monitoring body. But it is also laid down that NOKUT must see to it that the evaluations carried out are also of help in developing the quality of the institutions.

The responsibilities for NOKUT concerning Norwegian higher education are:

- ❖ *Evaluation of the institutions' systems for quality assurance.*
- ❖ *Accreditation of institutions.*

- ❖ *Accreditations of programmes of study.*
- ❖ *Revision of previously granted accreditation.*
- ❖ *Evaluations which are of significance for the assessment of the quality of higher education. The Ministry may instruct NOKUT to conduct such evaluations.*

In addition, NOKUT is also responsible for issuing general recognition - or credit- to national degrees of higher education from other countries. This is a power NOKUT shares with accredited institutions. NOKUT shall also approve courses in vocational education at the post-secondary level.

5.2 Authority and independence

NOKUT makes its decisions independently of the Ministry and the institutions. The Ministry may not instruct NOKUT in excess of what is authorized by statute or laid down by the Ministry in regulation and may not set aside accreditations granted by NOKUT. If NOKUT, on the basis of the experts' report, finds that an institution's system for quality assurance is unsatisfactory, the Ministry shall withdraw the institution's authority to establish new programmes of study. If NOKUT finds that an institution no longer fulfils the conditions for accreditation, NOKUT will withdraw the accreditation.

5.3 Publicity

All materials connected to the evaluations and accreditations, such as standards and criteria, procedures, application from the institutions, the self-evaluation reports, the appointment of experts, the report from the experts and NOKUT's decisions are made public. NOKUT has the responsibility, in an active way, to disseminate the results from the evaluations and accreditations to different groups of stakeholders.

5.4 Experts

The evaluations and accreditations shall be conducted by experts appointed by NOKUT. Such experts shall have competence within at least one of the following fields:

- ❖ evaluation
- ❖ quality assurance
- ❖ the field to be evaluated

At least 40 % of the experts in a panel should be female. Nearly all panels have a student representative and at least one expert from another country, usually from one of the other Nordic countries, due to language problems. The traditionally used word 'peers' does not really fit these panels.

NOKUT has established more detailed criteria for the competence of the experts and for their appointment. The number of experts in a panel depends on the actual evaluation and varies from two to six. NOKUT employs different measures to make the expert updated for the evaluation process.

5.5 The board - responsibilities and decisions

NOKUT is governed by a Board, which has the overall responsibility for NOKUT's activities and the decisions made by NOKUT.

The Board shall be appointed by the King in Council and shall consist of eight members. Deputies shall be appointed, including personal deputies for the staff and student members. The Ministry shall appoint the chairman of the board. The board's term of office is four years. Student members are appointed for two years.

Members of the board may not hold leading positions or office at institutions under the present Act. The board has a quorum for consideration of applications pursuant to the Ministerial Regulations when the chairman or the deputy chairman and four other members are present.

Concerning the decisions, the board has delegated to the director general to make decisions of accreditations of programmes of study in such cases that the experts are unanimous.

5.6 Organization

The board appoints NOKUT's director for a fixed term of six years. The director is responsible for the day-to-day running of the activities and is secretary to the Board.

The primary activities are divided into three units: Quality Audits Unit, Accreditation Unit and International Recognitions Unit. In addition NOKUT has three Staff Units (administration, information and a unit with responsibility to analyze NOKUT's activities and disseminate the results to the general public).

Of NOKUT's 45 staff-members in fulltime positions around 30 of them are working with quality assurance for higher education in Norway.

5.7 Appeal board

Decisions taken by NOKUT can be appealed against to an appeal board with 6 members appointed by the Ministry. Two members shall be students. The chairman and deputy chairman shall fulfill the statutory qualification requirements for judges of the court of appeal. It is not possible to appeal against the conclusions in the report from the expert panel.

6 Evaluation of the institutions' systems for quality assurance

NOKUT shall evaluate and pass judgment on the institutions' internal system through quality audits, carried out in regular cycles of six years. As well as acting as a control mechanism, the audits are supposed to be conducted in a way that is conducive to quality development. The evaluation of the quality assurance system shall include the structure of the system, the documentation it produces and the assessments of educational quality conducted by the institution itself.

When an expert panel evaluates and passes judgment on the particular institutions' quality assurance system and conclude whether it fulfils the given set of criteria, the term 'evaluation' or 'recognition' is used instead of 'accreditation'. This is due to the fact that institutional audits are not formally accreditation procedures and assessment criteria are not the same as absolute standards. But it is an accreditation-like procedure.

6.1 Method

The method of the evaluation includes:

- ❖ A study of documentation from the institution's quality assurance system including a description of the system and annual report on educational quality.
- ❖ An assessment made by an expert panel with 4-5 members appointed by NOKUT, and based on the institution's documentation and the standards and criteria for internal quality assurance systems. The evaluation process includes a site visit of 3-5 days. A staff-member from NOKUT assists the panel and drafts the report.
- ❖ NOKUT makes the decision on whether or not the quality assurance system is satisfactory based on the experts report and the institution's comments to the report.

6.2 The standards and criteria for evaluation

The Ministry of Education and Research decides on the standards for a satisfactory institutional quality assurance system. NOKUT is authorized, in consultation with higher education institutions, to stipulate the criteria in relation to which the quality assurance system shall be evaluated.

As a participant in the Bologna process regarding higher education, Norway is obliged to follow up the standards and guidelines decided for the European Higher Education Area in the Ministers meeting in Bergen 2005. These European standards for internal quality assurance of higher education are binding upon Norwegian higher education institutions.

The standards and criteria stipulated by the Ministry and NOKUT along with the European Standards and Guidelines form together the basis for evaluation of institutions' systems for quality assurance.

Standards for evaluation:

The institutions shall have a quality assurance system which:

- ❖ satisfactorily documents work on quality assurance
- ❖ is capable of revealing poor quality
- ❖ is applied to all processes of importance for the quality of programmes of study, beginning with the information provided to potential applicants and ending with completion of the programmes of study
- ❖ includes the routines for students' evaluation of teaching, for the institution's self-evaluation and for its follow-up of evaluations, documentation of the institution's development of the learning environment and routines for quality assurance of new programmes of study
- ❖ has routines that ensure continuous improvement of the system.

Criteria for the evaluation process:

1. How work on educational quality is made an integral part of the institution's strategic work.
2. How the objectives for the institution's work on quality are defined.
3. How work on quality is linked to steering and management at all levels of the organization.
4. How work on quality is organized in routines and measures that ensure broad participation, with defined distribution of responsibility and authority for the different stages of the work.
5. How the institution retrieves and processes such data and evaluation information as are necessary in order to make satisfactory assessments of the quality of all study units, and how this information is accumulated at higher levels, including the top level of the institution.
6. How analysis of the information and assessment of goal achievement in work on quality are systematically provided for.
7. How the institutions use the results of work on quality as a basis for decisions and measures with a view to securing and further developing quality of studies.

8. How work on quality is made to contribute to resource management and priorities at the institution (human resources, infrastructure, service).
9. How the system ensures a focus on the total learning environment and the active participation by students in work on quality and total learning environment.
10. How an annual Quality Report to the board of the institution gives a coherent overall assessment of educational quality at the institution and an overview of plans and measures for continued work on quality.

6.3 Experts

A panel of experts, appointed by NOKUT shall conduct the evaluation. The experts shall indicate areas where the institution should further develop its system and shall advise as to whether the system as a whole is satisfactory. Before NOKUT decides on whether or not the institutional quality assurance system is satisfactory, the institution is allowed a time limit of six weeks to comment on the experts' report. The institution's comments will be an important document when NOKUT shall make the decision.

NOKUT has established a pool of thirty experts with required competence to carry out the evaluations. The members of the pool have committed themselves to participate in at least 2-3 evaluations through a period of 2-3 years. NOKUT arranges regularly seminars for the members of the pool to discuss the processes, exchange experiences and secure consistence in the evaluations.

A maximum period of six years shall elapse between evaluations of individual institutions. NOKUT has established an annual schedule for the evaluations.

If NOKUT finds fundamental defects in the quality assurance system, the institution shall be granted a time limit of six months to rectify matters.

6.4 Consequences of an unsatisfactory internal quality assurance system

The consequences of not having a satisfactory internal quality assurance system, or that the existing system is not covering the minimum standards set, is not that an institution will lose its institutional status, or the accreditation for established programmes of study, but that the institution is not allowed to establish new programmes of study. In other words, not having an institutional quality assurance system restricts the institution's possibilities to expand and move into new fields of study.

Said in a more formal language, if NOKUT decides that an institution's system for quality assurance is unsatisfactory at an institution offering accredited programmes of study, the institution loses the right to apply for

accreditation of new programmes . If, after a new evaluation, the system for quality assurance is satisfactory, the institution shall be permitted once again to apply for accreditation of new programmes of study. And if NOKUT decides that the quality assurance system is unsatisfactory at an institution accredited as a university college, specialised university institution or university, this decision shall be forwarded to the Ministry. The Ministry will then revoke the institution's authority to establish new programmes of study. The institution may request that a new evaluation of the quality assurance system should be conducted one year after the authority to establish programmes of study was revoked by the Ministry. The institution itself must approach NOKUT to request that it conducts a new evaluation. If, after a new evaluation, the system for quality assurance is satisfactory, the Ministry shall grant the institution the authority to establish new programmes.

7 Accreditation in the Norwegian Quality Assurance System

7.1 Definition of accreditation

The word 'Accreditation' in the Norwegian system is defined as '*a professional assessment as to whether a higher education institution and the programmes provided by the institution, fulfill a given set of standards*'.

The definition must be understood in such a way that only new accreditations after the establishment of NOKUT from 1 January 2003 have to be based on an evaluation, thus exempting previously recognized higher education from this demand. Revision of earlier granted accreditation however, will be directed indiscriminately towards all accredited education and higher educational institutions.

The accreditation scheme is based on a combination of institutional accreditation, accreditation of programmes of study and revision of accreditation earlier granted. As from 1 January 2003 accreditation is mandatory and universal for all formally recognized higher education in Norway. It is important to notice that accreditation is not limited to a specified period of time, but will be considered as valid until explicitly revoked, following an assessment with the objective to revise accreditation earlier granted.

7.2 Accreditation and academic authorities

All accredited institutions are put into three categories:

- ❖ universities,

- ❖ specialized university institutions and
- ❖ university colleges.

Accreditation gives universities, specialized university institutions and university colleges some authority to decide themselves which programmes of study the institution shall provide. Such authority vary with institutional category.

Institutions accredited as *universities* have the authority to decide themselves that type of programmes of study the institution shall provide.

Institutions accredited as *specialized university institutions* or *university colleges* have the right to offer all kinds of programmes at lower degree level (bachelor) without any further process of accreditation. In those fields in which they are allowed to offer master and doctoral degree programmes, they have the same rights as universities to decide on new programmes of study. All new programmes beyond this - master and doctoral degree programmes - have to be accredited by NOKUT.

The institutional board must approve the programme description for each programme of study.

The authority to decide on provision of new programmes of study may be withdrawn by the Ministry if the institutions do not have a satisfactory internal system for quality assurance.

Private institutions did not start out as accredited institutions in 2003. They have to apply for institutional accreditation in any of the three categories and then obtain the same academic authority as state institutions in the same category. Private institutions without an accreditation will have to apply for accreditation separately for every course or programme of study they wish to offer.

8 Accreditation of institutions

8.1 Application and precondition

Institutions offering accredited programmes of study may apply to NOKUT for accreditation of the institution. Institutions that have obtained accreditation in one institutional category may apply to NOKUT for accreditation in another category.

A precondition for accreditation is that the institution possesses a satisfactory system for quality assurance. If an institution which applies for an institutional accreditation does not have a recognized quality assurance system, NOKUT will start the accreditation process with an evaluation of

the quality assurance system. In that case two expert panels both with 4-5 experts will be involved in the process.

8.2 Method and process

The method for an accreditation of an institution includes a self-evaluation report done by the institution according to the given standards and criteria for accreditation in the actual institutional category.

NOKUT appoints an expert panel to do the evaluation based on the self-evaluation report and the given standards and criteria for the actual category. The panel consists usually of five members, three professors with competence in evaluation, academic leadership, and with international experience, one member from society as a whole and a student representative. The evaluation process includes a site visit of 4-5 days and interviews with different external and internal groups and stakeholders. During the evaluation process the panel will be assisted by one or two staff members from NOKUT. The expert panel writes the accreditation report itself.

The panel's report, with the conclusion on whether or not the institution satisfies the standards and criteria for the actual institutional category, shall be forwarded to the institution by NOKUT for comments within six weeks.

NOKUT makes the accreditation decision on the basis of the panel's report and the comments from the institution. The decision regarding accreditation as a university college, specialized university institution or university shall be forwarded to the Ministry. The King in council takes the ultimate decision on the change in institutional category.

8.3 Standards and criteria for institutional accreditation

The Ministry has laid down in the regulations standards required for a university college, specialized university institution and university. In addition NOKUT has laid down regulations providing detailed evaluation criteria for accreditation in the three categories.

The Ministerial Regulation instructs NOKUT to make sure that national standards reflect relevant international standards that Norway has committed itself to observe. The accreditation standards and criteria make a formal reference to international standards of academic quality. NOKUT is intent on following up any standards and guidelines that are formally endorsed as part of the Bologna process.

a) Accreditation as a *university college* is dependent on the following conditions being met:

- ❖ The institution's primary activity shall be higher education, research and academic or artistic development work and dissemination.
- ❖ The institution's organisation and infrastructure shall be adapted to its activities.
- ❖ The institution shall engage in research and academic or artistic development activities related to its subject areas.
- ❖ The institution shall maintain stable employees in teaching and research posts in key subject areas comprised by the programmes of study.
- ❖ The institution shall hold accreditation for at least one programme of study which grants the institution the independent right to award first degrees, and shall have conducted examinations of first degree level students for at least two years.
- ❖ The institution shall be affiliated to national and international networks in higher education, research or artistic development work.
- ❖ The institution shall have a satisfactory academic library.

a) Accreditation as a specialised university institution is dependent on the following conditions being met:

- ❖ The institution's primary activity shall be higher education, research and academic or artistic development work and dissemination. The institution's organisation and infrastructure shall be adapted to its activities.
- ❖ The institution shall engage in research and academic or artistic development activities of a high standard related to its subject areas.
- ❖ The institution shall retain employees in teaching and research posts in subject areas comprised by the programmes of study.
- ❖ The institution shall hold accreditation for at least one programme of study of at least five years' duration, in total or as an integrated programme, which grants the institution the independent right to award second degrees, and shall have conducted examinations of second degree level students for at least two years.
- ❖ The institution shall maintain a stable researcher training programme and have the independent right to award doctoral degrees or hold accreditation for corresponding fellowship programmes for artistic development work.
- ❖ The institution shall be affiliated with national and international networks in higher education, research and academic or artistic development work, and shall participate in the national cooperation on researcher training or corresponding fellowship programmes for artistic development work.

- ❖ The institution shall have a satisfactory academic library.

c) Accreditation as *a university* is dependent on the following conditions being met:

- ❖ The institution's primary activity shall be higher education, research and academic or artistic development work and dissemination. The institution's organisation and infrastructure shall be adapted to its activities.
- ❖ The institution shall engage in research and academic or artistic development activities of a high standard related to its subject areas.
- ❖ The institution shall maintain stable employees in teaching and research posts in subject areas comprised by the programmes of study.
- ❖ The institution shall hold accreditation for at least five programmes of study of at least five years' duration, in total or as integrated programmes. This grants the institution the independent right to award second degrees, and first degrees within several subject areas.
- ❖ The institution shall have conducted examinations of students at first or second degree levels in the majority of these subject areas.
- ❖ The institution shall maintain stable programmes of studies for researchers and hold the independent right to award doctoral degrees in at least four subject areas. Two of these shall be key subject areas in relation to creation of economic progress in the region and they must also be of national importance. One of the four doctoral degrees may be constituted by the fellowship programme for artistic development work for which the institution has been accredited.
- ❖ The institution shall be affiliated to national and international networks in higher education, research and academic or artistic development work, and shall participate in the national cooperation on researcher training or corresponding artistic fellowship programmes.
- ❖ The institution shall have a satisfactory academic library.

NOKUT has issued regulations providing some evaluation criteria connected to the standards for accreditation as a university college, specialized university institution or university.

8.4 Newly accredited institutions

In the period 2003-2006 Norway got 2 new universities. A specialized university institution and a university college succeeded through an accreditation process to be accredited as universities. A private college achieved accreditation as a specialized university institution, and another

private college as a university college. These newly accredited institutions will have the same academic authority as institutions in the same category.

The arrangement of institutional accreditation implies that the political authorities in Norway have decided not to allow the founding of new higher education institutions without an accreditation process carried out by NOKUT according to the standards and criteria established for the actual institutional category.

9 Accreditation of programmes of study

9.1 Definition and provisions

The term 'accreditation' covers both 'initial' accreditation, when an institution applies to establish a new programme of study which the institution does not have authority to do itself, and accreditation 'control' which is a revision of accreditation earlier granted.

All higher education programmes of study - in state or private institutions- that were recognized under the previous guidelines by 1 Jan.2003 were automatically given status as accredited. New programmes of study in accredited institutions that go beyond the awarding rights that follow from institutional category, must be accredited after a process and in accordance with national sets of standards e.g. master degree programmes in institutions of the college category. Accreditation of programmes of study may be obtained for specific programmes that the institution is not institutionally accredited to provide. In effect, this means that all new or previously recognized provisions in unaccredited institutions must undergo such a process in order to become accredited.

So,

- institutions not subject to the Act relating to Universities and University Colleges may apply to NOKUT for accreditation of their programmes of study.
- University colleges and specialised university institutions may apply to NOKUT for accreditation of programmes of study which the individual institution does not itself possess the authority to establish, namely where requirements of specific professions are involved.
- The institutions may apply to NOKUT for accreditation of fellowship programmes for artistic development work offered by the individual university college, and corresponding doctoral programmes. Accreditation

may also be awarded on the basis of the university college's contribution to a joint fellowship programme for artistic development work.

A precondition for accreditation of programmes of study is that the requirements stipulated in the Act relating to Universities and University Colleges are met. Any regulations and framework plans authorised by the Act relating to Universities and University Colleges shall be taken into consideration in relation to the accreditation.

NOKUT has issued regulations providing the standards and criteria on which accreditation of programmes of study shall be based, including the relationship between decentralised activities and other activities and fellowship programmes for artistic development work. NOKUT has ensured that the standards are in conformity with such international standards as Norway is under obligation to adhere to. Significant changes to programmes of study accredited under the present Regulations shall be submitted to NOKUT.

NOKUT's decisions regarding accreditation of programmes of study forming the basis for a master degree or professional qualifications, and decisions regarding accreditation of fellowship programmes, shall be forwarded to the Ministry. The Ministry can deny the institution to establish the programme of study e.g. for financial reasons.

9.2 *Method and process*

The method used in accreditation of programmes of study is quite similar to that of accreditation of institutions. An 'initial' accreditation is not based on an ordinary self-evaluation report from the institution, since the institution does not have experience in running this new programme of study. The only possible basis for an accreditation process in the initial stage of establishing a new programme is the application from the institution. The application should be worked out with reference to the standards and criteria laid down by NOKUT.

In the second stage, NOKUT appoints an expert panel with 2 to 5 members with a competence profile in accordance with the actual programme of study. In accreditation of programmes of study there will be a dominant element of programme/discipline competence on the expert panels. To the extent that specific discipline demands are relevant, these will be based on the experts' understanding of quality in this actual discipline.

An 'initial' accreditation of a new programme of study at bachelor- or master degree level has no site visit. But at doctoral degree level a site visit is included in the accreditation process.

The panel shall work out a report with the assessments and conclusions on whether or not the programme of study meets the standards. The report will be forwarded to the institution for comments within six weeks. The panel will be assisted by an adviser from the staff of NOKUT.

The third stage is NOKUT's decision based on the experts' report and the comments from the institution.

9.3 Standards and criteria

For the accreditation of individual programmes of study both the standards and the more detailed assessment criteria are stipulated by NOKUT, after consultations with higher education institutions. These standards and criteria are generic descriptors for types of degree programmes of study, as defined by their level and credit volume (programmes of study at first degree level, bachelor; programmes of study at second degree level, master; doctoral programmes and institution-based fellowship programmes for artistic development work). In addition to these programmes of study, NOKUT has also stipulated standards and criteria for institutional participation in supra-institutional artistic fellowship programmes and programmes of study components forming part of a joint degree,

Specific national quality criteria for the different disciplines or subject areas have not been defined. Specific discipline requirements are left to the experts to formulate. It should be noted that a few programmes of study aimed at professions (notably teacher training education and the health professions) are regulated in more detail by national curriculum guidelines.

Below there is a presentation of the standards and criteria used for accreditation of programmes of study at second degree level (master degree):

a) Standards and criteria for accreditation of programme of study at second degree level (Master degree)

(a) The programme of study shall conform to the Ministry's Regulations relating to requirements regarding master's degrees.

(b) A plan shall be available for each programme of study.

1. The programme of study shall have a representative name.

2. The plan shall state the subject area(s) and core subject area(s) of the programme of study.
3. The admission requirements shall be commensurate with the objectives, contents and level of the programme of study.
4. The objectives of the programme of study shall be stated explicitly. These objectives shall state the knowledge, skills and attitudes that students should have acquired on completion of the programme of study, and the nature of the skills provided by the programme of study in relation to further studies and/or professional practice.
5. The plan shall set out the structure of the programme of study and its compulsory and elective components; its breadth and level of specialisation.
6. The syllabus and teaching shall be designed to provide students with skills in relation to the programme of study objectives.
7. The programme of study shall embody academic coherence and clear progression.
8. The programme of study shall provide knowledge and experience of applying scientific methodology.
9. The arrangements for examination and assessment shall be adapted to the teaching and academic supervision provided and shall be appropriate for attainment of the objectives of the programme of study.
10. Plans for and performance of any practical training shall be related to the objectives of the programme of study, the rest of the teaching and such skills as the students are expected to have acquired on completion of the programme of study.

(c) The institution shall maintain a stable body of academic staff assigned to the programme of study.

1. The size of the academic staff shall be stated in terms of full-time equivalents, and shall be adapted to the programme of study requirements for tuition and academic supervision, and the research-based and academic or artistic development work to be undertaken.
2. At least 50% of the academic staff assigned to the programme of study shall be employees with senior posts at the institution.
3. At least 50% of the academic staff shall have associate professor/professor status, of which at least 25% shall hold full professorships.
4. The institution shall have employees in senior positions within

the programme of study's core subject area(s).

5. The academic staff shall be able to show documented results from research or academic/artistic development work and shall engage actively in academic networks.
6. For areas in which the institution requires supplementary competence, a realistic plan shall be produced for how this is to be obtained.

(d) Infrastructure shall be adapted to the organisation and style of teaching and related to objectives of the programme of study.

1. Technical and administrative services shall be adapted to the programme of study and the number of students.
2. Students shall be provided with adequate access to ICT resources.
3. Library services shall be readily accessible and commensurate with the academic content and level of the programme of study.
4. The institution shall provide appropriate premises for teaching and research purposes.

(f) The institution shall engage actively in international cooperation within subject areas of relevance to the programme of study.

(g) Arrangements for internationalisation within the programme of study must be in place.

(h) The institution shall state how the programme of study is quality assured within the institution's quality assurance system.

10 REVISION OF PREVIOUSLY GRANTED ACCREDITATION

Based on different indications, NOKUT may independently conduct an evaluation of an institution or a programme of study with a view to revision of a previously granted accreditation. Such revision may result in withdrawal of the accreditation and the Ministry shall then withdraw the rights entailed by accreditation.

10.1 Revision of accreditation of programmes of study

Revision of accreditation can take the form of a specific programme of study assessment, directed at an identified unit of education. Revisions will

be triggered by indications from the institutional audits, but also by other indications, and they may be carried out as random tests.

10.1.1 Method, standards and criteria

The method used in a revision is similar to other forms of accreditation, and includes a self-evaluation report from the institution and a report from a panel of experts appointed by NOKUT with four members; three of them should be persons with high competence in the actual field and a student representative.

Prescribed standards and criteria according to the actual programme of study shall be adopted as the basis for the evaluation. NOKUT shall also take into consideration the academic level of the programme of study and documented results.

10.1.2 Consequences of revoked accreditation

If the result of the accreditation process is that a programme of study fails to comply with the requirements imposed, the institution shall be granted a time limit of 1 year to rectify matters. In cases where the deficiencies concern the competence requirements applying to employees in teaching and research posts, NOKUT may grant a time limit of up to 2 years. Upon expiry of the time limit, NOKUT shall conduct an evaluation of the extent to which such rectification has been adequate.

A decision to revoke accreditation of a programme of study has the consequence that the institution shall withdraw the programme of study immediately. The institution shall conclude an agreement with another institution qualified to assume academic responsibility for ensuring that the students are able to complete their studies and sit their examinations, or shall institute other measures, approved by NOKUT, to enable students to complete their studies.

If an institution has been ordered to withdraw a programme of study because it is no longer accredited, NOKUT may, in special circumstances, determine that a new application for accreditation of the same programme of study may not be made until 2 years have elapsed.

10.2 Revision of accreditation of institutions

10.2.1 Methods, standards and criteria

NOKUT may at its discretion conduct a revision of a previously granted accreditation of an institutions. Standards prescribed shall form the basis for this evaluation.

The method used in the evaluation is quite similar to other revisions of accreditation. It contains a self-evaluation report done by the institution itself, a panel of experts appointed by NOKUT doing the assessment. The panel will decide whether or not the institution meets the requirements for accreditation. The last stage is the NOKUT decision, based on the experts' report and the institution's comments to the report.

10.2.2 NOKUT's decision

If NOKUT finds that an institution no longer complies with the requirements regarding accreditation, the institution will be granted a time limit of 1 year to rectify matters. In cases where the deficiencies concern the competence requirements applying to employees in teaching and research posts, NOKUT may grant a time limit of up to 2 years. Upon expiry of the time limit, NOKUT shall conduct an evaluation of the extent to which such rectification has been adequate to bring the institution up to the necessary academic level. If the requirements for accreditation are still not met, NOKUT shall revoke the accreditation.

The decision to revoke the accreditation of an institution shall be forwarded to the Ministry. If an institution has lost its accreditation, NOKUT may decide that a new application for accreditation in the same institutional category may not be made until 2 years have elapsed.

10.3 The importance of revision of accreditation

This accreditation control is a very important part of the Norwegian quality assurance system. The wide authority to accredit new programmes of study at the institutions themselves, combined with the fact that the accreditation is not given for a certain period, makes it necessary to find a balanced level of accreditation control through revision of accreditation.

In 2005 NOKUT finished a revision of 34 programmes of study at universities and university colleges in the field of nursing at bachelor degree level and master degree level. Both master degree programmes met the requirements for accreditation. But 31 bachelor degree programmes out of 32 failed to comply with the requirements imposed. The institutions were granted a time limit of 1 and up to 2 years to rectify matters. The majority of programmes deficiencies were connected to competence requirements applying to employees in teaching and research posts.

In the autumn of 2006 NOKUT will start processes to revise accreditation for programmes of study at master degree level and doctoral degree level in jurisprudence, dentistry and pharmacy at the universities.

11 Evaluations of significance to assessment of the quality of higher education

NOKUT may also decide to conduct other types of evaluations that are considered useful from the perspective of increasing knowledge about quality in Norwegian higher education. Also, the Ministry may instruct the agency to do this. The opportunity to conduct such additional evaluations should then be thought of as a 'supplementary tool', which can help the agency - or the Ministry - to investigate specific areas, that are considered important but still receive less attention in the ordinary institutional audits or accreditation proceedings. These evaluations may vary considerably as regards aims. They may be thematic evaluations, covering specific aspects across the institutional spectrum, like e.g. the use of information technology, practical training in certain professional programmes, the use of distance education methodologies, institutions' strategic work and so on. Or they may be programmes of study or discipline evaluations.

In these evaluations NOKUT will no longer have quality control as an objective and the relation to the evaluated institutions changes correspondingly. When the object is exclusively 'to learn more', participating institutions become NOKUT's project partners.

Such evaluations will use the ordinary three stages method with a self-evaluation, an assessment of an expert panel with a report and the decision and follow up procedures. The standards and criteria must be designed specially for every evaluation dependent on the purpose and aims of the evaluation.

NOKUT is now in the last stage of an evaluation to assess the quality of 22 teacher training programmes. The evaluation will be finished in September this year. The evaluation has been conducted on the instruction of the Ministry, according to the Act relating to universities and university colleges, which gives the Ministry the right to instruct NOKUT to conduct such an evaluation. The Ministry has also instructed NOKUT to conduct an evaluation of 20 -25 engineering programmes on bachelor level in the period 2006/2007.

12 Integration, challenges and possible future developments

12.1 An integrated system?

The Norwegian system for quality assurance in higher education is a diverse system with use of different instruments for monitoring and developing the quality of Norwegian institutions that provide higher education. The instruments are thoroughly described above. An important question could be to what extent the different instruments work together in achieving the aims and objectives set in quality assurance in higher education. Is this an integrated quality assurance system or is it a fragmentary collection of different instruments without the ability to fill in?

An important instrument is that the institutions are required to establish satisfactory internal quality assurance systems, which will be assessed by NOKUT in periods of maximum six years. 'Institutional quality audits represent the systematic, comprehensive mechanism for external scrutiny of the quality of higher education.

Institutional quality audits will be conducted in all higher education institutions, irrespective of category. The main gain from establishing a satisfactory quality system is that the institutions, which are responsible for the quality on their provisions, have achieved an objective frame oriented towards following up their responsibilities on quality. The institutions have the possibility to develop a quality culture, which is important both in monitoring and in enhancing the quality.

Such institutional quality audits cannot directly themselves lead to the loss of accreditation. But the evaluation could reveal indications of poor quality and NOKUT has a possibility to follow up these indications by carrying out revision of accreditations. This link between institutional quality audits and revisions of accreditation is a central pillar in the Norwegian system.

Accreditation of institutions is an instrument which made it possible to change institutional category. The aim was to achieve academic expansion. Through a process from being e.g. a university college with the ambition of getting the status as a university, there is need to increase the institution's competence and quality.

Accreditation of programmes of study is an instrument to secure the standard of new programmes, which the institutions do not have the authority to accredit themselves.

Revision of previously granted accreditation is an important instrument, as mentioned above. NOKUT's decision can be based on information from the evaluations on institutional quality assurance systems. A revision decision could also be based on other evaluations conducted by NOKUT, e.g.

evaluations of significance for the assessment of the quality of higher education or other reliable sources.

Accreditation is not a monitoring instrument only. The accreditation reports from the expert panels shall contain recommendations on how the institutions could develop the quality beyond the minimum level. The experience shows that the institutions to a great extent follow up the expert's recommendations.

The arrangement to give the institutions academic authority to decide which programmes of study the institution shall provide, varying with different institutional category, is also an instrument to develop quality. Showing confidence in the institutions by giving them increased autonomy to establish new programmes of study may stimulate the institution's work on quality.

As shown above there are some links between the instruments used for monitoring and developing of quality in higher education in Norway. These links could give a certain substance for saying that the Norwegian system for quality assurance in higher education is an integrated system.

The strength of the Norwegian system for quality assurance in higher education could be the balance between internal and external quality assurance with a focus on the institutions' responsibility for the quality on their provisions. This balance, combined with confidence in the institutions, also make the system resource effective.

12.2 Challenges and possible development

The System has just been in function for a few years. It is a challenge to get the System to work in such a way that the ambitious aims and objectives are fulfilled. This implies to go through all standards, criteria, processes and procedures applied in every detail. It is also important to develop the open attitude and dialogue with the institutions and the different stakeholders, and to create an effective organization and reduce the burden on the institutions to a minimum level.

It will also be a challenge to take account of the results from the national work on establishing a qualification framework in Norway. To follow up the concept of life long learning and quality assurance in higher education in a globalized world is challenging.

Besides getting more out of the existing system by improving processes and procedures and following up the other challenging issues, the following steps could be taken:

- ❖ systematize the accreditation instruments more; criteria and procedures

- ❖ reserve evaluations of significance for assessment of quality of higher education, primary to thematic evaluations, covering specific aspects across the institutional spectrum
- ❖ give higher priority to work examining the effects of the different instruments on the aims and objectives

It is crucial to achieve more knowledge on the effectiveness of the different instruments used and how to reduce the cost in quality work without reducing the quality.

Implementing changes of the quality assurance system goes beyond the authority of NOKUT and is the responsibility of the Storting and the Ministry of Education and Research. NOKUT has the possibility to recommend changes. The Norwegian Government has in May 2006 established a committee on higher education with a wide mandate. The committee is supposed to deliver its report in 2008, which could lead to changes in higher education and in the system of quality assurance in higher education.