

NOKUT's experience from external quality assurance of doctoral education

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Published: May 2010**

NOKUT's (The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education) external quality assurance of doctoral education comprises accreditation of new study programs at institutions without self-accreditation powers, revision of existing accreditations, and evaluation of the institutions internal systems for quality assurance. The external quality assurance carried out by NOKUT has a dual purpose, targeted both at ensuring that a set of minimum quality standards are met and stimulating quality enhancement at the institutions by providing ample advice for improvement.

A project has been carried out by the Department of Analysis and Development in order to analyse NOKUT's experiences from the external quality assurance of doctoral education between 2003-2009, the results of which are presented in this report. The aim of the project was to communicate such results and experiences as may provide useful information concerning the quality development of doctoral education, to the institutions, national authorities, other stakeholders and NOKUT's own organization. As a consequence, the project has both focused on extracting and analysing the most important assessments and statements made by NOKUT's expert panels for accreditation, revision of accreditation and the evaluation of the institutions' internal quality assurance systems, as well as analysing NOKUT's performance in carrying out its quality assurance tasks relating to the external quality assurance of doctoral education.

The report consists of three main parts. After a brief introduction, chapter 2 presents NOKUT's results from external quality assurance of doctoral education. Chapter 3 presents an extraction and a discussion of the assessments and statements made by NOKUT's expert panels. Chapter 4 presents the analysis and discussion of NOKUT's performance.

Findings presented in the report

relating to assessments of doctoral study programs and institutional quality assurance:

- For colleges applying for accreditation, the major challenge associated with establishing new doctoral study programs has been to present satisfactory documentation that the program possesses an adequate academic level and sufficient breadth, depth and internal coherence within its field.
- The majority of research groups at colleges supporting applications for accreditation of new doctoral study programs have been considered fragile, and not highly active with respect to scientific publication.
- The infrastructure accompanying new accredited doctoral study programs at colleges has been considered very good.
- In several cases, institutional quality assurance systems that are well designed for collecting data on educational quality from large student populations at the level of bachelor's- and master's degrees are comparatively less well designed for collecting relevant data for quality assessment of the more individually oriented doctoral education.

- Norwegian higher education institutions have chosen different approaches to structurally and formally organizing their institutional quality assurance. The different approaches present both strengths and weaknesses with respect to their relevance for internal quality assurance of doctoral education.

relating to NOKUT's performance on the external quality assurance of doctoral education:

- NOKUT has accredited 10 new doctoral study programs at 6 institutions of higher education in the period 2003-2009. So far, the educational activity associated with these programs comprises a comparatively small percentage of doctoral education in Norway.
- NOKUT's external quality assurance aims to check the quality of education and stimulate its development. Over time, the reports from NOKUT's expert panels that carry out accreditation assessments have developed a more coherent format, with comparatively less emphasis on providing analyses and advice for development not directly associated with the specific requirements for accreditation, and comparatively more emphasis on outlining the assessments directly related to the requirements for accreditation.
- The majority of specific requirements (standards and criteria) for accreditation of doctoral study programs are open to interpretation, both in relation to what constitutes relevant information for assessment, and what constitutes the appropriate level for a positive outcome. This allows for a certain flexibility to recognize the ethos of different scientific disciplines, different academic traditions and the development of novel inter- or multidisciplinary subject areas. At the same time, however, it does represent a challenge as to ensuring that different applications are consistently assessed. For certain accreditation criteria, it might be considered to define more clearly what constitutes relevant information for assessment and what should be considered an adequate level for accreditation.
- So far, the decision to revise existing accreditation of doctoral study programs, has not been founded on clear indications of poor quality, and may thus have appeared as random checks. In order to achieve NOKUT's strategic goal of effective resource spending and to provide a higher level of predictability for the institutions, it may be necessary to develop a model based on defined quality indicators that allows for specifically targeting areas of poor quality in revisions of accreditation.
- In several cases, NOKUT's evaluations of the institutions quality assurance systems have not focused thoroughly on quality assurance with specific relevance to the institution's doctoral education.