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MAKING A CASE FOR A SLIM QUALITY AUDIT

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Introduction

This presentation is intended as an introduction to a discussion session, a Special Slot within track 6 at EAIR Forum 2004 shared between the authors of this paper and Lee Harvey and Jethro Newton. It is about the merits of what is here referred to as a 'slim quality audit' model of external quality assurance in higher education. The presentation is based on discussions held among representatives of European quality assurance agencies that employ – or have employed – quality audit: OAQ of Switzerland, QAA of United Kingdom, CNÉ of France, the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education and NOKUT of Norway. The national agencies in the United Kingdom, Sweden and France have operated for some time and have gained experience from varied practises of quality evaluation; in Switzerland and Norway the agencies are relatively new. Our discussions bear evidence of these 'historical' as well as other differences. Differences are interesting, and so are similarities. May be we have not focused sufficiently on what our similarities consist of? The views expressed in the first part of this paper are not necessarily shared by these agencies or persons and are presented in the hope that further discussion will bring forth nuanced and challenging views on the matter.

This text refers to Harvey and Newton's paper *Transforming Quality Evaluation* because it provides a relevant theoretical background to our discussion. Harvey and Newton argues that basically

(external) quality (assurance) is about compliance and accountability and has, in itself, contributed little to any effective transformation of the student learning experience. (...)...it is time to reclaim quality evaluation from opportunistic politicians, re-establish trust in higher education and focus attention on internal processes and motivators. Instead of politically acceptable methods, quality evaluation needs to appropriate research methodologies. (Harvey/Newton, 'Abstract')

The first part of the following pages will present some arguments for a slim – or sharpened – audit method, touch briefly on some of the issues raised by Harvey and Newton and hold the 'slim quality audit' method up against Harvey and Newton's general views about the role and possible (in)effectiveness of external quality assurance. The second part of the paper consists of short presentations of some national audit practices.

Part 1: 'Making a case for a slim quality audit' – some themes for discussion

The 'slim audit' concept

Of course, 'slim quality audit' is no established term or recognisable evaluation method. Although no attempt will be made here to define 'audit' in the light of possible qualifying epithets, a brief explanation of what the term 'slim quality audit' is meant to imply in this presentation is in place.

In a quality assurance context, 'audit' is basically a type of external evaluation, carried out by an audit panel or expert committee, that approaches the issue of quality via the internal quality assurance and other quality work that the institution itself carries out. As such, it is an indirect approach and the evaluations can therefore be described as 'meta-evaluations'.

The other main characteristic is that the audit represents a 'generic' approach: instead of addressing each subject area (like mathematics or sociology) on a quality platform that is more or less exclusively defined by the (national or international) subject community itself, it holds that most relevant aspects of educational quality – although it is 'translated' into the

different subject areas - can be generally defined and hence investigated from a cross-discipline perspective. The 'slim quality audit' is a traditional audit method in this sense.

However, the concept of a 'slim audit' is evoked here to describe an approach that tries to focus more sharply and exclusively on the quality of the *educational provision* itself than many other audit programmes have typically done. While much auditing practice has attached more or less equal attention to other (important!) aspects of what institutions of higher education do and provide - like research, infrastructure, governance and strategy, the slim audit will regard these aspects as important and relevant only in so far as they influence the quality of the educational provision. This would imply that these aspects will not be evaluated for what quality they totally and individually have, but for what contributions they bring to educational quality.

Advantages

The QA agencies that are (informally and loosely) associated with this presentation apply audit programmes that differ considerably in terms of adherence to a strictly 'slim' model. So it is at this stage more than anything a theoretical construct, whose rationale is (1) that the quality assurance of education should become more targeted and focussed and (2) that the quality work – for assurance as well as for enhancement and development – should mainly be motivated and take place inside the institutions themselves and according to the institutions' own agenda. In this sense, the external/national evaluation of educational quality can be seen as an extension of the institutions' own quality work. By placing such emphasis on the institutions' own quality work, it balances external and internal quality assurance more in favour of the latter than most other methods. By inference, the method is arguably also more based on trusting the institutions.

It has traditionally been seen as the strong point of the audit method that it places the responsibility for educational quality firmly on the institution itself. This responsibility involves not only the actual assurance of a 'given', or externally defined, quality, but even a responsibility to understand and interpret – and to some extent even *decide* - what quality in higher education entails as applied to the institution's own educational provision.

This also means that the method is fairly alien to quality assessments that are based on fixed standards – particularly when these relate to individual subjects and programmes. Nor will it easily lend itself to comparative measurements and ranking. That the audits thus make rather modest claims in the way of postulating authoritative 'truth' and 'accurate' assessments, may be regarded by some as a shortcoming; to others the fact that it does not foster unrealistic expectations about its own contribution is rather perceived as an advantage.

The other main advantage that is generally attributed to the audit method is its 'economy' – or lack of 'bureaucracy'. Most of the early systematic programmes of external quality assurance in higher education were directed at the subject or programme level. However, with the expansion in higher education since the early nineties, cyclic and comprehensive evaluations on this level, based on detailed self-evaluations and peer review, have turned out to be a heavy burden indeed. This goes for institutions and QA agencies alike and concerns work-load and resources as well as the element of intrusion. And to confound the issue still more, disciplines, subjects and programmes are not any more the rather few and constant entities they used to be. There are many more of them and they merge, diversify and change into all kinds of different shapes.

Challenges

But the audit method poses problems and challenges too. Since it is so general and open, and since it addresses the entire institution rather than the level of educational delivery, how can one make sure that the method will penetrate down to actual educational practice? And

while an audit evaluation may easily verify the existence of a general 'quality culture' and the institution's professed means of internal quality assurance, isn't there also a possibility that 'quality cultures' – or semblances of it – and quality systems may be purely theoretical phenomena, worked out nicely on paper and talked about a lot, while they have little practical consequence for the behaviour of the individual department head, teacher, administrator, librarian, service provider, etc.? In brief, isn't the audit method too superficial and too distant from where educational quality is actually created to be a sufficiently robust evaluation method?

Slim and focussed

This is exactly where ideas of a 'slim', 'focussed' and 'sharp' approach are relevant. There are many examples to show that open-ended audits have little genuine impact and bring even less assurance, although most participants would agree that they provided a very rewarding learning experience.

The two rounds of Swedish audits (1995 – 2002) is a case in point. With due respect for the considerable merits of these pioneering audits, isn't it also true that their broad scope, relative openness and lack of a unifying frame of reference made their outcomes very difficult to interpret for anyone outside the institutions themselves? For one thing, rather few and perhaps too general signposts and steering directions were provided for both the institutions and the visiting expert panels; for another, a balanced 'mesh' of internal and external quality assurance could hardly take place at a stage when it had not yet been properly defined what to expect from internal quality assurance. In turn, this probably also had an influence on the way institutions succeeded in transforming what had been learnt into reformed institutional behaviour, although it is well documented that real improvements also did result from the evaluations.

It would go beyond the purpose of this small presentation to discuss in detail what sharpening tools must or might be part of the audit inventory in order to make it more than a flexible, open-ended and supportive (but also rather superficial and unpredictable) evaluation method. The idea of a 'slim audit', however, may indicate at least the following points, which also serve to underline to what extent external audits depend on internal processes:

- Slim audits imply a concentration on *educational quality*, leaving other main fields of activity – like research and contacts with society – to other evaluations. The way audits may be focussed in this way can be illustrated by means of circles around a core, where the core represents 'educational quality' and the elements that are most intimately connected with the educational processes lie in the circles that are closest to the core. Obviously, the impact on educational quality of an institution's strategy, governance, research activity, physical infrastructure and administrative service will be considerable, but would still be considered less than the programme itself and the teaching/tutoring input provided by the teaching staff.
- In order to come close to this aim, however, the audits must communicate with systematic quality work in the institution, quality work that puts equal emphasis on the same points. As the audit addresses the entire institution in one sweep, it can hardly be expected to find out much at this micro level across a large institution's portfolio. Rather, the audits must rely on information about quality that the institution itself assembles and processes for its own monitoring and steering purposes. This means that the institution needs an internal quality assurance system and that this system must answer some pre-defined criteria. Taken together, these criteria would then make up a frame of reference for the evaluation that is understood and accepted by both parts. In order to preserve the institution's autonomy, responsibility and initiative in their development of programme quality and quality assurance, such criteria should preferably be generic (or system-related) and abstain from prescribing specific quality

assurance measures.

- The term 'audit' is taken from the world of accountancy, a word whose similarity to *accountability* is neither coincidental nor irrelevant. In discussions about quality in academia 'accountability' usually has a negative ring to it, as opposed to the more positively laden 'enhancement' or 'development'. No-one will question the importance of enhancement-orientation, but what about accountability as a legitimate claim? This is where the third sharpening element comes in: the demand for *documentation*. Just like the documentation of the accountancy system is reviewed in a financial audit, the academic audit will have to build on the systematically assembled documentation of quality assurance in order to fulfil its purpose. But the analogy goes further. Like the documentation in accountancy must be accurate and detailed in order to show and legitimise the actual movements of money, the documentation of academic audits must at least demonstrate how each individual study unit is quality assured, and what conclusions are drawn. And for business and academic audits alike, their external role is only secondary to the internal quality work that the company/institution itself carries out in order to safeguard the quality of its product and enhance its performance. Again we are speaking of how internal and external QA must communicate – and how the internal side has primacy over the external. It might be that a real innovative element in a 'slim quality audit' lies in the specific relations between internal and external processes, which state and respect the autonomy and responsibility of the institution.
- The fourth point to be mentioned here concerns the conduct of the auditing operation. Following the importance attached to documentation in the previous point above, and presupposing that the institution actually operates a quality assurance system, the audit panel might relate more directly to the first-hand (and processed) documentation of the institution's quality work and rely less on a self-presentation that is specially produced for the occasion of the audit. Whereas external panels in many other types of evaluations often run through a fixed and scheduled program of whom to interview and what questions to ask, the success of audit visits may depend on a more dynamic approach. This would mean that more of the panel's document studies will take place during the visit and that interviewing questions – and indeed decisions about whom to ask – to some extent will result from these 'findings'. So we are probably looking at a format that will take more days than 'ordinary' evaluation visits and where a larger portion of the activities will be decided during the visiting process itself.

Transforming quality evaluation?

In their paper *Transforming Quality Evaluation* Harvey and Newton argue in favour of roles and methodologies for external quality assurance that would modify what they see as the most typical procedures of today. With the danger of misrepresenting their views in a summary interpretation, we see in Harvey and Newton's paper a call for renewed emphasis on internal (institutional) processes, a more productive 'mesh' of external and internal quality assurance, more research-like evaluation methods, better adaptation of methodologies to aims and objectives in different kinds of external evaluations, more research-like methods and a sharper focus on the student learning experience - or 'transformation' with 'value-added'. Needless to say, this is a position that values the importance of enhancement/development much more than control from, and accountability towards, the outside. Their position can also be read as a move to 'take quality assurance back' to institutions and discipline communities who stand at the centre of the student learning process.

It is not difficult to discover substantial areas of potential common ground between the views presented by Harvey/Newton and the 'slim audit' concept, depending of course on the

practical conduct of the audits. First of all, there is the issue of roles and authority, where the audit concept builds on the primacy of internal quality assurance and an intimate communication between the actual round-the-year quality work in the institution and the external evaluation. Further, by refusing to refer to national/external standards of *actual educational quality*, the audit concept largely accepts and expects the institution's own responsibility for defining what educational quality is, in each of its programmes. Consequently, the external evaluation cannot issue good or bad "marks" for educational quality, either – and certainly not provide the basis for ranking comparisons. This would seem to be well in line with an enhancement-oriented approach.

Also in the area of methodology, the slim audit may come closer to ideals advocated by Harvey/Newton than most other common evaluation types. It can be seen as a methodological approach that answers Harvey/Newton's wish that method should be more specifically adapted to aims and objectives. The audit is in itself a departure from the very standard formula of self-evaluation followed by external peer review, or at least it may, for there is less need for a conventional self-evaluation in those cases where the external audit can relate to a well-developed quality assurance system in the institution. If the system produces documentation and analysis that satisfy the institution's own needs, then this documentation ought to be satisfactory for the purpose of auditing as well. Other areas of agreement may be the audit's openness to dynamic procedures and its potential (in its 'slim' or 'educational' form) for getting close to the 'black box' of the education of the student, depending of course on the quality of documented quality assurance in the institution.

On what points, then, would there seem to exist a contradiction between the slim audit concept and the ideas involved in Harvey/Newton's call for a transformation in quality assurance? First and foremost, perhaps, in the audit's controlling aspect: in the fact that the slim audit is, after all, a method that also answers a demand for accountability towards society (and politicians!) and usually employs a fixed standard (or a reference frame), although this is a standard of quality assurance, not of educational quality as such. This acceptance of (a legitimate element of) accountability may in fact be related to what *may* also be a difference in underlying assumptions concerning what ought to be the object of quality assurance: where Harvey/Newton speak warmly of bringing quality assurance close to the students' actual learning outcome (their 'transformation'), the present authors want to sound a slightly sceptical note about the feasibility of learning outcomes as suitable (or indeed definable!) entities of assessment. At least *one* of the obvious responsibilities of national quality assurance is to monitor the input side in higher education. After all, while learning outcomes will have to be defined in such general terms as easily lend themselves to 'sliding' interpretations, it is primarily the input factors (resources, hours, competences, teaching arrangements, equipment, space, etc.) that make higher education what it is, and it is these that are constantly being pressurised in the quest to reach 'results' with less resources.

Part 2: Short presentations of national audit practices

The move towards a 'lighter touch' in external quality assurance of higher education in England

Nicola Shannon

In March 2002 the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the UK published an Operational Description for the external quality assurance of higher education in England. The document heralded a move away from universal subject review in all higher education institutions in England, and a move towards lightening the burden of external review.

The key factors that determined this move were described as:

- 'Over the past eight years, there has been a comprehensive programme of external peer review at subject level, covering all main subject areas in all higher education institutions in England. It demonstrated that, in general, the quality of higher education programmes is very high, with only a small minority of programmes found to be failing or in need of substantial improvement. The review programme has provided a rich evidence base on the performance of all the HEIs in England. It has also had the effect of promoting the development of more comprehensive and rigorous internal quality assurance procedures within HEIs.
- We are now therefore in a position where the future quality assurance approach can be much more selective. It can rely more than previously on internal HEI quality procedures, and it can focus on identifying, and following up, areas of concern, consistent with the principle of 'intervention in inverse proportion to success'.
- At the same time, however, the future approach must be rigorous and robust in securing the accountability of HEIs, and in providing the information which students, parents, employers and other stakeholders need on the quality and standards of different HEIs and programmes. The approach must test whether HEIs' internal procedures really are effective in setting, monitoring and enhancing quality and standards of all programmes; and whether the information which each HEI provides about its programmes is valid and fair. The approach must be able to identify where there are weaknesses, and ensure rapid and vigorous action to address them.'

The outcome of the consultation on the Operational Description was general support from the HE sector in England and subsequently the *Handbook for institutional audit: England* was published. The schedule of audits, which started in January 2003 meant that in the initial 'transitional period', all higher education institutions in England would be audited in three years, followed by a 'steady state' six year cycle. The process is based on a self evaluation document from the institution, a selection of audit trails based on specific discipline areas which also have self evaluation documents, a visit by a team of peers for clarification purposes (the briefing visit), followed by a team visit to conduct the audit (the audit visit). A report on each institution is then published.

The 'slim audit' is only possible in England because it takes place alongside the increasing use of external advisers in internal processes within institutions; the publication by institutions of information about programmes on a national website; and the development and implementation of a series of codes of practice on quality and standards issues.

Is it working? We are half way through the transitional period and the feedback so far from all concerned is that the process is delivering the outcomes. There will be a full evaluation by external consultants in 2005 and we await the results with interest.

From audit to programme and subject assessment: Sweden

Staffan Wahlén

In their article Transforming Quality Evaluation, Harvey & Newton refer to the initial Swedish audits as one of the few cases where "improvement was designed in from the outset through the identification of improvement projects and evaluating their effectiveness". That was certainly the aim of the audits as they were developed and introduced ten years ago. On the basis of a parliamentary decision, the role between the government and HEIs had then recently been changed, and evaluation of higher education institutions was the price that had to be paid for greater institutional autonomy. The preparation process was a joint venture of the agency established for evaluation, i.e. the National Agency for Higher Education, and the institutions. There were two main premisses: (1) each HEI was responsible for the quality of the provision of its teaching and research, and (2) it was the responsibility of the Agency to control and support institutions in their quality assurance endeavours.

Consequently, an audit model was developed which assumed that the HEIs had established, or at least were establishing, their own quality work, monitoring and consistently improving the quality of its activities. The audits followed the general pattern of self-evaluation, site-visit by an expert panel with domestic and international experts. It was designed to take into account aspects such as leadership of quality processes, the institutional strategy for quality implementation, cooperation with stakeholders, participation in quality enhancement and the institution's own evaluation system, all in all an eclectic mixture of attitudes and processes as well as design, implementation and result of some processes, especially evaluation. The main focus was on improvement, but the audits were not without teeth. Sharp criticism was sometimes voiced in the reports, which in one or two cases led to major change directly or indirectly. Typically, such change involved not so much teaching and learning as organisation and leadership.

The audits were planned to take place in three-year cycles, covering all then 36 Swedish HEIs, and two cycles were completed between 1995 and 2002. In the middle of the second cycle, the Government completed an enquiry into student influence in higher education. One of the findings was that students wanted more information on the quality of education at the level of the individual discipline or programme. This could not be provided by the quality audits. Or rather, how departments' quality was assured and what that quality was, was not always transparent in the institutional quality records. And if such information was available, it was not comparable across the country. Other stakeholders, for example employers, joined the debate and demanded more insight into the quality of the provision. In the light of this debate the government, after consultations with the National Agency, called for a new evaluation model, involving a cyclical review of all disciplines and programmes over a six-year period, beginning in 2001².

In this way, political and stakeholder interests paved the way for a more intrusive and all-inclusive evaluation model. Paradoxically, the experience from the first three years of the six-year cycle indicates that while it functions as a control and enhancement instrument, it is also a learning experience as regards evaluation processes for the departments involved. This finding could contribute to the development of a modified, more enhancement-oriented national quality assurance system focusing on the institutional or faculty level, but also taking teaching and learning into account.

The dialogue as a condition of the evaluation

Pierre Couraud and Bruno Curvale

cné is in charge of the so-called "institutional evaluation" of the French universities or more globally of most of the higher education institutions. The higher education system in France is mainly organised as a public service and 86,2% of the French students are registered in higher education institutions under the responsibility of the Ministry of National Education. Since 1989, cné has a special legal status: it is an "independent administrative authority", that means it is not under the authority of any ministry and it only has to refer to the nation (it delivers once a year a report to the *Président de la République* about the state of higher education in France). Thus it is free to establish its own programme and methodology of evaluation.

Not only does cné recommend to the institutions it evaluates but it also recommends to the State (especially the ministry in charge of the higher education and research).

The final reports of the evaluations of the institutions are published and public (downloadable on the cné site www.cne-evaluation.fr).

² See Wahlén, S., Does National Quality Monitoring Make a Difference? In *Quality in Higher Education*, 10 (2)

This paper's aim is to focus on some of the principles at the heart of cné tasks and missions: the partnership perspective of the evaluation and the search for improvement of each higher education institution.

The so-called "institutional evaluation" led by cné is based on the double process "internal evaluation-external evaluation". These two steps are deeply linked (i.e. the report stemmed from the internal evaluation will partly determine the issues on which the external evaluation will focus).

In order to help the HEI to assess itself, cné promotes its own methodology in the "*Livre des références*". It was not only elaborated to help the institution to lead its internal evaluation but it should become a main tool of the internal quality within the institution. That concretely means that the institution is expected to integrate the tool and the demonstrative approach it implies in its "every-day-life". Therefore it can be seen as a mean to help the development of the quality culture within the institution.

The tool develops a series of references (*références*) around 3 domains (educational policy of the institution, research policy and management/strategy). These references are not parts of a model, but agreed/shared principles or expectations expressed by affirmative sentences.

This document was built in cooperation with CPU (the national rector's conference) and IGAENR (the control-service of the ministry). That was a strong willing of the cné that all the parties took part in the building of such a document. It definitively places cné as a third independent party.

The "*livre des références*" is planned to be annually reviewed by cné and all the stakeholders that share the view that quality assurance lies first in the HEI.

This common framework puts at a central issue of the evaluation process the discussion around the reference. The reference is the basis, the explicit object of the evaluation:

- on the HEI side, the reference is the starting point towards the institution has to prove that it knows its own situation in the domain to which the reference refers, that it can take coherent and relevant decisions in consequence, that these decisions are effectively implemented and become policies/actions adapted to the situation, and finally that it evaluates these policies/actions to examine their results.
- on the cné side, by making explicit its approach and the references it proposes, and therefore by clarifying what it expects and what it is looking at, it exposes its methodology, its choices, its work, etc. to the critical judgement of the HEI evaluated and users of evaluation results.

This agreement around the whole evaluative process is all the more important since cné mainly intends to foster the constant improvement of the higher education system. cné does insist on working in partnership with HEI because It is convinced that dialogue with the evaluated HEI coupled with an independent relevant external evaluation is the key to make the French higher education system evolve in a good way. Thus by promoting transparency, cné fulfils its mission of information towards the public.

Quality Audits in Switzerland

Karl Zbinden and Rolf Heusser

In the 1990s, the state-run universities in Switzerland began to introduce quality assurance measures. This work has progressed to varying degrees and been implemented on various levels in the different institutions. No review of the situation in Switzerland as a whole has been undertaken before 2004, however.

Taking as its basis the Federal Law on Financial Aid to Universities and Cooperation in Matters Relating to Universities (UFG) of 8 October 1999, the federal government decreed "Guidelines for the qualifying procedure for financial support stipulated by the Federal Law on Financial Aid to Universities (UFG)" which came into force on 1 January 2003. According to these Guidelines, the Swiss Federal Office for Education and Science (OFES) checks "every four years in a summary procedure whether the recipients of financial aid meet the requirements stipulated in Article 11 para. 3 UFG". Article 11 para. 3 letter a of the UFG requires universities or institutions "to provide high-quality services which are examined by the Center of Accreditation and Quality Assurance of the Swiss Universities OAQ (www.oaq.ch) and recognised by the Swiss University Conference" in order to qualify for financial aid.

The OAQ developed a concept for quality evaluation of this kind for existing state universities and academic institutions. The quality evaluation had to be of a summary nature. The concept of a quality audit (evaluation of the quality assurance systems operated by the institutions) chosen by the OAQ met these requirements and promised to strengthen the university's own efforts to improve their quality. In the course of a quality audit the HE institution must be able to demonstrate that quality assurance measures are in place that function in practice and do contribute substantially to the quality improvement. The quality audit can be viewed as a complementary activity to the accreditation of faculties, departments and programs.

Quality audits were carried out by the OAQ in spring 2004 at all twelve universities in Switzerland. The OAQ used a standard four step approach: Self-evaluation by the university / Two day visit of international expert panels / Expert report, comment of the university and final report by the OAQ / Publication of the final report. The panels consisted of four experts who had experience in quality assurance and governance of HE institutions. The experts were accompanied by OAQ staff. The two technical (ETH / EPFL) universities took part in the self-evaluation phase only.

This first round of quality audits at Swiss universities served to review the current situation. Four basic requirements quality assurance systems of HEI's should meet were used as a benchmark:

1. The quality assurance system at a university / academic institution should cover both quality control and quality development.
2. Quality assurance must be an integral part of the university / academic institution's overall strategy, cover all subunits of the institution and be applied systematically.
3. The results of internal and external evaluations and of other QA measures must be used continuously to improve the quality of teaching and research.
4. The efficacy of quality assurance measures must be evaluated periodically by external experts (This was covered by the summary quality evaluations carried out by the OAQ).

In 2007/08 the next round of quality audits will take place. They will be based on a more elaborated set of requirements/expectations and the universities will have to demonstrate the high quality of their output by showing positive results of evaluations / accreditations at programme level.

First results of the quality audits indicate that at present no Swiss university meets the four basic requirements to their full extent, although many quality assurance measures have been taken or are being developed. In the majority of cases the mechanisms of quality assurance were above all not sufficiently embedded in the overall strategy of the institution or not applied systematically enough. Systematic evaluation of programmes and to a lesser extent of research is also not common. Many universities do not yet dispose of a management

information system which could provide the central management with quality-related information on the subunits.

The OAQ will – in collaboration with international networks – further develop the principles and requirements to be met by quality assurance systems of HEI's. Before the next round of quality audits in 2007/08 a voluntary follow up after two years is offered to the universities.

Quality Audits in Norwegian Higher Education

Wenche Froestad and Jon Haakstad

In Norway, it has been mandatory for all institutions of higher education to have a QA system since 1 January 2004. The responsibility of the quality of higher education lies within the institutions themselves. The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) is responsible for evaluation of the QA systems. The objects of an internal quality assurance system are: to detect variations in educational quality, to identify inferior provision, to engage broadly throughout the institution and create a culture of quality and to promote quality improvement throughout.

The quality assurance system must be applied to all processes of importance for the quality of study programmes, beginning with the information provided to potential applicants and ending with the completion of the course. Routines must be included for students' evaluation of teaching, for the institution's self-evaluation and its follow-up of evaluations, documentation of the institution's development of the learning environment and routines for quality assurance of new course programmes. The institutions must have routines that ensure continuous improvement of the system.

All accredited institutions' QA systems are evaluated in a 6 year audit-cycle. If an institution does not meet the standards, it will be allowed a time of 6 months to improve the system according to the experts' advice. NOKUT will then arrange a new evaluation. If the QA system still is not satisfactory, the institution is prevented from giving new provision. NOKUT's board has defined the following 10 criteria for the evaluation of institutional QA-systems:

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 organised in routines and measures that ensure broad participation, with defined distribution of responsibility and authority for the various stages of the work
5. How the institution retrieves and processes such data and evaluative 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 institution uses 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.

The different types of institutions vary in what kinds of degrees they have the right to provide, as set out in the diagram below:

	University	Special field university	University college	Unaccredited
PhD				
MA				
BA				

Those institutions that are shaded grey (per programme) may not establish new programmes without initial accreditation. All state owned institutions of higher education are regarded as accredited on the level they held before the new law came into force (01.07.2002). All private, unaccredited institutions have to apply for accreditation for every new programme or for any change. Institutions may apply for institutional accreditation at any level shown above according to given criteria.

NOKUT can arrange for re-accreditation or other kinds of evaluations on different grounds:

- If it is suspected that one specific programme is not up to standard, the programme can be reviewed and the institution can lose their accreditation for this programme.
- There can be a wish to evaluate all programmes of a specific discipline at national level.
- NOKUT may find it necessary to arrange other evaluations as a standard addition to the Norwegian audit- and accreditation system.

Until now NOKUT has carried out 12 quality audits, out of which 7 followed an application of institutional accreditation. In two cases the quality assurance system was found not to be sufficiently in place and implemented. In such cases the HEI has six months to improve the system before a new evaluation is arranged.