

Measures of Quality: More than ‘good enough’?

By Jon Haakstad

Introduction:

Now it is all about one thing: Quality! It is important for us to have world class universities; we must be able to compete internationally. There are too many institutions with poor quality, with too low ambitions.

Norwegian Research and Education Minister T. R. Isaksen (11 Nov. 2013)

Traditionally, ‘quality’ is thought of as an extendable phenomenon, manifesting itself on a continuum that stretches from ‘weak’, through ‘acceptable’ and shades of ‘good’, to ‘excellent’ – relative to other phenomena of the same category. In Europe, the quality of higher education has been the object of organized assurance and scrutiny for many years. Does this mean that we now have a firm grasp on the quality status of our national HE sectors, when quality is seen as more than compliance with certain standards and the achievement of certain performance goals? Do we have the reference and the methodology that enable us to know when a particular programme or institution has ‘world class’ or ‘high international quality’? Does the Minister *know*, or is he assuming?

NOKUT’s source project

Such questions prompted NOKUT¹ to launch a project to investigate available sources of information about the general level, and the pattern of variations, of quality in Norwegian higher education. What knowledge about quality do these sources allow us to have? Instead of attempting to trace evidence of quality in a ‘rounded’ or ‘full’ sense, we looked at a number of single features/factors separately. Some of these are indirect (‘influence factors’), while others are aspects of educational quality. Moreover, our ambition was to approach quality as something intrinsically connected with the learning process. Accordingly, in addition to the most obvious input/resource and result factors, the didactic dimensions of curriculum, learning situation, learning methods and teaching were given attention.

The search for information naturally concentrated on what we might call ‘internal’ sources: nationally registered performance data and information flowing from NOKUT’s own quality

¹ The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education. The project was carried out in the second half of 2013. This paper builds on results from the project, without formally representing NOKUT’s views. A ‘working report’ from the project in Norwegian remains unpublished but is part of the material that now informs an ongoing process of revising quality assurance methodology and agency strategy for the coming years. This paper, like the project, refers to Norway only, but the assumption is that what is true for Norway may be relevant for other countries too.

assurance, evaluation and analysis activities. But a wide search was also made for other – national and international – sources that might contribute with relevant information. In a matrix with the two dimensions ‘information source’ and ‘quality aspect/factor’ a rather detailed picture of our state of knowledge could emerge: for each aspect it was assessed what each of the sources can currently tell about quality, beyond ‘good enough’.

An overview of the sources

‘External’ sources

A broad picture of the HE sector is given in the Ministry’s annual *Status Report for Higher Education*², mainly based on key performance indicators collected from the national database. The 2014 edition gives many indications of the sector’s general good health, but also reminders of weaker features, among these the problem of low credit output and completion rates. When qualitative judgements appear, like the statement that many small institutions have problems with quality, these are often of a general nature and less rigorously supported by evidence.

Prominent among international sources are OECD’s publications, like *Education at a Glance*, reports from the AHELO project and country thematic reviews. The latest thematic review for Norway³, like the Norwegian status report, comments on features of policy, structure and performance, based on the same statistical information. But it also takes in information from meetings with key players and groups of stakeholders, as well as from other qualitative studies⁴. According to the report, there seems to be only small variations in quality among the institutions and relevance for occupational life is on the whole very good. The report does not really assess the quality of Norwegian higher education against an international reference in any deeper sense. Anyway, it is nine years old now and stands rather alone as a source of this type.

Rankings lists, another possible source, do make comparisons and distinctions. Most international rankings, however, concern only the very few institutions whose score allows them to appear in the tables and tend to be heavily biased towards the hard sciences and research. The new European U-Multirank project – still in a stage of development – seems more promising, as it applies a broader spectrum of indicators and quality categories; it may therefore become a more useful tool for a wider range of institutions⁵. There is so far no national ranking project in Norway with a degree of sophistication that would make it qualify as a source in our study.

The project group also looked at other research literature. A problem here is the lack of good meta-analyses⁶, which may anyway prove difficult to produce, given the disparate nature of this source. Selective reading and a broad scan of titles demonstrated how research articles often address narrow topics and/or is written from a specific ‘position’ in a wider discourse. This of course makes them

² The Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research (www.regjeringen.no/kd)

³ OECD: *Country Background Report for Norway; Thematic Review of Tertiary Education (2005)*

⁴ In particular: Gornitzka, Å.: *Quality in Norwegian Higher Education in an International Perspective (2003)*, NIFU Report Series 25/2003 (Title translated from Norwegian)

⁵ www.multirank.org. (The launch of the project came too late (May 2014) for the present study to analyze its results in a national perspective.)

⁶ Such analysis was beyond the scope and resources of this project. The Ministry has assigned this function to the Norwegian Research Council but work is still in a very early phase.

difficult integrate into more aggregated analyses. Reports from research institutes could be more useful, but in this category we saw a reluctance to approach the theme of educational quality as such. For instance, of 100 reports issued by NIFU⁷ in 2012 and 2013, two reports on ICT in higher education and one on PhD education are the closest one gets; the bulk of reports have a socio-economic or sociological angle (e.g. recruitment, candidates' job paths; education and workplace mobility, career paths in HE, entrepreneurship), or they relate to institutional strategy and governance.

Finally, there are the institutions themselves, where quality-related information is collected on an annual basis through internal quality assurance systems and other evaluations. But in a context of institutional competition and image-building it is perhaps only to be expected that public reporting of results from local quality work is quite modest.

'Internal' sources

The 'official' national instruments for monitoring higher education are the national Database for Higher Education⁸ and the national quality assurance agency (NOKUT). The database has reached a high level of sophistication and the recent development of a NOKUT Portal⁹ makes it possible to find and compare information on more than 30 indicators for most programmes in the sector. Much information has also been accumulated through the eleven years of NOKUT's existence, including the national evaluations of educational programmes for certain professions (nursing, teaching and engineering), carried out between 2003 and 2010¹⁰. Still, the bulk of NOKUT's activities have been quality *assurance* procedures (accreditations and audits), where the reports tend to be rather streamlined towards the yes-no decision concerning accreditation or recognition. 'Excess information' is typically not reported, nor systematically registered, categorised and processed for further analysis, and thus mostly 'gets lost'.

So far, most accreditation procedures have been of the *ex-ante* type, and can say little beyond 'capacity for quality'. The agency is here restricted by national legislation that binds up resources to initial accreditation. Changes in regulations and strategy, though, will now make it possible to channel more resources into accreditation checks of existing provision. These might produce quality assessments in greater depth if they are structured also with this purpose in mind.

The cyclical 'hub' of the Norwegian system of quality assurance is the audit, or 'evaluations of the institutions' internal quality assurance systems'. Their focus is on quality work and system quality, which is also reflected in the reports. Assuming that there is a causal connection between good quality work and good quality, audits can give assurance that Norwegian higher education has 'adequate' quality – but little more. In sum, Norwegian external quality assurance, although it may perform its *assurance* work well, does not today have a design and methodologies that make it a good information source for more sophisticated assessments of quality.¹¹ A third 'weakness', if

⁷ NIFU (The Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and Education) is the main provider of research related to higher education in Norway.

⁸ The database is organised under the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (www.nsd.uib.no).

⁹ www.nsd.uib.no/nokutportal Available via NOKUT's website.

¹⁰ English summaries of these evaluations are available at www.nokut.no/publikasjoner

¹¹ If these statements may seem like harsh judgments on NOKUT's current practice, it must be emphasised that quality *assurance* after all is the agency's main task, but also that these 'weaknesses' are recognized and currently addressed in a strategy process that will transform QA practices.

international comparison is the aim, may be that all our national sources of information are on the whole rather parochial, with assessments ‘biting their own tail’ in a national context¹².

Since 2010 an output of analytical reports and articles is also emerging from NOKUT’s own analysis department. These are analyses of information contained in various QA and evaluation reports, or they are the results of fresh studies conducted by NOKUT. Combined with a comprehensive National Student Survey¹³ and more sophisticated data at programme level in the national database (The NOKUT Portal), this activity has given interesting *indications* of systematic patterns of quality.

Single quality factors: the present status of knowledge

The students as ‘input factor’

It takes two to tango: successful education depends as much on the learner as on the teacher. The students must therefore be included among the ‘input factors’ that contribute towards quality. Two categories of information are central: the students’ entrance qualifications and their work effort. For both of these there are good sources of information. Initial admission to higher education is coordinated by a national agency, which makes information available about admission profiles, for individual programmes and statistically for larger domains.

The students’ work effort has formerly been investigated by the OECD in 1995 and in several other projects, most recently through the new National Student Survey. The Survey confirms earlier assumptions of low averages in terms of weekly hours spent on study work, but also of vast differences between different paths of study. These findings are currently creating much debate.

Entrance qualifications will vary between disciplines and over time but their average is determined by two ‘outside’ factors: the qualifications that a years’ cohort carries with it from secondary school and the number of students that are admitted into higher education. Information about students’ work effort, entrance qualification and dropout rates has led to debate about the possibility of falling standards and some have even questioned the ‘truth’ that the higher the percentage of young people who enter higher education is, the better.¹⁴ But the debate about ‘student quality’ seems more driven by interest (student organisations see this differently from many academics) and assumptions than by factual information, as long as doubts exist concerning the ‘real’ value of grades from secondary education. Statistical information tells us that there are big variations, but not if entrance threshold admits too many inadequately prepared students, or where Norwegian students generally ‘stand’ in an international comparison.

¹² Audits and accreditations of institutions and PhD programmes require ‘at least one expert with a relevant engagement at a foreign institution’. For language reasons, this usually means one panel member from another Nordic country.

¹³ <http://www.studiebarometeret.no>

¹⁴ Worries about low intake levels are expressed by a majority of teachers in *The Scientific Employees’ Educational Quality Barometer 2010* (NOKUT Report 3/2010), *NOKUT’s Higher Education Quality Barometer* (NOKUT Report 2/2011), *Perceptions of Quality in Higher Education* (NOKUT Report 5/2012) and most recently in Aamodt, P. O. & al.: *Quality in Higher Education: some Empirical Examples; Results from a Survey among academic employees* (NIFU Report Series 6/2014)

Volume of input in teaching

Quantity is also a quality: educational programmes must have a reasonable volume of teaching/learning engagements between students and teachers. Precise information is available about resource input into Norwegian higher education institutions in terms of budget allocations and other sources of income. We also have precise information about the institutions' investment in the crucial factor of academic staff, but national statistics cannot yet tell us how the use of this resource is distributed between research and educational activity respectively. We do not have official registrations of teaching input per programme, and consequently no national figures or calculations of average input per programme type, or how this input may vary throughout the sector.

Discussions about resource input into Norwegian higher education are confounded by a paradox: while total investment in HEIs is high by European standards, complaints are rife about inadequate resources for *both* research and teaching. Several NOKUT studies¹⁵ show that professors consistently express the view that teaching and feedback density ought to be increased, while simultaneously stressing that too little time for research is the problem they are most concerned and frustrated about. This tells us that teaching remains 'the additional burden' in academic work. So what is true then: Are there simply too few academic staff? Are they overburdened with administrative chores? Are the incentive systems counter-productive? Is academic work inefficiently organised, with weak priorities? Or is it just 'plain complaining'? These questions would be better answered if we had reliable information about the input of teacher hours at programme level and statistics on the institutions' total investment in the volume of teaching.

Competence input in teaching

Teaching volume is one thing; its academic competence levels another. The hallmark of higher education is its supposed quality of being R&D-based and we have quite precise information about the competence levels of staff and the R&D activity of institutions and discipline units. What we know less about is how R&D competence is utilised in teaching activities. In programme accreditations stock is always taken of the discipline community's research and competence profile, with fixed minimum standards for percentages of staff at doctor and professor levels. But we also know from other evaluations and studies that competence levels as accounted for in accreditations often deviate considerably from the profiles we see among those who are actually teaching the programme. Just as we do not know the precise teacher input in programmes, we do not know the competence profile of this input either.

In spite of rapidly growing numbers of doctoral candidates, our material indicates that challenges still exist in the area of academic competence. One of the most frequent recommendations from accreditation panels has been to strengthen this factor, also in cases where the minimum standards are met¹⁶. In any case, better knowledge of how R&D is linked to teaching would require more targeted evaluations or studies at the programme level. The current QA system evaluations, the only mechanism that spans the whole sector, are not calibrated to produce information at this level of detail. In reports from 17 evaluations conducted in 2009/-11 none of the 61 'challenges in quality work' mentioned by the institutions, and none of the 91 recommendations given by the expert panels, refer to academic competence. Another study from 2009 shows that the institutions' annual

¹⁵ e.g. *Perceptions of Quality in Higher Education* (NOKUT Report 5/2012, op. cit.)

¹⁶ NOKUT: *Recommendations from Expert Panels* (NOKUT Report 3/2011)

internal quality reports largely ignore this aspect too, as no instances were found of quality challenges being connected with academic competence in the 56 reports that were studied.¹⁷

The learning environment

Physical infrastructure, administrative services and social/academic learning environment are all factors that are quite well covered in NOKUT's system evaluations, as well as in accreditation processes, so the level of information concerning this aspect is therefore reasonably good. The results are also on the whole very positive, which is confirmed by the students' expressions of satisfaction in the National Student Survey. There are very few indications that the learning environment presents barriers of any significance to the quality and effectiveness of studies.

Concerning the availability of ICT infrastructure, it is interesting to note that this is generally well provided for by the institutions, but less utilised by academic staff than what was planned. This also comes through in a study of flexible provision,¹⁸ where it was found that the utilisation of electronic information channels was much lower than the ICT infrastructure would allow, and that instead there was much reliance on ordinary campus teaching, only organised in periodic clusters.

Programme quality: Aims and plans; curriculum and cohesion

Programme quality has a strong 'local' and discipline ownership. Of course, evaluative mechanisms are operative: external QA processes generally show the institutions as having robust procedures for setting up new programmes; in addition there is the normative influence of the Qualifications Framework, national discipline councils, external examiners and informal network contacts, domestic or international. Also, some of the big programmes for professions have national curriculum framework plans, while others must comply with national authorisation requirements.

A programme's curriculum is what first and foremost determines its 'academic level' and this aspect is therefore given much attention in both initial and revising accreditation procedures, with frequent recommendations and many cases of non-recognition. However, NOKUT's battery of mechanisms can only give scattered impressions of status throughout the sector. In the present system, objects of accreditation are few and unrepresentative, while the audits, although they frequently address the quality *assurance* of curricula, with altogether 18 recommendations on this theme in 17 investigated reports¹⁹, have neither the capacity nor the competence to make informed judgments about the academic quality of individual programmes. The issue of programme quality therefore remains an area with little transparency, where quality is largely 'assumed' as long as the providing community's formal qualifications are in place. Neither NOKUT nor any other agent conducts broader, discipline-wide studies of the content and organisation of educational programmes. Probably, the potentially richest source of information about this aspect would be the programme evaluations that are now frequently conducted by the institutions themselves, if these could only become more openly available for external analysis.

Results from other qualitative studies that add information to this picture can only have status of hypotheses, as most of them were conducted on a small scale.²⁰ We have indications that many programmes, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, have weaknesses in thematic

¹⁷ NOKUT: *On Reporting Quality* (NOKUT Report 3/2009)

¹⁸ NOKUT: *Quality Challenges in Flexible Professional Education* (NOKUT Report 3/2013)

¹⁹ *The 17 first audits in NOKUT's second cycle, 2009 – 11* (Unpublished NOKUT report)

²⁰ In particular *Perceptions of Quality* (op. cit.)

coherence and 'total design', but we also learn from surveys that students and teachers are generally satisfied with the content and level of programmes.

Relevance may be regarded as a sub-category of programme quality. The aspect is given increased attention today, following expectations from employers that occupational relevance should be further enhanced. Anyway, more and more institutions now operate their own candidate surveys, adding information to NIFU's national surveys that have been conducted regularly since 1972. We therefore have fairly detailed knowledge of the relationship between educational programmes and career patterns. But relevance is in any case no simple dimension and cannot be reduced to the needs of industry at a certain point in time.

An interesting aspect of programme quality is the attention paid to generic skills and competences, as recently set out in the Qualification Frameworks. It is of course too early to assess how well these aspects are now integrated in HE programmes, but the recently published study of results from the close monitoring of MA programmes in the field of humanities shows that only 5 out of 60 programmes had yet managed to develop satisfactory learning outcome descriptions²¹.

Process quality: Teaching and learning processes, counselling and student feedback

The recent shift of attention from input factors to learning outcomes would logically imply that quality assessments and assurance took a didactic turn, focusing more on learning efficiency and the teaching/learning situation than what has hitherto been usual. Aspects of process quality are often discussed in research articles, where information, theories and points of view are presented, analysed and criticised²². Typically, this literature is more theoretical than specific and presents a fragmented and complex picture. Like programme quality, or perhaps to an even greater extent, this aspect still belongs to a multitude of different, half-'privatised' teaching and learning situations,²³ which restricts the view from outside and of course also makes wider analysis problematic. The impression is that it is difficult to monitor even for the institutions themselves. Nor are there any agreed standards that can act as reference for graded assessments, let alone absolute requirements concerning the teaching staff's didactic competence.

For these reasons, process quality receives little illumination through external quality assurance processes, or indeed through any other evaluative studies. In revisions of accreditation and in programme evaluations, where a close-up view of the individual programme is provided, expert panels tread carefully around questions of process quality, with very few exceptions. Obviously, we are lacking the means, the methods and the motivation to approach this important aspect of quality. As meta-evaluations, the audits have to rely on documented evidence from the institutions' internal QA systems and although relevant information may well exist deep down in these systems, mainly provided by the students' course evaluations, it seems largely to remain unprocessed and unanalysed by the institutions. NOKUT's study in 2009 of 56 annual 'quality reports' from institutions, which are basic documentation in the audits, showed no references at all to

²¹ www.nokut.no/publications

²² Several national journals, e.g. *UNIPED*, published by the Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions, have educational quality as their main target area.

²³ Aamodt & al. (op. cit.): 'Teaching is to a large extent seen as a private matter, (.....) programme leaders give little direction and feedback ...(and) the academic employees express that the (internal) quality assurance systems give little contribution to quality'.

teaching/learning processes, and no instances of differentiation between stronger/weaker provision or disciplines.²⁴

Certain indications are given by other sources, e.g. surveys/interviews among teachers and students. These show the two groups as having somewhat diverging perceptions of teaching quality, with the students expressing most dissatisfaction with feedback from teachers. On the whole, however, there seems to be little inclination for institutions, teachers or students to problematise process quality in broader and more general terms, with institutional involvement only in rare cases of serious student complaints. By and large, surveys show teachers and students basically in positive agreement about the use of (mainly traditional!) teaching and learning methods and process quality seems to be accepted for what it is, by teachers and students alike. In terms of making distinctions, much is then left to anecdote, rumour and reputation.

Outcome quality

The usual way of assessing 'outcome' on a large scale is to process collectively, for single programmes or larger groups, the formal results that students achieve individually. Outcome may then be expressed for instance in terms of grade profiles, dropout percentages, failure percentages, average completion time or credit production. For all these *formal* results we have solid statistics. But there is some distance to bridge from 'results' to 'quality of outcome'. For one thing, formal results are hardly exact measurements of the students' learning outcomes. Important aspects are likely to be left out of the assessments and we know from several studies that there may be little consistency in the use of the grading scale. In NOKUT's evaluation of teacher education, for instance, a neutral re-assessment in four different subjects at a number of institutions showed systematic differences in grading practice between *both* subjects and institutions²⁵. These findings have recently been confirmed in another study conducted for the Ministry by the Centre for Economic Research at NTNU.²⁶ And anyway, learning outcome – 'formal' or 'real' – cannot be seen as just a reflection of programme quality. A student group's learning and results are also influenced by the composition of the group in terms of individual talent, motivation and previous learning.

In spite of these limitations, formal results will always be a strong indicator of quality, in addition to serving as an important dimension for judging an institution's achievement of its targets. For this factor Norway, like most other countries, has precise and detailed information in its National Database for Statistics on Higher Education, also further arranged at single programme level in the NOKUT Portal²⁷. Handled with care, these data can be of use in comparisons of quality between individual programmes in a given discipline. When applied across discipline – or of course national – borders, however, results in the form of grade profiles become rather useless under the combined influence of cultural differences and the Gaussian curve of distribution. Other result parameters, like average completion time and annual credit production, yield more 'absolute' information and low efficiency has in fact caused worries in Norway in recent years. But the connection between productivity and educational quality is far from obvious, either. Weak results may even indicate that standards have in fact been upheld while the average intake quality has fallen. We also know that

²⁴ NOKUT: *On Reporting Quality* (NOKUT Report 3/2009). Admittedly, the situation may have changed in the four years since the study was made, but random checks in recent reports confirm these findings.

²⁵ NOKUT: *Evaluation of General Teacher Education in Norway 2006; Main Report*, pp. 31 – 37 (Oslo, 2006)

²⁶ www.regjeringen.no/kd/aktuelle-analyser

²⁷ <http://www.nokut.no/no/Fakta/Databaser-og-oversikter/NOKUT-portalen/>

many students plan their lives and studies differently today than what was formerly the case, with parallel sequences of work and study that give an *intended* effect of lower efficiency. On the whole, the result-quality relationship is fraught with problems and formal results can tell us next to nothing about the level and quality of Norwegian higher education as compared with other countries.

Concluding reflections

To sum up: When sector-wide assessments of quality in Norwegian higher education are attempted, documented information from over a decade of external quality assurance turns out to have limited value. Nor do we have other national or international studies that address the topic in depth and breadth, so by and large, the picture we get is based on registered input and performance data, with the indirect, 'outward' and production-oriented approach to educational quality that this entails. The data tell us little about the general academic level, the quality of the students' learning processes, or what is good and less good in comparison with higher education in other countries. Other studies that we have are too 'thin' and scattered to enable us to build comprehensive and nuanced quality images of the sector from them. Is the situation similar in many other countries as well?

If this description is accepted as realistic and representative, how should we relate to it? It may seem disappointing that the considerable resources that go into 'quality monitoring' can tell us so little about quality in a graded or 'extendable' sense. After all, when politicians and sector representatives discuss the issue it is quality in this sense they have in mind, making claims about quality – positive or negative – that are hardly borne out by evidence. Maybe we simply have to admit that the quality of teaching and learning is too diverse, too complicated and too evasive to lend itself to sector-wide (let alone international) comparative analysis without forbidding costs (e.g. like AHELO). Is it then suitable task for quality assurance? In fact, a possible conclusion might be to *roll back* external quality assurance, making it focus narrowly on its gate-keeping role, while the tasks of recording and understanding quality in a deeper sense are best left to performance indicators, to research and to the institutions' own designs. This might find support among those who argue that external quality assurance is mainly a ritual burden, with conspicuous lack of enthusiasm shown by large sections of the academic community, with weak *evidence* of enhancement impact, and without having developed its 'state of the art' noticeably since the early beginnings. (Admittedly, the recent movement towards risk-based quality assurance does represent a methodological innovation, while at the same time underlining the search for simpler, more economical, more indicator-based approaches.)

However, the aims of the Bologna process, echoed by agencies, ministries and institutional leaders, signal ambitions that go further than this. All talk about quality work, quality culture and continuous improvement implies that we ought to have deep knowledge about quality, not least as a basis for improvement efforts. Is it at all feasible? How can external quality assurance really contribute? The experience from Norway indicates that audit-like methods, for instance, cannot produce the kind of assessments that we are looking for here. While audit may do *its* (quality *assurance*) job satisfactorily, other approaches must come to assistance if the object is to assess quality in any depth across a whole national sector, seriously taking in the aspects of academic level, didactic quality and learning outcome. This is probably best done when divided up into manageable entities through some kind of *thematic evaluations*, where status and variation of quality in *single aspects* are assessed, one by one, in reasonably large samples of programmes across the sector. This will give

focused assessments, with opportunities also for addressing academic and process quality in some depth. Quality is more easily identified in its various aspects than in a 'round' sense, and it is the single aspects that you address in order to make improvements.

Still, this will not help us find out if, or to what extent, our national higher education has 'high international quality'. The only way to make international comparisons is to apply international reference! So just like there is now an increased tendency to provide cross-border joint programmes we also notice beginning efforts to internationalise quality assurance and evaluations. This is a tendency that should be enforced, both through joint evaluation projects and through wider use of foreign experts, in thematic-type evaluations and regular quality assurance processes alike.

References

A list of references for this paper could be 'indefinitely long', as the very discussion concerns all sorts of sources, including a very large number of NOKUT's quality assurance, evaluation and analysis reports. For all NOKUT and national database sources a portal reference is:

- NOKUT: www.nokut.no/NOKUTs_publicasjoner (Individual references are given in notes to the text.)

The most important external references are:

- OECD: www.oecd.org/edu
 - AHELO: *Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes; Feasibility Study Report* (2013)
 - *Education at a Glance 2013: OECD Indicators*
 - *Country Background Report for Norway; Thematic Review of Tertiary Education* (2005)
- Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research: www.regjeringen.no/kd
 - *Status Report on the Quality Reform, 2007*
 - *Status Report on Higher Education 2013*
 - *Evidence on Dropout Phenomena at Universities (2013)*
 - *Aktuelle analyser: 'Stor variasjon i karaktersetting'* ('Big variations in the use of the grading scale'), 2013
- NIFU (The Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and Education): www.nifu.no
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- SIU (Norwegian Centre for International Cooperation in Education): www.siu.no

- *Internationalisation in Norwegian Universities and University Colleges* (SIU-Report 2/2013)
- *International Profile? Internationalisation Strategies in Norwegian Universities and University Colleges* (SIU-Report 3/2013)
- Mjøen, J. and Tjelta, M.: *Bruker høyskoler karakterskalaen ulikt* ('Is the grade scale applied inconsistently by colleges?'), Økonomisk Forum 6/2005
- AFI ((Norwegian) Work Research Institute): *Undersøkelse om tidsbruk blant vitenskapelig tilsatte I universitets- og høyskolesektoren* ('Use of time among academic staff in universities and university colleges'), Oslo, 2012

Measures of Quality: More than 'good enough'?

Abstract

To what extent is it possible today to make authoritative, graded assessments of educational quality? While acknowledging the slippery nature of the concept itself, an attempt was still made to map sources of quality-related information about Norwegian higher education, and to assess what this information can tell us.

The paper scrutinises relevant national and international sources and evaluates their information value for each of a number of quality aspects/factors. The 'short' answer is that existing sources are very far from adequate for such a purpose. In particular, the richest source, current external quality assurance activities, yield less than what might perhaps be expected. To what extent then are our views on quality dependent on rather loosely founded assumptions?

After a discussion of the realism of aiming for graded assessments in this area, some measures and methodologies are suggested that may at least shed more light on quality status, including quality variations within the sector, directed specifically at the students' learning outcomes.