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Searching for the holy grail- excellence in teaching and learning in Norway A study of Centres of Excellence in Education (SFUs).

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Abstract

Searching for the holy grail- excellence in teaching and learning in Norway. A study of Centres of Excellence in Education (SFUs).

Norway announced three centres of excellence in higher education in November 2013. Several countries have implemented similar programs. While the programs have been analysed and evaluated, not many studies have been conducted to see why these centres are excellent and if they have characteristics in common. This paper offers an explorative case study of the Norwegian centres to see if common traits in teaching, learning and working methods can be identified with the overarching aim to operationalise and give insight into dimensions of quality and excellence in education. Statements about excellence in education are found in policy documents across the world. There is however no agreed definition or operationalization of excellence in education. The Norwegian centres will be compared with centres of excellence in teaching and learning internationally. If common characteristics are identified this might give indications on how to enhance educational quality.

Presentation

Searching for the holy grail- excellence in teaching and learning in Norway. A study of Centres of Excellence in Education (SFUs).

Introduction

The world can be described by increasing complexity, higher speed and more uncertainty and the knowledge turn-over is bigger and bigger. Higher education institutions face increased student numbers, more diverse student groups, economic constraints, higher international competition following internationalisation, a bigger focus on value for money and greater, and sometimes conflicting, demands from stakeholders. Institutions in higher education are increasingly pressed to prove their worth. Hénard and Roseveare (2012) have called this the “new paradigm for quality teaching”. Claiming excellence is one reaction to this.

Excellence is at the heart of policy discourses internationally. Institutions and policy makers have an increased focus on educational quality, excellence and benchmarking. Quality and excellence have become the modern Holy Grail.

Skelton (2007, p.1) claims

“excellence is so potent because it brings together a range of neo-conservative and neo-liberal interests. It offers a way in which the seemingly contradictory goals of expansion, efficiency, choice, the maintenance of standards, economic relevance and meeting individual needs through specialization can all be brought together under a common banner. It also provides a way in which the move to mass and ‘universal’ systems of higher education can be managed under conditions of reduced funding, since excellence shifts responsibility away from the state to enthusiastic and self-regulating individuals, teams and institutions”.

Enhancing educational quality and excellence is a multi-level effort. One of the mechanisms for stimulating excellence in teaching and learning and increasing the status of education has been the establishment of national programs of centres of excellence in higher education. Finland, United Kingdom, Sweden and recently Norway are the European countries that have adopted such programs (UHR 2009).

Norway established a program of Centres of Excellence in higher education in 2010. A pilot restricted to teacher education programmes, appointed ProTed- Centre for Professional Learning in Teacher Education in 2011. This centre is a collaboration between the University of Oslo and The Arctic University of Tromsø. Norway appointed three centres of excellence in education after the first open call in November 2013:

- Centre of Excellence in Biology Education (bioCEED), University of Bergen, The University Centre at Svalbard (UNIS) and Institute of Marine Research
- Centre of Excellence in Music Performance Education (CEMPE), Norwegian Academy of Music
- Centre of Research, Innovation and Coordination of Mathematics Teaching (MatRIC), University of Agder

The success of centres of excellence in education has been evaluated and is not the topic of this paper (e.g. Carlsten and Aamodt 2013; HEFCE 2011; Raaheim and Karjalainen 2012; Saunders et al. 2008)¹. Rather the purpose of this paper is to analyse the Norwegian centres of excellence in education (so-called SFUs) to explore what makes these centres excellent in teaching and learning and how the SFUs distinguish themselves from the other bids.

Background and Method:

This paper will offer an explorative case study of the SFU bids for centres of excellence in education 2013 in Norway. It is based on two analyses of the SFU bids from 2013; one studying how the bids documented excellent quality in their education and the second how the SFU-centres distinguished themselves from the

other applicants. The main cases are the eight bids that reached the final, but the other 15 bids have been consulted. By comparing and contrasting the appointed centres with bids that did not achieve status we may explore commonalities in the way excellence in teaching and learning were documented and realised.

The questions we will focus on are:

- What is it that makes the Norwegian SFUs and academic communities excellent?
- How did the centres stand out from the other applicants? Do they have any traits in common?
- If there are common traits, can these also be found in appointed centres and excellent communities internationally?

This study is primarily based on the written bids and supplementary material submitted by the applicants, the interviews during the assessment period and the evaluation of the international expert panel assessing the Norwegian SFU-applications.

Comparisons will be done with international centres of excellence and particularly successful units from Finland, Sweden and the United Kingdom. The Norwegian centres and bids that reached the final are compared with international successful units based on reports from the expert committees assessing the bids and their final reports to the quality assurance agencies (QAAs) managing the programs. Reports and evaluations of the programs, and centres, from QAAs and other relevant actors have also been consulted.

Finland was one of the first European countries to implement a national program. Their scheme of Centres of Excellence in University Education dates back to 1994. Finland appointed their last centres in 2012 and is the country in Europe having had a national program with centres of excellence for the longest period. From 2007-2009 20 centres were appointed. Finland also had, for the latest appointments, similar criteria and selection procedures as the Norwegian program. Finnish centres will hence be an interesting point of comparison.

The United Kingdom initiated a substantial funding scheme parallel to the Norwegian SFU-program in 2004-2005. From 2005 to 2010 74 Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) were supported with £315 million. This program supported the highest number of centres during a short period of time. Even though the program differs from the Norwegian and Finnish schemes in ways such as follow-up and control, the numerous centres and substantial funding over a short period of time makes the CETL program an interesting program of comparison to the Norwegian SFU-program.

Sweden appointed 8 national centres of excellence in three calls from 2007-2009. As a neighbouring country, similar in culture and policies, the Swedish program is a natural program of comparison. While the Norwegian, British and Finnish centres received substantial funding, the Swedish centres received no funding. This may explain the drop in interest from the first call with 26 bids appointing 5 centres, to the following with only four applicants and appointing two centres in 2008 and only one in 2009, and consequently the termination of the program (Högskoleverket 2008a,b; Högskoleverket 2009).

While recognising that teaching and learning situations are complex and context specific, an international perspective is an important part of a critical investigation and can help us to understand and situate the local contexts and allow for learning about educational excellence across borders (D'Andrea 2007; Skelton 2007).

Analytical framework

Few countries have adopted national excellence programs and these programs are quite recent. Therefore there is little educational research about national excellence programs. We thus have few significant theories in this regard (Carlsten and Aamodt 2011).

Allan Skelton (2005; 2007) has provided substantial contributions to the discussion around teaching

excellence. He (2005, p. 21-37) outlined a typology for meta-understandings of teaching excellence. These four ideal-models are:

- Traditional: in which excellence is seen as disciplinary mastery, analytical and critical approach to knowledge, and where teaching excellence requires a suitable student level.
- Performative: excellence is regarded as contributions to the economy and the ability to compete internationally. The state regulates to maximize individual, institutional or system performance (for work). The focus is on choice, modularization, work-based learning, competence formation and continuous improvements through reflective practices.
- Psychologized: view teaching excellence as relational with the aim to develop students' deep learning and predicted outcomes. Teachers must recognise individual students' needs and respect them and consequently select appropriate learning experiences, hence student will grow and achieve their full potential. Student-centred approaches and constructivist theories are popular in this approach. (This view is dominant in literature on teaching and learning and specifically British pedagogical research).
- Critical: teaching excellence aim at empowering students through participation and engagement in critical questioning around the nature of knowledge and education, challenging prior assumptions. Students are encouraged to contribute to design of learning experiences and assessment. Teachers are expected to be involved in policy discussions and locate their practice in a broader context, involving moral considerations.

These models can serve as a backdrop for analyses and to understand conceptualisations and differences in emphasis in the bids. Other understandings have also been discussed by ENQA (2014).

Common traits of the appointed SFUs 2013

The following sections will outline common traits and discuss any implications of such findings. These following characteristics separate the three centres from the other finalists and bids in 2013.

SFUs as strategic goals and results of long term commitment to enhance the status and quality in teaching and learning

The different applicants addressed and prepared for the call differently. While some of the bidders started initiatives when the call was issued and hence prepared for it in 3-6 months, other institutions have seen the SFU program as an opportunity to map their strengths in education, and research, and to develop these further. The appointed centres were results of long term strategies and commitment to enhance the quality in education. University of Agder and the University of Bergen pointed out in their institutional strategies already in 2010-2011 that their goals were to get SFU-status and worked strategically towards this ever since. The institutions not only mapped their strengths but also consolidated the organisations and built networks and partnership with other institutions with complementary strengths. Hence, the partnerships and networks behind the appointed centres were robust. They were real partnerships with common understandings and shared visions. The Norwegian Academy of Music did not plan the bidding process such a long time in advance but had worked strategically for a long time with documenting quality in teaching and learning and quality assurance, they therefore had the knowledgebase and documentation available.

SFUs as visionary results of top-down and bottom-up mechanisms

The SFUs have clear aims and visions for their work with ambitious goals and plans to reach these aims. The aims and visions are shared by all the participants, cooperating partners and key personnel in the centres. It seems that the development of the centres and their activities result simultaneously from top-down and bottom-up mechanisms. The priorities and visions were well anchored in the leadership at all levels and supported by the senior managers who showed engagement and real insight into the proposed centres and projects, in the host institution as well as in cooperating institutions. The educational leadership in the organisation and the centres were strong and explicit. The management of the centres were persons with

educational leadership skills and complementary competence and solid track records. Last but not least the projects and centres emerged from a collegium, with not only capacity to implement the centres, but also a strong will to achieve this from the involved teachers and leaders.

This was not evident in all the finalists in 2013. Some projects did not share a common understanding and vision of key elements in the proposals, others were not anchored in the leadership who had different ideas and visions for the centres and others had collaborating partners who had not been working long enough together to form a real partnership. In an SFU cooperation is key. The evaluators of the implementation of the SFU program (Carlsten and Aamodt 2013, p. 16) emphasise that in organisational and evaluation research, excellence is often seen as a “standard for operationalised knowledge cooperation”.

Teaching and learning: teacher excellence and research and development-based education

Gunn and Fisk (2013) documented several characteristics of teacher excellence. Excellent teachers were inspirational and motivated the students. They had respect for the students as individuals. They saw the learning process to be a dynamic engagement and active learning, and worked with teaching and learning in a critical and scholarly way.

All the appointed centres had teachers who were excellent as defined by Gunn and Fisk (2013). They were stimulating innovation and driving the academic community forward and pushing for educational change. They were also held in high regards by the students. Many teachers had been awarded prizes for their teaching. All the centres with their academic communities clearly had individuals of excellent teachers, which is a necessary but not sufficient condition for excellence in education.

Solid knowledge bases and research and development-based education

One part of teaching excellence is a scholarly approach to teaching and learning. All the appointed centres have a solid knowledge base both within the disciplines but also within pedagogics and research related to teaching and learning. MatRIC comprises a well-recognised academic community in mathematics and especially mathematics didactics. The Norwegian Academy of Music has been one of the leading institutions in higher music education research, nationally, and in Europe. BioCEED is involved in several centres of excellence in research (SFFs) and innovation (SFIs) as for instance Bjerknes Centre for Climate Research, Centre for Integrated Petroleum Research and Centre for Geobiology, and partners having complementary competence.

The centres thus have solid foundations for development. However being excellent in research does not guarantee a SFU-status or a good evaluation. The important aspect is how these centres use research to inform teaching and how the research permeates the students' learning. One example is how students in BioCEED do small research projects on water quality in Bergen through BioCEED's cooperation with the municipality in Bergen. Another is how MatRIC cooperates with a university hospital and do research and teach students advance mathematics, by the use of simulations, and mathematical information in medicine, for instance by showing how mathematics is vital ultrasound, surgeries and in cancer treatment and the patients positioning during radiation therapy.

These two examples might also show another seemingly characteristic of the three centres: how they are externally oriented and cooperate with many stakeholders, nationally and internationally to ensure relevance in education, among other things. (More about this in the following).

Research and developmental work in the centres are integrated with teaching and learning. The academic communities in the three SFUs had a high level of consciousness when it comes to reflection around teaching and learning. They further emphasise knowledge-based analyses and development. This is related to what often is referred to as Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and braided practice (Brew 2007; Gale 2007). Brew (2007) claims that these inclusive and scholarly knowledge communities who are involving students in research become learning partnerships where the divide between students and academics is increasingly erased. This correspond to MatRIC's view on learning as something social requiring mutual

engagement, as well as Skelton's critical model. The students are involved in these reflective practices and research, and the centres will continue to focus and develop these collegial ways of thinking and analysing teaching and learning, not only documenting learning and teaching approaches but also further develop methods and mechanisms such as collegial peer review.

The centres were thus constructed on a solid knowledge foundation and learning and teaching were results of knowledge-based analyses and development. In many of the bids not allocated resources this seemed to be lacking. One illustration of this can be that many applicants did not refer to sources when asserting their quality in education. Several bids had claims similar to these: "External evaluations confirm the strong academic competence and relevance" and "Both collaborating teaching institutions have well-established and well-evaluated...[studies]". No references were made and nothing was said about who evaluated, when and for what purpose.

Externally and internationally oriented academic communities

The centres are externally and internationally oriented academic communities. They have a high degree of internationalization. Many international students attend programs and courses in Norway and Norwegian students going abroad. Many teachers have also been taking part in international teacher exchange programs and several programs and units had a high degree of international faculty. Most of the faculty engages in international projects to improve education or research projects. The centres also participate in extensive cooperation and networks nationally and internationally, sometimes assuming leading positions. Furthermore, the centres cooperate closely with industry, businesses, municipalities and other stakeholders. This cooperation is strategic to ensure development and relevance of the study programs, internship opportunities etc. In addition this cooperation enables realistic and authentic projects, tasks and exams. Students thus deal with real problems that stakeholders want to solve or get input on. In addition the academic communities have these cooperating partners as "critical friends" as Handal (2006) calls it to get new perspectives. Many of these activities are key to benchmark educational practices in Norway and disseminate best practices.

Dissemination

The three appointed centres had the strongest plans for disseminating knowledge to others. Hamsworth and Turpin (2000) distinguish between three levels of dissemination, for awareness, for understanding and for action. The SFUs had dissemination strategies covering all levels. This is an essential element in the SFU program. The program is an incentive to stimulate the best academic communities, the spearheads, to improve and develop innovative approaches for teaching and learning and research- and development-based education. In addition the centres and the program have a mandate to inspire and involve others in their work and thus disseminate knowledge about educational methods that are conducive to learning and best practices. The program is thus designed to stimulate the best and at the same time have an impact throughout the sector.

International comparison

In August 2014, the Norwegian centres have been operational for 6 months. It is hence too early to make an operational comparison. The main focus is on the centres at the time of the assessment, but evaluation reports have been consulted. This particularly goes for the centres in the United Kingdom due to the large number of centres, and for the early stages of the Finnish program. The assessment processes in Norway, Finland and Sweden were transparent and the expert committees' assessments of the bids and centres were available and have been the primary source of information. It is important to notice that these centres have been assessed at different times and with different criteria, some with only guidance on quality aspects to be documented. Being aware of the differences in contexts, disciplines and criteria and bearing in mind that the contexts of higher education are different in these countries, there are however indications that some common characteristics do emerge.

Indications of international commonalities²

Units have clear goals and strategies to improve their education. A clear mission with a common culture and identity is developed with all the partners in the units. One example of this, evident from the assessment of the bids in Sweden and in Norway, is the consistency in the presentation made by students, teachers, management and leadership. The centres' goals are shared and anchored in the leadership and partners. Further the management and leadership are strong and committed at all levels to realise the plans. As one of the evaluation committees put it in Sweden 2008, (Högskoleverket 2008b, p. 15) "The leadership of the programme embodies an infectious enthusiasm which motivates the staff to provide the best possible learning experience for the students". Further, as also HEFCE (2011, p.13) highlighted the centres were "established because of the perceived benefits and not just to increase the chances of winning in the bidding stages".

In addition, there are strong indications that the centres of excellence are, as the expert panel in Sweden put it (2008a, p. 16), "true learning communities- students, faculty and management share a common culture for learning", which in the Finnish reports are characterised as development communities. The Norwegian centres showed strong collegiums working together in teams. In all countries the centres encourage students' opinions and respect them. Students are seen as important partners in learning community and development at all levels, and this goes beyond formal representation in decision-making bodies.

The academic foundation is strong. Teaching and research are closely linked and students are involved in research and artistic development work. This goes for the Norwegian centres as well as the Swedish and Finnish. The expert committees assessing these centres highlight the authentic problems the students are investigating and link this to the close cooperation with industry and stakeholder. Raaheim and Karjalainen (2012) emphasis that one of the key features of centres of excellence in Finland has been that the students are active in research from the early stages in their education. The academic communities are strong in research, if not excellent, as well as strong in teaching with research informing education. Developments are knowledge based.

The centres focus on supporting the students learning processes. This can be seen in some centres as focus on the individual student and their learning processes, extra teaching and learning hours, open door policies and flexible learning trajectories focus on the learning environments. The Finnish centres are characterised by being student-centred. Overall most of the assessment reports from the bids emphasis how the centres stress student-active teaching and versatile learning and assessment forms. A major focus seems to be put on formative assessment.

All the centres have advanced quality assurance and management systems. The units do not close their eyes on weaknesses. Their focus is rather on continuous improvement. Both weaknesses and strengths are mapped and analysed. Teaching and learning is constantly evaluated. The quality assurance systems have been model for several other higher institutions.

Conclusion

The implementation of Centres of Excellence in Norway may be seen as one way that governments and institutions can address quality enhancement in a context where the discourse of excellence is increasingly dominant.

Few would disagree that we have to make efforts to promote teaching excellence in higher education, to raise the standards. But what sort of teaching excellence do we want? There is growing a tendency to look at teaching and education as measurable, as performability and predetermined outcomes. By taking contextual factors into account we shake off the exclusive connotations, Skelton (2005) argues. We need to develop a critical approach and discuss what teaching excellence is about and how we can achieve this (Skelton 2005).

With this study we intended to shed lights on operationalisations of educational quality and give some indications on characteristics of centres of excellence in an international perspective.

For the Norwegian centres there are indications that the appointed SFUs

- are strategic results of educational enhancement initiatives resulting from top-down and bottom-up mechanisms which have consolidated organisations and partnerships and developed shared identity.
- have strong educational leadership, with engagement and ambitious goals, that will maximise visions and plans.
- provided evidence of excellence in education, have strong knowledge-base and research-based education building on teacher excellence, scholarship of teaching and learning and braided practice.
- are externally and internationally oriented academic communities and have strong cooperation with stakeholders.

An international perspective seems important in a critical approach. Although the centres in other countries are appointed in different contexts and adhering to different criteria, international comparisons shed light on local contexts and make it possible to learn from differences and establish robust interpretations of teaching excellence. If we should dare to highlight international indications of commonalities between the centres following traits are relevant:

- The centres have clear goals and common identity among all partners which are anchored in a strong leadership.
- The centres are learning communities involving and engaging partners in general and students in particular. This correspond well with Skelton's (2011) critical model of excellence which emphasis participatory dialogue and engagement of all partners. Graham Gibbs (2010) also underlined that student engagement is a good indicator of excellence. Several of the centres also highlighted the relational aspect with students and student-centred approaches, more closely associated with the psychologised understanding.
- The close interaction with stakeholders and industry and focus on relevance and work-based learning can be seen as traits from the performative model.
- Build on strong academic foundation and knowledge-base and excellence in research which is associated with the traditional view on excellence. However, it is how research informs and permeates teaching and student-active and centred learning experiences that are highlighted more in parallel with the critical and psychologised models.
- Have advanced quality assurance systems and constantly evaluate teaching and learning.

We hence see traits of all four ideal-models, although less of the traditional. Emphasis is put on disciplinary knowledge and the teachers as subject experts, however, it is the critical and psychologised model that seems to be dominant. Discussions on higher education and purpose of it, for instance to form general intellectual abilities, the production of manpower, enhancement of individuals characters or developing competences to participate in a society, will form and inform how we discuss and conceptualise excellence in education. We have seen in the Norwegian centres of excellence signs of all such conceptualisations. Further analysis and discussions could make the academic communities and policy actors more aware of



conceptions and implications for views on learning and teaching and excellence.

We should be aware that these findings are majorly based on the assessment documents and feedback given to the applicants. The assessment panels have however not written conclusive reports but highlighted some key strengths and weaknesses. These findings might nevertheless point out some strategies to implement in order to enhance educational quality. In a complex institutional and organisational landscape of higher education, teaching excellence is multifaceted. Developing innovative and excellent education is a complex multidimensional and multi-level task.

Previous studies have shown that incentives change the way we think about quality. Concepts and discourses around quality are debated, leading to an increase in knowledge and consciousness (e.g. Carlsten & Aamodt 2013; Vicky & Gunn 2013; Shephard et al. 2011). It will therefore be interesting to see if and how the SFU-program changes the way quality is documented, discussed and developed. The differences between the SFUs and equivalent international programs have not been studied in this paper. How to learn more from international experiences and study differences in context and conceptualisations could be further investigated. The overarching question for this paper has been how we best can support enhancement and educational excellence in higher education. Centres of excellence are one answer to this multi-level task.

¹ It is worth noting that many of the evaluations were carried out in the finishing stages of the programs, after 3-5 years, i.e quite early. Making changes in education and cultures in higher education institutions takes time. An evaluation at a later point in time could have shown other results, and possibly even more positive results. For the Finnish centres the finances were allocated to the institutions and not necessarily to the unit being awarded the centre of excellence.

² Sources for this entire chapter are: Gunnarson et. al 2008; HEFCE 2009; Hiltunen 2009; Högskoleverket 2008a, b; Högskoleverket 2009; NOKUT2013a; NOKUT2013b; Raaheim and Karjalainen 2012; Saunders et al. 2008.

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