

Implementing Quality Assurance standards in the European Higher Education Area - The way forward

Seminar

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"The point of view of the European Agencies"

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Introduction

In Bergen May 2005 the Conference of the European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education adopted the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area proposed by ENQA. This was a huge step forward in establishing a foundation for developing the quality in higher education in Europe through more systematic internal arrangements and instruments, combined with external quality assurance mechanisms. By establishing a culture of quality within the higher education institutions and by establishing external quality assurance agencies, the aim and objectives for developing higher education in the European Area can be achieved. Like the other European quality assurance agencies, NOKUT also welcomes the adoption of the European Standards and Guidelines, which opens to new possibilities

in developing both the quality in higher education and mutual recognition of higher education in Europe.

The countries in Europe are not standardized. On the contrary, they have a high level of diversity, with varying political and economical systems, systems for higher education, as well as types of higher education institutions and national quality assurance agencies. It is this diversity which in the long run can lead to progress and development in all fields. Standardization is not a key to achieve ambitious aims in the future. On the other hand, I am convinced that it is necessary to establish a certain level of standardization by way of generic standards and guidelines in order to get the best out of a diversity of systems.

The Standards and Guidelines, which are now established in Europe, are from my point of view an appropriate starting basis. It is crucial, however, for the successful output of these arrangements, that there is an entity in Europe which has the responsibility for adjusting and developing the Standards and Guidelines. We need a dynamic system which is able to reflect the changes in the society, not a static one.

Despite a generally positive attitude to the Standards and Guidelines, there are certain challenges in the process of following them up and implementing them. I anticipate that we all have experienced some difficulties in getting our national quality assurance systems to include and fit the adopted European standards and guidelines.

As the basis for my presentation I will use the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT). Because I know the agency quite thoroughly, I can be more concrete. First, I will start with a short presentation of the main structure of the Norwegian system. Then, by referring to the European Standards and Guidelines, I will indicate what sort of problems and shortcomings we

have identified so far in Norway. I will round up my presentation with some remarks about the consistency of the evaluations and mutual recognition of higher education in Europe and to which extent the implementation of the European Standards and Guidelines could assist a move forward.

Main structure of the Norwegian System for Quality Assurance in Education

Introduction

The Norwegian system for quality assurance in higher education is in some ways a dualistic one, consisting of rigorous requirements which the institutions of higher education must meet, certain arrangements and an assumption of confidence in our institutions of higher education. In order to deal with the quality assurance of higher education at the national level the Norwegian Parliament, The Storting, established the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT), which started its activities 1 of January 2003.

Legal basis

The system in Norway is legally based on the Act relating to universities and university colleges of 1 April 2005. The same Act regulates also NOKUTs activities.

Aims

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. 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.

Available instruments to achieve the aims are:

- Evaluation of the institutions' systems for quality assurance.
- Accreditation of institutions.
- Accreditation of programmes of study.
- Revision of previously granted accreditation.
- Evaluations for the assessment of the quality of higher education. This the only evaluation the Ministry may instruct NOKUT to conduct.

Fixed sets of Standards and Criteria:

The Ministry has decided on:

- standards for a satisfactory quality assurance system
- standards for accreditation of institutions
- requirements for revision of accreditation

NOKUT is authorized to stipulate:

- criteria for evaluation of the institutions' quality assurance systems
- standards and criteria for accreditation of programmes of study
- supplementary criteria for accreditation of institutions

The fixed sets of standards and criteria have been decided on in consultation with the higher education institutions.

Experts

The evaluations and accreditations shall be conducted by experts appointed by NOKUT, who hold adequate competences,

Accreditation and academic authorities

All accredited institutions are put into three categories, universities, specialized university institutions and university colleges.

Accreditation gives the institutions some authority to decide themselves which programmes of study they shall provide. The extent of the authority varies according to the institutional category. *Universities* have the right to start any new programmes of study without applying to NOKUT. The *specialized university institutions* and the *university colleges* have right to offer all kinds of programmes at the lower degree level (bachelor) without any further process of accreditation. In the fields in which they are allowed to offer doctoral degree programmes, they have the same rights as the universities, to decide on establishing new programmes of study. All other new programmes - whether on master`s or doctoral degree level, have to be accredited by NOKUT.

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

Independency

NOKUT makes its decisions independently of the Ministry and the institutions. The Ministry may not instruct NOKUT beyond what is authorized in the Statute, or laid down by the Ministry in the Regulation; nor may it set aside accreditations granted by NOKUT.

Publicity

All materials connected to the evaluations and accreditations, such as the standards and criteria, the procedures, the 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, to actively disseminate the results from the evaluations and accreditations to different groups of stakeholders.

Consequences of not complying with the standards and criteria

The consequence of not having a satisfactory internal quality assurance system is 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.

The consequence of a revoked accreditation of a programme of study is that the institution must withdraw the programme immediately. The institution is at the same time granted a time limit of up to two years to rectify matters.

The Board

NOKUT is governed by a Board of 8 members, appointed by the King in Council with. The Board has the overall responsibility for NOKUT's activities and the decisions made by NOKUT. At least four members of the Board should hold high academic positions. One member should be a student.

Appeal board

Decisions made by NOKUT can be appealed against to the appeal board with 6 members appointed by the Ministry. It is not possible to appeal against the conclusions in the report from the expert panel.

Integrated system

The Norwegian system for quality assurance in higher education is a diverse system which makes use of a mixed set of instruments for monitoring and developing the quality of the Norwegian higher education institutions. This can pose an important question. Do the different instruments work together in order to achieve the aims

and objectives, to sustain and develop the quality assurance in higher education? Or are they a fragmentary collection of different instruments without the ability to interact?

One important instrument is the requirement for the institutions to establish satisfactory internal quality assurance systems, to be assessed by NOKUT in periods of maximum six years. These institutional quality audits represent a systematic, comprehensive mechanism for external scrutiny of the quality of higher education.

A negative outcome of such institutional quality audits alone cannot lead to loss of accreditation, but the evaluation may reveal indications of poor quality. NOKUT has then a possibility to follow up these indications by carrying out a revision of accreditation. This link between institutional quality audits and revisions of accreditation is a central pillar in the Norwegian system.

Revisions of previously granted accreditations are an important instrument. The revisions of accreditation of institutions or programmes of study are not carried out within specified periods of time. NOKUT's decision to carry out a revision of accreditation can be based both on the information resulting from the evaluation of the institution's quality assurance system, on other evaluations conducted by NOKUT, as well as on the basis of other reliable sources of information.

As shown above there are some links between the instruments used for monitoring and developing the quality in higher education in Norway. The existence of these links can in my opinion support a claim that the Norwegian system for quality assurance in higher education is an integrated system.

Implementing the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance

The European standards for external quality assurance agencies

The requirements to the quality assurance agencies are presented in the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (part 3).

The European standards for external quality assurance agencies consist of 8 points, 3.1 to 3.8. To make it easier to follow my presentation, I have listed below the headlines of these 8 points:

3.1 Use of external quality assurance procedures for higher education (part 2)

3.2 Official status

3.3 Activities

3.4 Resources

3.5 Mission statement

3.6 Independence

3.7. External quality assurance criteria and processes used by the agencies

3.8 Accountability procedures

The Standards have been developed on the premises of the development of European external quality assurance systems during the last 10 years. It was emphasized that the standards should not reduce the freedom of the European quality assurance agencies to reflect in their organizations and processes the experiences and expectations of their nation/region. The standards should be neither too detailed nor too prescriptive. They also must ensure that professionalism, credibility and integrity of the agencies are visible and transparent to their stakeholders and must permit comparability to be observable among the agencies and allow the necessary European dimension.

Status for NOKUT

New legal basis for quality assurance in higher education

The Norwegian government decided on a new act relating to universities and university colleges, embracing both state owned and private owned institutions of higher education in 2005. The new Act of 1 April 2005 also made it necessary to work out an updated ministerial regulation concerning evaluation and accreditation. Consequently, NOKUT revised its own regulation on standards and criteria for evaluation and accreditation.

The new Act and the Regulations, which have taken into account the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance, enable Norway to follow up the adoption of the Bologna process.

NOKUT and the European standards and guidelines

In 2005 NOKUT conducted a simple internal review to assess to which extent NOKUT complies with the European standards and guidelines for external quality assurance of higher education (part 2), and the European standards for external quality assurance agencies (part 3). The conclusion was that most of the essential standards and guidelines in part 2 and 3 were met.

These were:

- the external quality assurance addresses the institutions internal quality assurance;
- the objectives, procedures and criteria are predefined and made public in an active way;
- the evaluation reports are made public and easy accessible on NOKUT's Web-site.

Some of the points are more qualitative:

- the agency shall use the standards and guidelines in a consistent way;
- the evaluation processes shall be well adapted to the aim of the evaluations;
- the reports shall be written so that they are clear and easy to understand;

- the requirements in Part 3 regarding the official status, the activities, the resources, the mission statement and the independence have also been met. These points essentially counterpart NOKUTs own status as layed down in the Act of 2005 and the Regulation of 2006.

In some fields though, NOKUT follows particular arrangements which should be explained and interpreted in the context of the content of *The Standards and Guidelines*.

- Point 2.7 Periodical review

All higher education shall be evaluated periodically. NOKUT conducts a special arrangement. The institution's quality assurance systems are evaluated in fixed periods of six years. Other evaluations of significance for the assessment of the quality of higher education, and accreditation of institutions and programmes of study, are not carried out in fixed periods of time. Similarly, accreditation of institutions and of programmes of study 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. The wide authority to accredit new programmes of study by the institutions themselves, together with the fact that the accreditation is not given for a certain, defined period, makes it necessary to have a system of stable, high level accreditation control, carried out through a revision of accreditation.

How satisfactory this revision procedure could be, will depend on the quantity of revisions made and of availability of resources.

- Point 2.8 System-wide analyzes

This point requires quality assurance agencies to occasionally issue summary reports. The reports should describe and analyze the general findings of their evaluations and

accreditations. NOKUT does not meet this requirement to day, but we are in the process of establishing a staff unit, which will be responsible for the summary reports and analyses and will be disseminating these to general public. The staff unit will consist of 3 full positions holding high adequate competence and experience. It is intended to be operative in the autumn 2006.

- Point 3.7a Self-assessment

An accreditation of programmes of study is not based on an ordinary self-assessment of the institution, since the institution does not have the necessary experience in running the new programme. NOKUT has an adequate procedure which is based on the application procedure used when an institution plans to start a new programme. Such application must follow the specified standards and criteria, established for that particular level of programme of study.

- Point 3.7b Site visit

NOKUT does not require a site visit in an accreditation process of a new programme of study on a bachelor- and master-level. On a doctoral level accreditation, there is always a site visit. All other evaluations and accreditations involve site visits.

- Point 3.7 Follow-up procedures

The existing regulations in Norway do not give NOKUT the authority to require reporting from the institutions about their remedial activities. NOKUT requests the evaluated institutions to report back to NOKUT on how they have followed the recommendations given by the experts. This is a voluntary procedure. The Ministry, on their part enquires about it at the annual meetings with the institutions.

Point 3.8 Accountability procedures

NOKUT has established all of the required procedures.

Evaluation of NOKUT

NOKUT's board and the Ministry of Education and Research decided in 2005/2006 that NOKUT itself should be evaluated with reference to the European Standards and Guidelines. The evaluation will take place in the second half of 2007. The Ministry will be responsible for the process and the evaluation would be conducted by an external evaluation unit. It is probable that the Ministry will wish to include some certain nationally oriented criteria in addition to the European Standards and Guidelines. NOKUT plans to start the self-evaluation process in late 2006. The expert panel will mainly consist of members from outside the Nordic area.

It is difficult to foresee the conclusions of the expert panel on whether NOKUT satisfies the Standards and Guidelines. It will probably depend on how the panel interprets NOKUT's specific arrangements in relation to the European Standards and Guidelines.

Two Subjects at the End

Before I conclude my presentation, I wish to present to you some comments on two subjects related to the European Standards and Guidelines under discussion here: The Consistence of the evaluations and Mutual recognition of higher education in Europe.

Consistent evaluations

As mentioned above, the systems of higher education, the structure of the higher education institutions and of the quality assurance systems are diversified, but also have a lot in common. It is difficult to say whether the balance between diversity and standardization represents an optimal level in relation to assuring and developing the quality in higher education.

The combination of diversified national systems on one hand, generic European standards and guidelines for quality assurance on the other hand and at finally the different expert panels making their own interpretations of the standards and guidelines, can result in

inconsistent evaluations. The question arises: What can be done to avoid such a development?

There are a lot of possible arrangements and instruments which could be used to reduce or avoid inconsistencies. Theoretically, one way out could be to increase the central coordination of the evaluation processes. But I believe this is neither a realistic nor a desirable solution. It stands in conflict with the decentralized model, where the national quality assurance agencies are to be reviewed on a national basis. ENQA can only take the initiative to conduct an evaluation in cases where after five years no initiative has been taken either nationally or by the agency itself.

Thus, it is difficult to propose any definite, effective instruments which would increase the degree of consistency of the evaluations. A possible arrangement could be that The European Register Committee, which has the main responsibility to decide on admissions to the European register, could also be given a responsibility to see to the consistency of the evaluations. Publication and active dissemination of the Committees results from the evaluations; including the panels interpretations of the standards and guidelines, could in the long run lead to more consistent evaluations. According to the ENQA proposal the Committee will also take into account the diversity of the higher education systems. I don't know if it may be realistic at all to give the European Register Committee such a responsibility.

Nonetheless, it is necessary to initiate a serious discussion on how to assure the consistency of the evaluations without changing the systems. Otherwise, the confidence in the European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance in higher education may be jeopardized.

European Standards and Guidelines - Mutual recognition of higher education in Europe

The Executive Summary in the ENQA report on Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education

Area, of February 2005, has indicated what will be the outcome of the implementation of these recommendations. The last of the eight points states the following: 'The move towards mutual recognition will be assisted'.

I wish to make some comments on this anticipation.

Since 2003 NOKUT and Aneca have worked together with 13 other European quality assurance agencies from 10 countries focusing on accreditation as an important instrument to assure and develop the quality in higher education. This multilateral collaboration is organized as a project for a period of four years, under the name European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA).

The ultimate aim of this project is 'Mutual recognition of accreditation decisions'. The project consists of 4-5 working groups, each with different responsibilities, and meeting at two workshops every year to conduct discussions related to the reports from each of the working groups.

A central question in the process has been: What is the necessary and sufficient knowledge the agencies need of each other to be able to reciprocally recognize the accreditations decisions made by other agencies?

Besides discussing further the development of A Code of Good Practice, similar to The European Standards and Guidelines, we have exchanged information and discussed matters of interest related to our ultimate aim. Furthermore, we have worked out profiles of each participant, we took part in each others accreditation processes as experts or observers; comparing each others standards, criteria and procedures.

The project will be finalized in December 2007, so no conclusions have been made yet. We are progressively and systematically collecting necessary information and data from the agencies involved. All these activities have been essential and interesting. Still, I do believe that the Code of Good Practice & the European Standards and Guidelines are absolutely of vital importance as a basis for mutual recognition. The remaining factual information is more

detailed and therefore perhaps not so essential for mutual recognition of accreditation decisions.

My opinion is that *the European Standards and Guidelines*, and the corresponding *Code of Good Practice in ECA*, have formed the necessary basis for mutual recognition of programmes of study in higher education. The question is: Is it sufficient?