

Quality Assurance Systems in HE Institutions: the Inside Experience

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Published: March 2008

The project was started in the autumn of 2007 with the aim of finding out about what experiences the institutions have had with their internal quality assurance systems, and particularly to what extent they have found them to be useful instruments for quality development, after these systems became mandatory as from the beginning of 2004. This was defined as a pilot project as it included only three institutions (university and higher education college). Methodologically, the study is based on in-depth interviews with a number of representatives of these institutions, including academic and administrative leadership, academic staff, students and 'key system operators'. A more specific intention was to reveal what intended and unintended effects the introduction of quality assurance systems has had and to test a conclusion that was expressed in one of the reports of the national evaluation of the 'Quality Reform'¹: that the introduction of quality assurance systems did not (so far) have any effect on the actual quality of higher education.

The study opens with a section on theoretical issues, where the concepts of quality, educational quality and quality assurance are discussed against a background of relevant research literature. The discussion focuses on 'the dilemma of control', that refers in particular to two problem areas: 1) the relationship between trust and the reliability/validity of outcomes in the external evaluations of quality assurance systems and 2) the relationship between simplifying (reductionist) indicators and limited QA procedures on the one hand and on the other: a complex concept of educational quality and an endless number of processes, agents and factors that influence quality. The study argues that there is a danger for quality systems to fall victim to a 'gap of expectations' as they seem to promise more than they can actually deliver. This may constitute a problem of credibility and legitimacy. Further, it is argued that with their inherent 'reductionism' there is a danger for these systems to become conservative and rigid rather than instruments for renewal and development and that they therefore may easily be reduced to instruments for administrative control.

After this theoretical discussion the internal quality assurance systems of the three institutions are presented, followed by a thematically organised discussion based on the findings and observations that are extracted from system descriptions and interviews.

Main findings

While making allowances for the validity of a project that only includes three institutions, the study indicates that the introduction of quality assurance systems have had many beneficial effects. The systems, and the process of developing them, have vitalised internal quality work in the institutions and have led to more reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of the institutions' educational provision. The systems inspire the development of a stronger culture

¹ 'The Quality Reform' of Norwegian higher education (2002) included the introduction of a 'Bologna' degree structure, accreditation schemes, mandatory quality assurance systems in the institutions and the establishing of NOKUT as (external) quality assurance agency. The evaluation was carried out in 2006.

for change and improvement in the institutions and improve their readiness to 'repair' instances of failing quality and to press for further enhancement. It emerges from the interviews that most groups at the institutions take a positive view of the systems and believe that they will prove useful. Of course, the study's answer to the question of whether the systems will help improve educational quality can only be vague and indirect. No information about educational processes or learning outcomes was assembled but it seems reasonable to conclude that the positive view of the systems that are generally held at the institutions must indicate that they will be useful instruments for improvement.

But the study also points at some problematic issues. Many respondents point to the fact that the systems often become too big and complex, which also means that they become excessively bureaucratic and burdensome. When this happens, people have trouble identifying the crucial quality challenges in a myriad of more or less important information and the motivation to work along the guidelines of the QA system easily evaporates. The study concludes that the systems would be more effective if they become simpler and focus more on the important factors and processes. The observation is made that there is a tendency for QA systems to 'enter a broader pattern of bureaucratisation' that is developing at the institutions.

Another experienced problem, voiced by many, is the fact that the systems are too much dominated by the institutional leadership and their administrative apparatus. The ordinary academics of the discipline communities do not yet appear to be sufficiently involved. Bureaucracy, lack of focus and the dominance of leadership are all factors that tend to alienate large sections of the academic community and thus represent major challenges in the institutions' continued work with educational quality. A further challenge is to do with the fact that most systems are heavily reliant on the students' course evaluations, which of course are an obligatory feature of all systems according to the relevant Ministerial Regulation. Where the students' views are not modified or supplemented by the views of the teaching community doubts will be raised about the information basis that the institution's self assessment rests on.

The sample of institutions is too small in this study for it to have obvious validity for the entire higher education sector. But the findings correlate to a large extent with observations that NOKUT has made elsewhere, which lends a reasonably high credibility to the main points. The challenges that are pointed at underline the need for NOKUT to continue its work to systematise recorded experiences with the use of quality assurance systems, as these will appear in the audit reports. Not least because the institutions in the sector are very different in terms of size and discipline orientation and thus will have different needs in their quality work.