

Strategic plan

Strategy for further development of NOKUT 2010-14

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Preface

Background

This strategy plan sets out the direction for NOKUT's work and development in the five-year period 2010–2014. The strategy is based on experiences we have gained since our establishment in 2001 and on external contributions, not least the international evaluation of NOKUT (2008).

The evaluation concluded that NOKUT clearly meets the European standards for quality assurance in higher education. At the same time several recommendations for improvements were made in relation to both NOKUT's activities and the Norwegian system for quality assurance in education generally. The evaluation committee raised two issues in particular. Firstly, it felt that NOKUT had focused too much on control activities and recommended that it increasingly take on a more development-oriented role. Secondly, it was anxious to see NOKUT becoming more flexible and targeted in its methods.

Several of the specific recommendations have been of a type that has required changes in NOKUT's mandate, and during 2009 the Ministry of Education and Research amended the law and is currently in the process of changing the Ministerial Regulation under which NOKUT operates. The change in the law underlines NOKUT's development-oriented role, and NOKUT is to be given more flexibility in its supervisory activities. Parallel to this we have reorganised our activities to make better provisions for meeting the increasing expectations expressed by the mandate change.

The evaluation gave few signals in the field of recognition of overseas qualifications. However, in 2007 a report was published pointing out possible areas of improvement (the Brautaset commission). One of the results was that NOKUT was charged with establishing an information centre with the purpose of guiding people holding foreign qualifications to the appropriate recognition or authorisation authorities. The centre was established in 2009 and will be operative in spring 2010.

About the strategy plan

The strategy plan has emerged through a wide-reaching process in NOKUT's board and administration. We have also received many useful recommendations through consultations with the university and higher education sector, the vocational education sector and other organisations. The plan is divided into two parts. Part 1 formulates the overall goals for NOKUT's contributions to society and the key strategies for further development of its activities. Part 2 contains more detailed strategies for developing each of our three areas of activity.

The strategy will be followed up with annual and multiannual activity plans with specific priorities and management parameters designed to help us stay on course. The plan is ambitious, not least because the Ministry aims for it to be realised within the same budgetary boundaries as today. Tough resource priorities and step-by-step implementation throughout the strategy period will therefore be necessary. We hope and believe that the next evaluation of NOKUT will show that we have fulfilled our commitment to society to the benefit of the sector.

Oslo, November 2009

Petter Aaslestad
Chairman

Terje Mørland
Director

Part I

Overall goals and strategies

About NOKUT

Purpose

NOKUT's mission is to help ensure and enhance educational quality through

- controlling and stimulating the enhancement of educational quality at Norwegian universities, higher education colleges and colleges of tertiary vocational education
- conducting recognition of foreign higher education qualifications in relation to the Norwegian educational system on application from individuals

NOKUT's work aims at building trust in the broader society that Norwegian higher education, Norwegian tertiary vocational education and recognized foreign higher education qualifications is of good quality

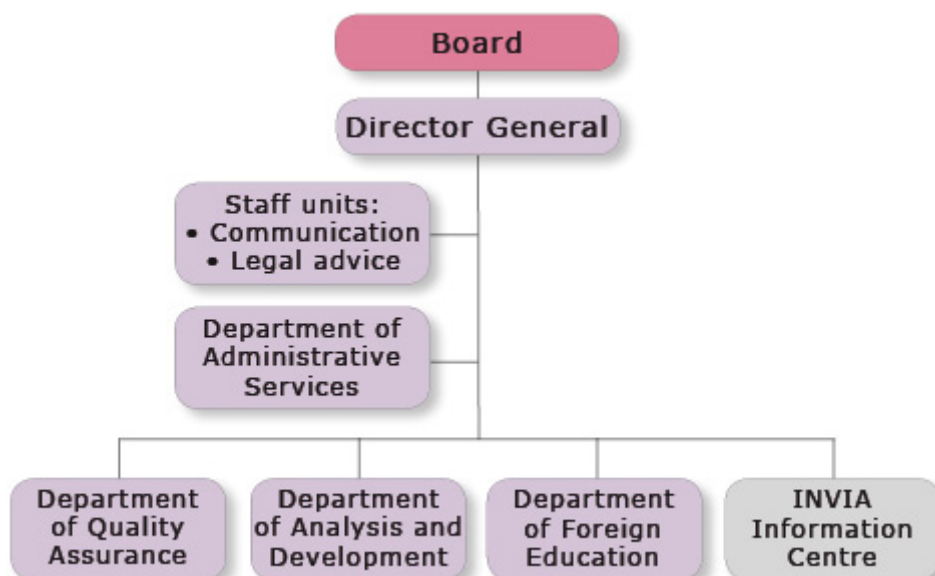
Organisation

NOKUT is a professionally independent agency established in 2003 as part of the quality reform in higher education. Its activities are regulated by the Act relating to universities and university colleges and the Act on tertiary vocational education with associated regulations set by the Ministry of Education and Research. Its professional independence means that NOKUT's decisions on recognition and accreditation cannot be overruled by the Ministry.

NOKUT has organised its activities into three areas:

- Supervision of higher and tertiary vocational education.
- Assisting quality development by means of evaluation, analysis and R&D-projects
- Recognition of foreign qualifications

Organizational chart:



Overall goals

NOKUT's purpose sets out its intended contribution to society. On that basis we have identified four overall goals:

Goal 1

To help ensure that the quality of Norwegian higher education and tertiary vocational education satisfies national standards

We do this by carrying out controls of the educational activity at institutions that provide tertiary education. Our instruments and methods in carrying out this task include evaluation of the institutions' internal quality assurance systems (quality audit), institutional accreditation, the accreditation of new provision and monitoring established provision. All control mechanisms may lead to a demand that an institution takes action to make a specified feature comply with national standards. In most cases further recommendations are also given to assist the institution in its work to further enhance its educational quality or quality assurance.

Goal 2

To stimulate the enhancement of educational quality at Norwegian universities, higher education colleges and colleges of tertiary vocational education

We do this partly by making recommendations for further improvements in connection with our control tasks and partly through evaluations, studies and analyses with the aim of producing and disseminating new insights into quality-related issues, for the benefit of institutions and relevant authorities in their efforts to improve educational quality. Activities in the latter category have the sole purpose of assisting quality improvement and do not involve any control measures.

Goal 3

NOKUT shall contribute to society's general confidence that persons with foreign qualifications have their qualifications assessed in relation to Norwegian qualifications, and that employers and educational institutions are given the correct information about overseas qualifications

We can achieve this in two ways. Firstly, we process applications from individuals for general recognition of foreign higher education. We evaluate the level and extent of the qualification in comparison with the Norwegian educational system and may award study credits and years of study before approving the qualification as equivalent to a Norwegian degree. We also assess the authenticity of the qualification. Secondly, we provide information about foreign higher education and the Norwegian recognition system to employers, the authorities, educational institutions and other interested parties. NOKUT operates an information centre for the various accreditation and authorisation schemes for foreign qualifications. The centre offers guidance and refers users to the correct authority.

Goal 4

Society should be confident that the quality of NOKUT's activities meets international standards and that we manage our resources effectively in relation to our purpose.

In order for NOKUT to be able to contribute to society general confidence in the quality of higher Norwegian education, tertiary vocational education and recognised foreign education, society needs to have confidence in NOKUT. This means that we embed our activities in international standards for quality assurance and good management practices, that we have

the right expertise, that we use highly qualified experts, and that we have good routines for the management and quality assurance of our activities. We shall be open and transparent to the outside world and actively communicate our processes and results. We shall act in accordance with our core values at all levels of the organisation. NOKUT shall be:

- *Competent* in the execution of its tasks
- *Comprehensive* in its understanding of tasks and the concept of *quality*
- *Solution and user oriented* in all activities
- *Effective* in its use of resources
- *Clear and transparent* in all communication

Key strategies for the further development of NOKUT

We have defined five overall strategies for NOKUT's development in the next few years, partly based on the evaluation of NOKUT in 2008 and subsequent changes in the law and the regulations that regulate NOKUT's activities. These represent a shift in focus and set out the direction in which we shall move in order to increase our contribution to society in the areas described above.

Development strategy 1 *Increased emphasis on stimulating quality enhancement*

NOKUT will increase its efforts to stimulate the development of educational quality in the sector. This will partly be achieved through a strengthening of research and analysis activities and partly by developing further the element of making recommendations for improvement in connection with our control tasks. In our written and oral communication we will make a clear distinction between demands for measures that have to be taken in order to achieve compliance with national standards on the one hand and further recommendations or advice for improvement on the other. Through open seminars and a more distinct voice in the public domain we will disseminate the results of our activities or direct public attention towards identified challenges in the field of educational quality. Our statements and recommendations shall be based on facts and aimed at the improvement of educational quality in specific institutions or in the sector as a whole

Development strategy 2 *A more holistic, targeted and effective control and monitoring regime*

NOKUT will develop a comprehensive and holistic model for the monitoring of educational quality, with improved interplay between the different mechanisms. We shall exercise greater flexibility in our choice of controlling mechanisms and our activities will be more targeted at areas where specific demands have been identified. This entails that the factors of demand, risk and cost-effectiveness will loom larger than before in our planning of control activities.

Development strategy 3 *Improved service to those who depend on our activities*

NOKUT shall provide better information and service to its stakeholders and other interested parties. We will make it easier for those who apply for recognition of foreign higher education to find the correct recognition authority, while improving the level of information about NOKUT's own recognition activity. We will also improve the level of information to institutions about our quality assurance processes and other activities.

Development strategy 4 *More dialogue with the sector and with the public*

NOKUT shall strengthen its dialogue with the educational institutions. When dealing with the institutions we must be aware of our dual role as quality assurance agent on the one hand and adviser in matters of quality enhancement on the other. With regards to the recognition of foreign qualifications we will put increased emphasis on contact with applicants, the labour market and other recognition agents. We will also strengthen contact with the public and make our activities better known in society by developing our website and strengthening the dialogue and networks with relevant organisations.

Development strategy 5 *Continue to develop NOKUT as a professional and integrated organisation*

NOKUT shall appear as a competent, professional and integrated agency. We will further develop internal communications and make provisions for all staff to obtain a basic understanding of all of NOKUT's key tasks in addition to their own field of expertise. We will develop a staff policy that values our employees as the organisation's most important resource and make provisions for the systematic development of competences. We will continue to develop procedures and routines to ensure efficient and high quality work processes. Our user orientated services and internal case handling will be developed in line with government targets for e-management.

PART II

Strategies for individual areas of activity

Quality assurance of universities, university colleges and tertiary vocational colleges

About this area of activity

NOKUT inspects educational activities at all Norwegian institutions offering higher education and vocational education. The monitoring comprises two key components:

- * Inspection of the institutions' internal quality assurance of their educational activities
- * Inspection to confirm that the institutions' courses meet national quality standards.

NOKUT inspections are based on the fact that responsibility for the educational quality rests with the institution offering the course. The authority to carry out inspections is laid down in the Act relating to universities and university colleges and the Act on tertiary vocational education with associated regulations produced by the Ministry of Education and Research. The regulations contain national standards and criteria. NOKUT sets complementary standards and criteria in its own regulations. Together these form the national standard on which NOKUT's inspections are based.

Almost without exception inspections take place with the use of expert committees. The primary aim is to ensure that educational activities are carried out to a satisfactory standard. The inspections also have a dual function in that NOKUT also gives guidance on how the institution can further develop the quality of its courses and its quality programme.

The Norwegian model for quality assurance of higher education and tertiary vocational education is briefly described below.

The inspection model for higher education

The inspection model for higher education assigns institutions to categories with various powers to offer courses on Bachelor, Master and PhD levels. The institutional categories and associated powers are shown in the figure below. The inspection model comprises the following components:

* *Inspection of the institutions' internal quality assurance of their educational activities.* This is carried out by way of a periodic assessment of the quality assurance systems at all institutions.

* *Inspections to ensure that the institutions' courses meet national quality standards.* This is done in two ways:

Accreditation of new courses

Accreditation of new courses following applications from institutions that do not have the authority to establish the new course, cf. the figure below.

Inspections of established courses

NOKUT may request a report from an institution where there is reason to believe that quality is unsatisfactory in an identified course or programme. This can be followed up with a revision (re-accreditation) process. All courses at all institutions may be revised, including those established on the basis of self accreditation.

The scheme for institutional categories with varying powers allows an institution to apply for institutional accreditation in a different category with extended powers. NOKUT assesses whether the institution meets the standard and criteria for accreditation in the relevant category. The Ministry of Education and Research then determines whether the institution can be transferred to that category. NOKUT may revise institutional accreditations.

The inspection model for tertiary vocational education

The inspection model for tertiary vocational education comprises the following key components:

* *Inspection of the vocational colleges' internal quality assurance of their educational activities.* This is achieved by NOKUT's carrying out an assessment of its quality assurance system. It takes place when a vocational college applies for accreditation of new courses or when NOKUT carries out inspections of established courses, for example.

* *Inspections to ensure that the vocational college's courses meet national quality standards.* This is done in two ways:

Accreditation of new courses following applications from the vocational colleges.

Inspections of established courses. NOKUT may request a report if there is reason to believe that quality is unsatisfactory or may conduct a revision of the accreditation for a certain course. All courses at all institutions may be revised, including those established by a vocational college on the basis of self accreditation, cf. accreditation of specialisms below.

From 2009 vocational colleges may also apply to NOKUT for so-called specialism accreditation. If the vocational college meets the appropriate standards and criteria it is granted authority to establish new courses within the relevant specialism. NOKUT may revise, and revoke, a specialism accreditation.

Strategies for further development

Inspections in general

A consistent approach

NOKUT shall develop a consistent inspection model with improved interaction between various approaches / inspection methods. A consistent approach shall form the basis for the way the agency is run and organised, for communication with the sector, and for the further development of the standards and criteria on which we base our assessments, accreditations and evaluations.

Effective and targeted inspections

NOKUT shall exercise increased flexibility with regards to the methods we apply. The processes shall be adapted to the institutions' size and other relevant circumstances. The

inspections shall also be targeted towards areas where particular needs have been identified. This means that the assessment of need, risk and cost-benefit will be more integral to the planning of inspection activities than previously.

Further development of standards and criteria

NOKUT shall simplify and illustrate the standards and criteria that form the basis for accreditation of higher education courses. In consultation with the sector we shall review the most important quality aspects, i.e. the factors that are most central to the quality of the education, and assess how they can best be evaluated and operationalised in a revised accreditation standard. No significant changes are planned for the vocational sector. New standards and criteria were introduced in this sector in 2009. However, we shall establish routines for regular re-inspection and revision, including of standards and criteria for vocational accreditation.

Further development of the processes

NOKUT shall further develop:

- * the internal quality assurance system with particular focus on offering guidance in order to ensure a uniform understanding and implementation of standards and criteria
- * information activities, including systematic applicant guidance ahead of deadlines
- * the advisory element in the inspection processes, including report templates that more clearly distinguish between instructions and recommendations

International involvement

NOKUT shall systematically monitor international developments in the field and contribute actively to development in areas where we have advanced expertise or other qualifications for doing so. NOKUT shall prioritise co-operation in the European and Nordic arena.

Inspection methods in higher education

Evaluation quality assurance systems

The evaluation criteria and evaluation schemes were amended before the secondary assessments were carried out in 2009. The advisory element has been developed further, and this time the institutions can expect more dialogue in the process, increased focus on the benefit of the systems and offers of follow-up seminars. The aim to develop a more consistent inspection model along with the experiences gathered in the first round of assessments may result in some adjustments to the evaluation criteria and evaluation schemes.

Institution accreditation

NOKUT shall illustrate certain criteria and renew the routines associated with the processing of applications. NOKUT will revise institutional accreditations if developments in the sector warrant it.

Accreditation of new courses

In consultation with the sector NOKUT shall revise the standards and criteria for the accreditation of courses with the view to simplifying and illustrating aspects that are key to educational quality at the various levels. We will also review the way applications are handled. The introduction of application deadlines will be considered in an attempt to reduce processing times and to allow for more systematic guidance to be given to applicants and experts. Sufficient capacity for application processing shall always be a priority.

Inspections of established courses

NOKUT shall introduce a new model for the inspection of established courses. These inspections shall change their focus from a random and broad selection of auditing objects to largely serving as a targeted quality control to be launched when there are indications where quality is failing. The model will comprise three steps: i) Annual overall analysis and risk evaluation, ii) Obtaining statements where there is an indication of quality failure or other reason for inspection, and iii) Review of accreditation if necessary after step two.

Inspection methods for tertiary vocational education

Assessing quality assurance systems

The requirement for quality assurance systems for everyone offering tertiary vocational education was introduced in 2009. NOKUT began an assessment of these systems in autumn 2009. Adjustments may be made as we continue to gather further experience.

Accrediting new courses

New standards and criteria for courses were introduced in 2009. At the same time we are changing the way applications are processed. Sufficient capacity for processing applications will always be a priority. Adjustments may be made as we continue to gather experience with the new system.

Inspections of established courses

NOKUT shall launch inspections of tertiary vocational courses that have already been accredited. These will follow the same three-step model described for higher education.

Specialism accreditation (authority to establish new courses within a given specialism)

NOKUT shall establish a scheme for specialism accreditation whereby vocational colleges can apply for permission to establish new courses within a given specialism.

Assisting quality enhancement by means of evaluations, R & D projects and the analysis of aggregated information

About the area of activity

In addition to its mandatory control function of supervising the educational activities at the institutions, NOKUT also conducts analytical investigations into educational quality, quality work and the assessment of quality with the aim of encouraging quality enhancement. These activities never include the issue of accreditation or recognition; nor will they carry any sanctions for the institutions involved. The purpose of these activities is to produce and compare knowledge that can stimulate the institutions and the authorities' work to improve quality in education. The reporting activities shall also help to further develop NOKUT's methods.

Typical activities in this area are:

- Comparison and analysis of information with identification of trends and tendencies across institutions. The analyses may be based on results from NOKUT's own activities or on information obtained from other sources.

- Evaluations to assess quality and to identify measures that may help improve quality. These may be programme evaluations of the type carried out in relation to general teacher education, for example, or thematic evaluations targeted at specific aspects or issues across different educational programmes and institutions.
- Projects of an investigative and/or developmental nature, relating to specific aspects of educational quality or quality assurance, often in cooperation with institutions of higher education or discipline communities, and with the aim of inspiring improvement in the institutions' quality work and the further development of NOKUT's methods.
- Seminars and the dissemination of fresh results and other relevant information on educational quality and quality assurance.

Strategies for further development in the area

Organisation and priorities

NOKUT shall organise its research and analysis activities in a network model, where a small core of permanent personnel can also draw on relevant competence in NOKUT's other departments and externally in the execution of specific projects. The selection of project topics is made on the basis of identified challenges in educational quality or of quality work at the institutions, or of the need for further development of NOKUT's methodologies. We will prioritise areas where our expertise or our mandate give us particular qualifications for producing and comparing knowledge that may have a stimulating effect in the sector.

Annual report with quality assessments

NOKUT will develop a comparative and analytical annual report where we disseminate aggregated information and results from NOKUT's quality assurance activities and investigative projects, focusing on trends and tendencies across institutions. In the longer term we will supplement this with information from other sources and analyses of quantitative data, based on an improved set of performance indicators. Over time this will enable us to gradually develop a knowledge bank on educational quality in higher education and tertiary vocational education.

Multiannual planning of evaluations and investigative projects

NOKUT shall draw up five-year programmes for more extensive evaluations and two-year programmes for smaller evaluations and projects in consultation with the sector, the Ministry of Education and Research and other relevant organisations. The plans will be drawn up on the basis of an overall analysis of cost-benefit, and will be adapted to comply with the expected budget levels through the period.

Recognition of foreign higher education

About the area of activity

There are several types of recognition schemes for foreign qualifications. The purpose of these is to quality assure overseas qualifications for the Norwegian labour market or for enrolment into further studies in Norway. NOKUT's responsibility and tasks in this respect can be divided into two categories:

- NOKUT's own recognition scheme and other recognition work
- An information centre that covers all existing agents with recognition or authorisation functions

Recognition work

NOKUT's recognition work is partly concerned with processing applications for having foreign qualifications recognised as higher education in Norway and partly with various advisory and co-ordinating activities such as being a national hub for the European EriC/Naric networks.

General recognition of foreign higher education qualifications

NOKUT processes applications from individuals for general recognition. We assess the level and extent of the qualification in relation to the Norwegian educational system without evaluating its academic contents. NOKUT has the authority to award study credits and years of study and may approve qualifications as equivalent to Norwegian degrees (the college candidate degree, bachelor, master and PhD degrees). NOKUT also assesses the authenticity of the qualification.

National hub for the EriC/Naric networks

The hub function in these networks implies a responsibility for providing information about foreign educational systems in Norway and about the Norwegian educational system abroad. The national aspect involves the accreditation status of foreign educational institutions, the level and extent of foreign qualifications, the authenticity of qualifications and the co-ordination of recognition practices. The users are primarily universities and colleges of higher education, the Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund and the Norwegian Universities and Colleges Admission Service.

NOKUT is also responsible for maintaining various databases and for keeping a list of requirements for general study qualifications for applicants with foreign qualifications (the GSU list). NOKUT also provides information about Norwegian accreditation schemes and the Norwegian educational system to international enquirers.

INVIA - The information centre for the recognition schemes for foreign qualifications

NOKUT's function in relation to the recognition of foreign qualifications in Norway was strengthened in 2009 through the establishment of an information centre that covers all recognition and authorisation authorities in Norway. The centre will be operative as from the spring of 2010 and is part of the authorities' effort to introduce immigrants more quickly to the Norwegian labour market.

The information centre will serve as a joint public facility for NOKUT, colleges of higher education, universities and the recognition offices of various sector authorities. It shall provide information about the Norwegian recognition procedures, offer guidance and refer enquirers to the appropriate authority. Through its website, email, telephone and personal visits, the centre shall be a portal for anyone wishing to obtain recognition of a foreign. The centre will also be a point of contact for the EU directive on the recognition of professional qualifications for regulated professions.

The centre's most important user groups will be persons seeking recognition of their foreign qualifications, employers and public services (The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration, asylum holding centres, adult education providers etc).

Strategies for further development in the area

More effective user service

NOKUT shall adapt its activities to deal with a significant increase in applications and other queries. This involves a range of streamlining measures, while maintaining acceptable service level vis-à-vis users. We shall ensure sufficient capacity for processing applications in a good, fair and quality-assured fashion within the requirements imposed by the Lisbon Convention with regards to processing times. NOKUT will also initiate a review with the aim

of improving the so-called refugee procedure for refugees with higher qualifications but insufficient documentation.

Improved information

NOKUT shall improve the level of information provided to applicants for general recognition and make NOKUT's accreditation document better known in the labour market. Simultaneously we will build and further develop activities at the information centre in close co-operation with the various recognition institutions and important user groups.

Further develop the guidance given to other parties

NOKUT shall further develop the GSU list and improve the user friendliness of our other databases. We will continue to prioritise queries from institutions requiring advice and assistance on their dealings with overseas qualifications. In light of the increasing number of applications and other queries in this field, we will work with the Ministry and the sector to review the need for and service level of our various co-ordinating and advisory activities.