



Student participation in external evaluation panels

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Abstract

Quality assurance in higher education implies various types of student involvement. The question of student participation in external evaluation panels is a recurring issue in international debate.

The backdrop for our discussions is experience from the work of experts and staff connected to The Norwegian Agency of Quality Assurance (NOKUT). A majority of NOKUT's expert committees include students.

In general, student participation in external evaluation panels is highly appreciated by the parties involved in the evaluations, and students' contributions are valued. However, a closer discussion sheds interesting light on the actual role of the students.

Student participation in external evaluation panels

Student involvement in the quality assurance of higher education in Norway

Norway has about 80 providers of higher education. Less than half of the institutions of higher education (HEIs) are owned by the state. However, 90% of the students attend state owned institutions. In the Norwegian model of quality assessment of higher education HEIs are granted rights of self-accreditation according to their institutional status. Universities may provide programmes and grant degrees on any academic level without formal approval. State university colleges have the same rights up to bachelor level, and may apply for accreditation of provision on a higher level (MA; PhD), as well as for a higher institutional status. Privately owned institutions must submit an application for all new provision, but may apply for institutional accreditation and gain the same rights as state owned institutions.

The responsibility for the quality of Norwegian higher education lies within the HEIs themselves. It is mandatory for all institutions to have a quality assurance system that covers all aspects of education and students' evaluation of teaching and learning must be part of it.

The purpose of NOKUT is to oversee the quality of Norwegian higher education by means of evaluation, accreditation and approval of quality systems, institutions and programmes. These tasks should be performed in such a way that the institutions can use the results to develop their own quality system and improve their provision. All providers of higher education are audited in six-year cycles. NOKUT's evaluations are conducted by external expert panels. NOKUT has laid down more specific requirements as to the experts' competence, depending on the panel's tasks. Student experts take part in all evaluations except evaluations prior to the accreditation of new provision. These panels are small, consist of experts in the relevant academic field(s) and do not conduct site visits. Student involvement in the assessments of higher education is a well established tradition in Norway. A national model of assessment without student involvement is unthinkable in the Norwegian cultural setting.

Student participation in expert panels must be understood in the light of tradition and students' rights in general. Student representation in the boards of HEIs is mandatory in Norwegian higher education. It is also mandatory with student representation in all decision-making bodies. Every HEI has a "Learning environment committee" reporting directly to the board. The committees have an advisory status regarding all issues related to physical and social learning

environment. Students have 50 % of the representatives and the head every second year. Also, there is a student representative on the board of NOKUT. Two national student organisations represent the student population, one targeting mainly university students as members, and the other targeting students from university colleges. Every HEI should accommodate the local student organisations. The student organisations nominate students to NOKUT's pool of experts. Student welfare organisations are mainly owned by the students, and hence also run by the students.

Students participate in the internal quality assurance of the HEIs in various ways; as formally elected student representatives in decision-making bodies or advisory bodies, as chosen spokesmen for groups of students, through personal ad hoc complaints or suggestions and through student assessment of teaching and learning; programme design; learning environment; etc. Students' participation in the internal quality assurance of the HEIs is given special attention in NOKUT's evaluations.

Approach – reflection on given topics by panel members and NOKUT's staff
The point of departure of this project has been to let staff and external experts reflect upon some aspects concerning student involvement in NOKUT's evaluations.

All members of expert panels were asked to reflect upon how students are selected to expert panels, the roles students take within the panels, added value or possible problems from student participation, and whether students in the future ought to take part in assessing new provision. The student experts also gave their opinion whether students could head the panels. Student representatives are participating in all decision-making within the HEIs. Hence, their perspectives might differ from those of "the common students". Student experts were asked to reflect on whether they, as experienced student representatives, could still represent the interests of common students.

The information gained from panel members was followed by a joint seminar for NOKUT's staff. Finally, relevant aspects from this study have also been compared to those of a joint Nordic project on student involvement in quality assessment of higher education (Froestad & Bakken (Eds.), 2003).

Experience with student participation in expert panels

The general finding is that all panel members are in favour of student participation and value students' contributions to the panels' work.

Students are regarded as equal members alongside the other experts, and, in most cases, student experts are well integrated in the group. However, there is a difference between audit panels and the other panels. The auditors belong to a pool of experts. They are appointed for one year at a time, but only 10-20 % of the experts in the pool change from one year to the next. Every expert participates in several evaluations and the auditors meet in different panels. Also, NOKUT holds joint seminars for the auditors once or twice a year. Hence, the pool members have learnt to know and respect each other. The panels conducting evaluations prior to institutional accreditations, on the other hand, normally do not know each other and never meet as experts outside the actual project. Some students report that they needed more time to gain acceptance from the other panel members in these panels. Some students also remark that it seems important to have knowledge of the appropriate social codes. In this sense, coming from an academic background might

be an advantage. Still, the overall impression is that both students and other experts, who are taking part in these panels, think of it as positive.

Below, the following aspects of student participation in external evaluation panels will be investigated more closely; the selection procedures NOKUT applies when choosing student panel members; the roles students play in the panels and the contributions students make within the panels; the student member heading a panel; and finally, whether to widen the students' participation to expert panels assessing new provision.

1. Selecting student experts

NOKUT's criteria for selecting students include experience from the decision-making bodies within a HEI or from the student organisations. Experts are appointed by the board of NOKUT. However, the student organisations nominate students for NOKUT's pool of auditors. They are also normally consulted when NOKUT is in need of student representatives to the expert panels in other evaluations as well.

In general, both students and other experts feel comfortable with the selection procedures. Representatives who work full time in the student organisations may stay on as experts for a year or two after passing their final exams. Due to this, some of the student experts are no longer students. Some of the experts pointed to this fact as a possible problem. The students argued that a position as a representative within the student organisation makes one qualified to be a student representative in evaluation panels as well. However, NOKUT finds that student panel members should participate in panels as student representatives for a maximum of one year after graduation.

The student experts have often been full time representatives in their organisations, at a national or at an institutional level. Student experts were asked if such positions made a gap between them and common students that might be problematic in respect of representing students in the panels. They argue that being a local student representative implies raising the students' issues within the institution. There is, naturally a longer "distance" to full time student representatives at national level, since they are not at a HEI. However, student representatives claim they are used to speak in the interest of all students. This is actually what they are elected to do. Also, when asked to be student experts in panels evaluating HEIs, how can experience and competence be negative?

The broad organisational experience of formal student representatives is seen to be especially important in audits and evaluations assessing the HEIs as institutions. To be an expert in these types of evaluations, it is necessary for students to have a good understanding of the governance of HEIs. In these cases, the existing criteria are seen as an important means of selection. When conducting revision of educational programmes, however, NOKUT sometimes choose other student experts than the ones nominated from the student organisations. In these evaluations experience from the same, or similar educational programmes is considered necessary. Also, the experience from institutional decision-making might not be as important in these evaluations. To NOKUT it is not important to have the same set of criteria for the selection of student experts for all types of evaluations. Actually, criteria for choosing other experts also vary with the tasks of the panel. Hence, NOKUT might adjust the criteria selecting students to some expert panels.

Regardless of how experts are selected, they should never act as the representatives of an organisation inside the panel. Indeed, the work within the panels is

confidential, and no part of specific discussions should be brought back for debates in the students' organisations. However, in general terms and without any references to specific HEIs, student may bring back what they have learnt from working in expert panels.

According to our project, there are two possible alternative ways of selecting students:

1. The HEIs may nominate student representatives from their own student population. It is emphasized as important to keep focus on the criterion that makes demands on experience from decision-making processes within the HEIs. This method of selection, it is argued, secure that student experts have sufficient understanding of decision-making processes. In addition, the method will be beneficial with a view to recruit students from various institutions as well as different geographical regions.
2. The task may be advertised as a part-time position students may apply for. In this case NOKUT may use the same procedures as they do when recruiting new members to its own staff.

For NOKUT the second alternative is considered to be too time consuming. The student experts argued against the first alternative, claiming that some HEIs have small and weak local student unions, and that the HEIs might not know the student representatives well enough. Instead they pointed out that the national student unions were the best to pick student representatives with necessary experience for the task. The Nordic project showed that while Sweden involved the HEIs in nominating students, Finland and Norway turned to the national student organisations. National tradition in quality assessments of higher education probably determines what is considered legitimate procedures. If there are no national student organisations, or there are several competing organisations, nominations from HEIs could be a good alternative. Similarly, presenting the HEIs with given selection criteria for nominating students, might be a good procedure when a broad organisational experience is less important than other qualifications. Sampling randomly amongst the student population is not seen as a serious alternative by any party.

2. Students' roles in the panels and added value from student participation

All panel members are chosen according to given criteria, and shall have complementary competences. As an overall finding, students are regarded as equal members of the panel. Students are expected to take part alongside other panel members in all parts of the panels' work. Still students are expected to take special responsibility for all student related issues, as well as to have special knowledge in this field.

Due to NOKUT's selection criteria, the other panel members are experienced people, normally aged 50+. In addition to their position as students, getting arguments and viewpoints from a younger person is in itself regarded positively by the other panel members. However, all experts stress the necessity of selection criteria. The criteria secure student experts with sufficient knowledge as well as personal confidence needed for the task.

As mentioned, students normally seek out their position and role in the panels without severe problems. However, some students wish that NOKUT clarifies the role of the student expert. In addition, it is necessary also to explain this to other panel members in order to ease students' integration into the group.

Students often take a leading role when students are interviewed during site visits. This secures that students are understood. Further, an active fellow student in the panel may ease the conversation. However, some experts claim that students are more critical when interviewing teachers and leaders, than they are when meeting fellow students. For the other panel members, though, the opposite might be the case. Academic norms may restrain academic experts to pose openly critical questions to their colleagues in academia and administration. On the other hand they easily pose critical questions to students, for instance about the amount of work they put into their studies, about student involvement in evaluating teaching and programmes etc. Hence, it is probably a positive finding that the panels tend not have a very strict division of labour.

In general students do contribute to the panels. Different examples of such “added value” are mentioned from most of the experts. Below these contributions from student participation are listed.

Added value from student participation in external evaluation panels:

- Other experts easily understand the viewpoints of the researchers/teachers and leaders. The student perspective is equally important, and is best handled through student participation in the panel. The student experts are the representatives and the voice of students within the panel.
- Student participation enhances the possibility of obtaining a broader discussion within the panel, securing a wider perspective, and hence, better quality for the decisions made.
- The students have fresh experience of being a student, and have updated knowledge of teaching- and exam forms, of regulations, of curricula etc.
- The student experts are aware of possible problems concerning students’ influence in the HEIs, and may look behind statements from academic and administrative staff.
- Students may have different perspectives on the documentation from the HEIs.
- When students are interviewed, a student in the panel makes students feel at ease.
- Student participation increases the legitimacy of the evaluation amongst students.
- Student participation has a democratic aspect.

3. Students heading panels

The students were not always in the favour of students heading the panels. Many felt they would master the task. Still, they felt uncertain of the reaction of the HEIs, and, also to some extent, of the reaction from their colleagues in the panel. Also, there was some concern as to whether the role as leader might restrain the critical role one could otherwise pursue as a student member in the panel.

Unfortunately the other experts were not given this question to reflect upon. It was debated in NOKUT’s staff seminar. There was no strong reluctance to student leadership. In an ongoing evaluation of Norwegian teacher’s education, students are chosen to lead panels. It should be mentioned that this evaluation has a purpose of developing the programmes and is no accreditation. This evaluation will last over a period of two years, and the panel members have plenty of time to get to know and respect each other. The student representatives are chosen from NOKUT’s pool of auditors, and they have both participated in several audits. In addition, they are students in teacher education. Only positive remarks have come from other experts as to the students taking the role of heading panels. So far, no site visits have taken

place in this evaluation and reactions to student leadership of the panels from the HEIs remain to be seen.

As seen from the staff of NOKUT, student leadership of the panel might hold a higher level of legitimacy when the evaluation is an audit, than what might be the case of evaluations when the purpose is accreditation. Audits concern the evaluation of the quality systems and the quality work of the HEIs. Student representatives are well integrated in this work as well as in the HEIs' decision-making systems. Hence, students heading audit panels may not raise any opposition from the HEIs. As, mentioned earlier, the members of the pool of auditors know each other well. Reluctance to student leadership within these panels is less likely, than what might be the case in those panels only meeting for one evaluation.

Also, the students' own reservations are important to NOKUT, particularly if student leadership of panels restrain students from taking a more critical role in the panels.

4. Should students participate in assessing new provision?

Today assessments of new provision are carried out by small panels consisting of experienced academics within the related academic fields. The assessment concerns planned programmes or courses on various academic levels from bachelor to PhD. They are evaluated through written documentation only. Except for the accreditation of PhD-programmes, there are no site visits or interviews, and the panels do not usually meet.

Both the student experts themselves and the other panel members disagree among themselves when it comes to this question. Students that are sceptical are especially concerned with what their roles should be. They see no point with student participation if this is not of importance to the evaluation. Other panel members that are sceptical to student participation in these panels argue that the panels are in need of experienced academic experts in the field, and hence students can not fully contribute.

On the other hand, it is argued that students having adequate experience might contribute to these panels as well as to others. A student from a higher level within the same academic field might spot problems in planned provision when it comes to organisation, timing, workload etc. The same might be the case with students at the same level as the provision in question, if the student has attended the programme for a sufficient period of time. There will normally be student representatives in the decision-making bodies accepting new provision within the HEIs. Sometimes they also take part in planning the new provision. It may be argued, therefore, that students with such experience will make positive contribution to the panels assessing new provision.

NOKUT can see interesting arguments, both pros and cons, for extending student participation to these panels. However, due to many applications, there is a matter of efficiency that counts against larger panels than today. These first-round accreditations already take a lot of resources. Whenever an ongoing program is being revisited for accreditation, students will participate in the panels. Also, it is considered to be more important to ensure student participation in the planning process of new provision within the HEIs. However, when it comes to the accreditation of new PhD-programmes, NOKUT has under consideration to include newly graduated PhD-candidates in the panels.

Conclusion

As expected there is an overall positive experience with student participation in external evaluation panels assessing higher education. Based on experience, we have developed some ideas to change and adjust some of our procedures, while others are confirmed as well-functioning. Hopefully this presentation at the EAIR conference will add to this learning experience for NOKUT, as well as for other conference participants.

The Nordic project on student involvement in quality assessments of higher education found that student participation in evaluation panels contributed to the assessments. The project showed obstacles to student participation, such as tradition and regulations. The report from the project holds out some examples of good practise in order to support student participation in the panels. Among these are:

- *“Selection criteria are used to ensure that student panel members have the required experience.*
- *The national student organisations are involved in nominating students.*
- *A start-up meeting or seminar is held with the panel in which evaluation methods and experience in general, as well as the forthcoming project, is discussed.*
- *The evaluation officer will consult the panel throughout the project, and may especially focus on the student member if necessary.*
- *Evaluation training programs open to staff and students”.*

However, what might be good practise in this context must be understood in the light of national traditions and regulations. It is also depending on student rights and various types of student involvement both on a national level and within the HEIs themselves. Hence, every nation probably needs to find its own procedures for student involvement in evaluation and evaluation panels.

References:

1. Froestad, Wenche and Bakken, Pål (Eds): Student Involvement in the Assessments of Higher Education in the Nordic Countries, NOQA, 2003 (The report is found on the website of any of the Nordic quality assurance agencies.)