

Independence, Responsibility and Trust: (Nordic) Quality Assurance at European Crossroads

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Changing context for quality assurance

- QA as a globalized activity embedded in increased scepticism of cross-border collaboration
 - Regionalization – the new format for internationalization
- State steering of higher education – questioning institutional autonomy
 - Security issues – and more focus on STEM
 - Demographic change
- Tech disruption – and the need for QA innovation
 - Both in services and in the way QA-agencies exploit new technology and data

Consequences for quality assurance (1)

Independence – a new balancing act as the set-up of agencies is (once again) transforming in a number of countries

- Organisational independence: legal basis
- Operational independence: autonomous responsibility the process
- Independence of formal outcomes: conclusions, reports, and recommendations must be free from any undue third-party influence

Rate of partial or non-compliance when looking at RC decisions 2021- 2025

Standard	Partial or non-compliance
3.3 Independence	41%
3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance	39%
2.6 Reporting	27%
2.7 Complaints and appeals	21%
2.5 Criteria for outcomes	19%

Independence – why the trouble?

Key issues observed

- Public agencies' governing bodies dominated by governmental representatives.
- Private agencies' lack of independence from their founders.
- Governmental authority (over)prescribing the operational elements, such as EQA procedures or methodologies.

Consequences for quality assurance (2)

Responsibilities – QA agencies always challenged by stakeholders wrt the operations and decisions – this pressure will most likely increase in the years to come

- Example - The NOKUT societal mission is to:
 - Ensure compliance with existing regulations
 - Provide knowledge on the quality of Norwegian HE
 - Agenda setting role on quality issues

Easier to concentrate on the first dimension than the latter two in the years to come?

Rate of RC divergence with review panels



Standard	Divergence
3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance	23%
2.6 Reporting	21%
3.3 Independence	16%
2.7 Complaints and appeals	16%
2.5 Criteria for outcomes	9%

Activities, policy and processes for QA – why the trouble?



Key issues observed

- Lack of stakeholder involvement in the governance of in the decision-making processes.
- Unclear classification of activities within and outside the scope of the ESG; or the lack of separation between external QA activities from other (non-ESG) activities.
- Lack of strategic planning, mission statement not translated in the daily work of the agency.

Consequences for quality assurance (3)

Trust – always in the eye of the public, and with an increasing number of articulated stakeholders, QA agencies need to navigate the new landscape carefully

- Quality has become “democratized” – everyone is entitled to have an opinion (peer review mechanism weakened)
- Trust as competition – increased contestations over what should be considered as valid quality narratives

Final reflections...

- Governmental steering is also a victim of fashion –
 - NPMmanagement = decentralization and agencification
 - NPGovernance = coordination and planning
 - The idea of always having an “agency” might shift, and new tasks might also be added to the quality agenda (Elken & Stensaker, 2023)
- European collaboration in HE is strengthened – with new tasks being added: University alliances, European degree, micro-credentials, recognition
 - For QA-agencies – European developments represent interesting possibilities

Q & A

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Thank you!

