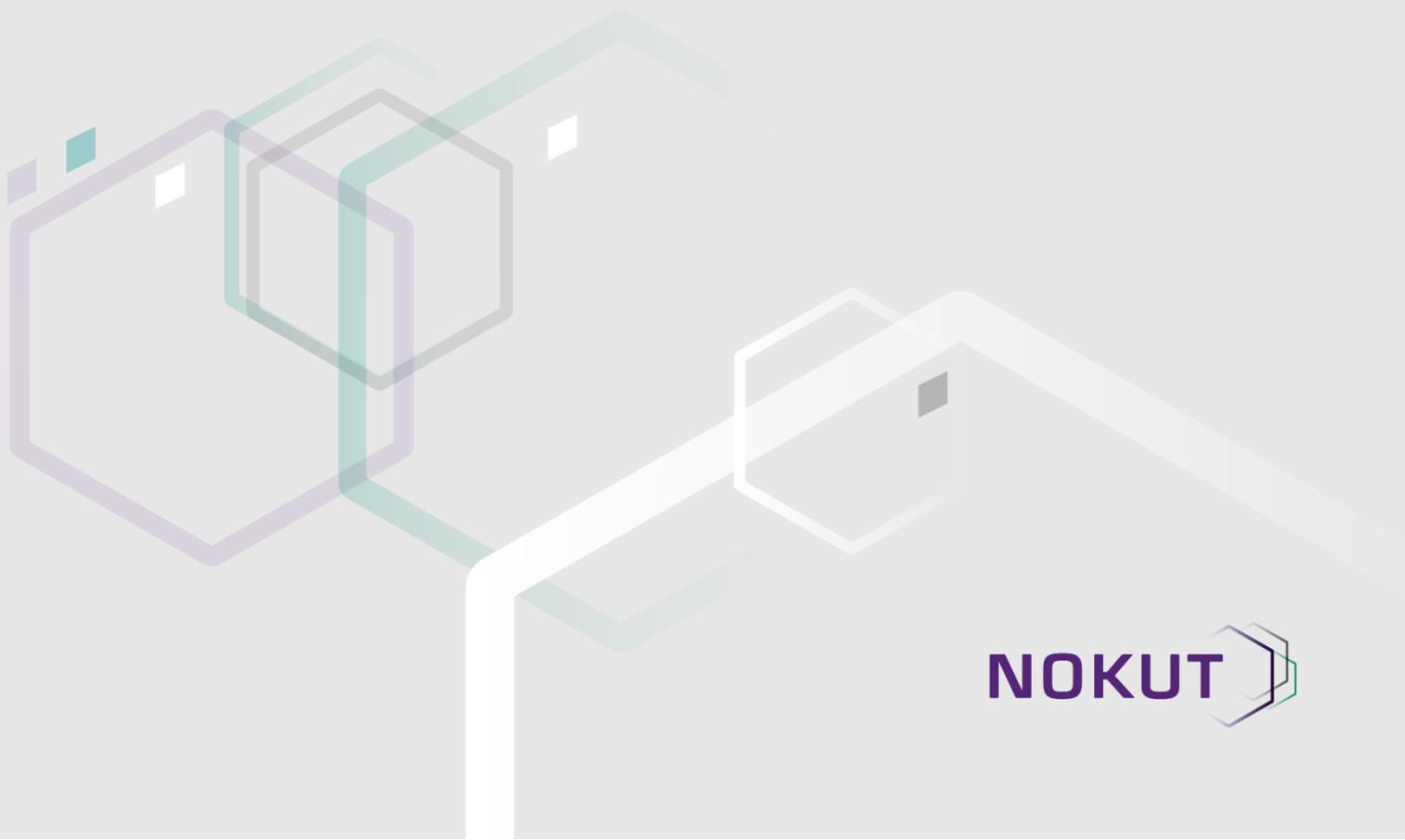


# Teaching in Higher Education: Consistency and change in context and role

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### **Short biography**

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## Abstract

How is the role and status of higher education teaching generally perceived in Norway today? This theme is reflected on in the Ministry's newly published White Paper on quality in higher education in Norway. A certain concern is expressed that teaching lingers 'in the shadows of research', that it is methodologically conservative, and that its status needs to be lifted.

The voice of teaching academics themselves tends to be less heard than those of political and institutional leaderships and students. This paper presents results from an in-depth interview study that explores how the opinions of the academic teachers compares with the governmental perspective and other 'myths' of conservatism and resilience to change.

## Introduction

How is the role and status of higher education teaching generally perceived in Norway today? This is one of the themes that are reflected on in the Ministry's newly published White Paper on quality in higher education in Norway. A certain concern is expressed that teaching lingers 'in the shadows of research' and that its status needs to be lifted (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). The Paper stresses the importance of the teaching mission in higher education in a world full of global challenges and expresses concern about educational quality and innovation at a time when student numbers are continually rising. A sharper focus on educational quality is called for.

The White Paper identifies a need for improvement in specific areas, particularly in educational management and discipline collegiality – or 'quality culture', pointing to the alleged fact that teaching and quality work around studies are often privatised and non-collegial, conservative and not quite up-to-date in a pedagogical sense. This argument is often repeated in the public debate about quality in higher education but is equally often met with opposition from academic staff and institutions<sup>1</sup>. This forms the background of our 'construct' of the typology of the 'resilient academic', which will be the object of our scrutiny in this paper.

The government is a major stakeholder in higher education. Institutional leaderships, researchers/teachers, students and society at large are other such stakeholders, whose voices are heard with varying strength in public debates. Arguably, the voice of teaching academics here tends to become less heard among the more vocal voices of political and institutional leaderships on the one hand and students (student surveys; students' course evaluations; student interest organisations) on the other. The teachers typically find themselves in a position where they are squeezed by demands from two sides: reform-minded politicians and quality-demanding students.

**(Margin note: The Teacher Survey, 2016)** On this background NOKUT<sup>2</sup> started to work with the idea of a national teacher survey, which was launched as a pilot scheme in 2016 (Amundsen, Damen et al. 2017)<sup>3</sup>. Several of the questions in this survey addressed the themes of educational quality and quality culture/collegiality in teaching. The survey was partly meant as a supplement to the already existing national student survey. The sample in the pilot included the following disciplines: political science, social economics, sociology, teacher education, engineering (BA), engineering (MA), humanities (not languages) and architecture. The questionnaire was sent to 6 468 academic employees at 25 different institutions, of which 2 561 (ca. 40 per cent) responded. Only those who reported that they had taught during the last two years (2 169) were included in the final sample. All active teachers in the sample were asked a number of questions (86) about different aspects of their programmes and their teaching. The findings here – 'the teachers' voice', as it were – seemed largely to contradict the views referred to above about the role and status of teaching<sup>4</sup> and this was in fact a main reason why the agency decided to conduct a qualitative follow-up study of higher education teachers' views about their own teaching practice.

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance: From Svein Stølen's blog, rector of the University of Oslo (24. Nov 2017): «It is also a myth that our academic staff give little priority to teaching. A self-enforcing image that many love to talk about and that I have argued strongly against for a long time». (In a commentary welcoming NOKUT's report: Amundsen et al., 2017)

<sup>2</sup> The Norwegian Agency for Quality in Education. More information on: [www.nokut.no](http://www.nokut.no)

<sup>3</sup> Continued as a full-scale survey including all teaching academics in Norway in 2017.

<sup>4</sup> To our knowledge, there are no other examples of similar teacher surveys on educational quality and therefore there are few studies available for comparison with our study.

**(Margin note: The qualitative follow-up study)** In the aftermath of several extensive reforms in Norwegian higher education during the last 20 years, our intention was to find out about the teachers' perceptions of these reforms and other contextual developments and to assess the actual impact of these on teaching practice. The focus of the study is on the theme of collegial cooperation and general engagement in teaching and programme enhancement work, with a special aim of testing the validity of the 'myth' that portrays higher education teaching as conservative, privatised and existing 'in the shadow of research'<sup>5</sup>. Our choice of this negative description/typology as a point of departure is not empirically researched but is based on our perception of the general ('meta level') discourse about higher education in Norway.

In our study (Amundsen, Haakstad 2017) we conducted in-depth interviews on these issues with a sample of 33 experienced academic teachers in discipline groups of 2 – 4 persons<sup>6</sup>. The semi-structured interviews included teachers from all the discipline groups that were represented in the national survey, took roughly 90 minutes to conduct, followed a predefined guide and were recorded on tape. We selected teachers with 15 – 20 years of experience, since we wanted their descriptions of and reflections on the changes that have taken place. Although the project is restricted to the Norwegian scene, we expect our findings to be relevant for other European countries as well.

This paper will present the main findings of the qualitative study. According to Roxå (2014), reform efforts in higher education are often influenced by many different stakeholders, who all strive in different directions, often based on knowledge derived from personal accounts, anecdote and appropriately constructed narratives that mirror 'position' agendas. It is therefore important to bear in mind that the results/conclusions in this paper represent one particular perspective: that of teaching staff in higher education.

## The myth of the 'resilient' academic

As stated above, a persistent myth about higher education teaching has been its resilience to change and its resistance to reforms and outside steering. According to K. Crawford (Crawford 2010), academics see their professional development as more depending on personal autonomy and discipline networks than on national and institutional policies. A proverbial saying has it that "I'd like to see the reform that will change the way I teach." We thought the myth could be split up into four assumptions:

- *The anti-reform teacher:* Efforts to modernise higher education through structural reforms are often seen to threaten academic freedom and the autonomy of the discipline communities.
- *The unwilling teacher:* Research, not teaching, defines status, promotion and career. You are 'allowed' time and resources to do research; you are 'obliged' to teach. Consequently, teaching lives in the shadow of research and real engagement in teaching is lacking.
- *The conservative teacher:* Discipline knowledge is what matters. Teaching follows 'naturally' from this well of knowledge. Therefore, traditional methods based on knowledge transfer still dominate, while didactic awareness is less developed.

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<sup>5</sup> A similar, if small-scale, project by NOKUT in 2012 had indicated that HE cultures are largely conservative in terms of didactic orientation (Haakstad and Nesje, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> A full report from the project was published by NOKUT (in Norwegian) in the autumn of 2017.

- *The lonely teacher*: A higher education teacher is a lonely king in his own teaching realm. The assumption is that there is little cooperation with other teachers and little insight from the outside into the teaching process. Assessment of teaching quality mainly happens by anecdote and reputation.

Do these myths really describe typical teaching practice in higher education today? Or perhaps they are just that: myths that need to be contradicted, as the responses in the Teacher Survey (Amundsen, Damen et al 2017) seem to indicate. According to the Ministry of Education's recent White Paper (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017) on quality in higher education, however, challenges still do exist that can be related to these 'myths':

"The status of teaching must be raised. ( ... ) There are many indications that structures and culture at the institutions are more geared towards research than teaching. Feedback that the Ministry has received to the ongoing work with this White Paper confirms this" (p70).

"There are many indications that teaching and the development of educational programmes has often been too privatised, and that there has been too little collective engagement invested in the coherence of study programmes. Content as well as teaching and assessment methods in the programmes have too often been left to single course teachers, while the development of learning outcome descriptions has sometimes been an administrative task" (p. 81). (Our translations)

## The challenges of reforms and a changing context

**(margin notes: A period of big reforms)** Over the last two decades, the context of higher education teaching has changed radically, ostensibly with improvement as an aim. Key words are increased recruitment, European harmonisation and steering reforms inspired by New Public Management. Entrance into higher education has continued to rise, now amounting to around 40 per cent of age cohorts. With the Bologna process, the degree structure, the grading system and the international transfer of qualifications have been streamlined and modified. Structural reforms (mergers) have changed the institutional landscape considerably. Other reforms have given institutions more academic autonomy, while at the same time exposing them to controls through a national system of quality assurance, new forms of reporting and steering/incentives based on formal ('production') outcomes. As a result, educational provision, and the way it is organised into courses and programmes, has been extensively modified. How do the academics assess the impact and merits of these reforms? Have they led to better quality? Moreover, how has the alleged 'resilience' of academics fared under the pressure of externally driven change?

In Norway, programmes at the Bachelor degree level directed at certain professions, e.g. teaching, engineering, nursing and other health professions, make up about one half of the higher education sector<sup>7</sup>. Traditionally, they have mostly been provided by the university colleges and are all programmes that must find their form inside a framework of national curriculum guidelines. These **(margin note: profession studies)** types of programmes, and teacher training in particular, have received more than their fair share of attention from the Government after 2000.<sup>8</sup> They have been the

<sup>7</sup> This proportion is changing now, as all teacher education programmes for primary and secondary education have been raised to the master degree level as from 2016 and will now take 5 years.

<sup>8</sup> It seems a reasonable observation to make that the university colleges have enjoyed less trust than the universities from the authorities in questions of quality and competence. And as for teacher training, this provision has always been particularly high on the political agenda. (The present mergers in the sector are now integrating most former colleges into universities.)

objects of comprehensive evaluations and other investigative projects and have had to adapt to several reforms.

The attitude of our informants from these programmes was mildly critical: although individual reform steps as such might be seen as reasonable, the frequent exposure to interventions and enforced change was not. Many informants expressed a tiredness with all these outside interventions and a growing feeling of public distrust. Nor did they see that their programmes had really improved much in content or in teaching methodologies as a result of the reform efforts, at least not when seen against the background of cost in time and resources.

**(margin note: discipline studies)** For nearly all other educational types, or ‘discipline’ programmes, the Bologna process and its national corollary, the Quality Reform<sup>9</sup>, meant a total shake-up of the degree structure. In addition to aligning the degree system with the Bologna pattern, it was an important ambition to make qualifications better attuned to working life demands and better serviced for the students through tighter guidance and follow-up. Dropout rates were expected to improve and more students would complete their education inside the time norm. However, neither the statistics nor the national evaluation of the Quality Reform (Michelsen 2007) bear witness to much success on these scores.

This assessment is also clearly expressed by our informants: Completion rates have not improved significantly and although the informants agreed that more written work for students has meant an overall increase in follow-up (and in teacher workload), it was also their impression that the intended increase in individual academic counselling has not occurred. According to the National Student Survey (Damen 2016), students still rate academic counselling as one of the weakest aspects of their programmes, although the teachers we interviewed would claim that students largely fail to make use of the counselling opportunities that are in fact available.

When the degree structure changed, many disciplines in the universities, most strikingly in the humanities, lost their traditional form and position in the provision landscape. Many of these programmes had so far mainly been designed with the purpose of educating teachers for upper secondary schools. With the reform, our informants observed, the pattern of disciplines and programmes at the Bachelor level became more atomised and specialised. Discipline communities had to carve out new ‘identities’ in the way they presented themselves to students. **(margin note: A particular challenge for the humanities)** According to some of our informants, this was at first a welcome change: with more specialisation, teaching could become more academically satisfying. But the new structure soon turned out to be problematic. The interviewees frequently admitted that their programmes now had weaknesses in coherence and working life relevance, which in turn led to problems related to student recruitment and sustainability. In this way, the structural changes seem to have strengthened the general ‘crisis’ that especially the humanities have experienced in later years. Although our informants would maintain that progress had gradually been made in programme design, they had difficulties in seeing how the reformed degree structure has led to candidates with competences that are more relevant than before. Rather, their responses echoed the debate that now rages whether the bachelor degree can in fact stand alone as a qualification (Haakstad and Kantardjiev 2015).

The Bologna process also included the adoption of a national Qualifications Framework. The reform demands that learning outcomes, rather than curriculum and content, must now define the aims of teaching programmes. Opinions differed quite sharply among our informants about the merits of this

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<sup>9</sup> A comprehensive reform of Norwegian higher education in 2002 that, among other things, harmonised the degree structure to the Bologna pattern and introduced formal quality assurance.

reform: Most informants seemed to agree that the reform had produced a welcome emphasis on generic skills and competences, but assessed other effects differently. **(margin note: Responses to the qualification framework and learning outcomes)** Those who taught in profession studies tended to express satisfaction, saying that the process of rewriting the study plans had sharpened their awareness of candidate competences. Among discipline teachers, on the other hand, the attitudes varied more: some were positive, others neutral/pragmatic, but the majority were negative. Some accepted the reform as ‘reasonable’, whereas others would reflect the views expressed by Hussey and Smith (2002) and Killen (2000): that “the idea of learning outcomes ... is profoundly mistaken” (Hussey and Smith), that “it emphasises minimum levels of achievement, and therefore, encourages mediocrity” (Killen). We often heard expression like ‘the emperor’s new clothes’ and “an obligatory exercise that we carried out for reasons of compliance”. Few pointed to any tangible effect on teaching practice and it therefore seems questionable if the reform really represents the paradigm shift that it is often made out to be.

The transition from ‘elite’ to ‘mass’ education is not the result of a single reform, but a general, international development that goes much further back than 20 years. This also applies to Norway. Trow (2005) has demonstrated how this transition has worked since the 1960’s in Europe. But even in a 15 – 20 years’ perspective most of our informants would describe how they had experienced changes in especially increased heterogeneity in their student groups. **(margin note: mass education and heterogeneity)** Not so much in talent and aptitude, perhaps, as in attitude and engagement. They would stress that “fresh students do not carry with them a reasonably broad knowledge base any more, things you can take for granted and build on”, as one informant said. Another formulated a common opinion: “Today’s students are more like pupils: they act like clients and they negotiate; they demand that we structure their work for them. And if they fail, they file a complaint.” On the other hand, many would stress how today’s students are more forthcoming and self-assured, and often more skilful. Overall, underperforming students were in fact not a big topic with our informants, although we heard claims that “general levels have fallen by a whole grade”, as one person put it.

## Change and impact: internal factors

If the effects of national reforms were often played down by our informants, much the same applies to the steering efforts of institutional management. The interviews provided little evidence that the policies of institutional leaderships have had a developmental influence on educational practice. Institutional management, our informants stressed, focuses on building strategic profiles and programme portfolios, and not on the practice of delivering educational programmes ‘on the ground’. Some would even go as far as to say, as one of our informants did, that “the leadership is only interested in research volumes and candidate production and follow these goals with an administrative logic”. **(margin note: institutional managements as agents for change?)** The teachers often expressed awareness of a certain ‘overarching’ educational policy at their institutions that aimed at making the institution attractive to students, e.g. that teaching is closely linked to research, or that the institution makes advanced use of ICT technology, or that interactive learning methods are actively promoted. But they were much less sure to what extent these broad goals and ideals were actually followed up.

Nor was leadership at the medium level, e.g. faculty or department leaders, seen to have much influence on the actual teaching and learning processes, although our informants saw their functions as very important for other reasons (see below). They would stress how so-called academic leadership easily becomes administrative rather than academic: keeping budgets, distributing tasks, administering timetables and acting as an arbiter in conflicts. Our informants saw academic leaders’ scope and

authority for making academic decisions as limited, squeezed as they are between the institutional leadership from above and the values connected with individual academic freedom and discipline group consensus from below.

This all points to a conclusion that partly supports the idea of the ‘resilient academic’: Our informants revealed a tendency to take a critical and defensive attitude towards the many reforms, while at the same time actively picking up certain reform ideas and including them in their professional practice (**margin note: Reform scepticism?**). Most typically, they would insist that few of the improvements that have been introduced in their teaching practice have come about as a result of national or institutional interventions. Rather, they tended to see as one of the effects of these interventions that power and influence has been shifted away from active teachers and researchers and on to institutional and political leaderships. These attitudes reflect a debate that has been running since the Bologna reforms were implemented: between those who welcome the reforms and see them as a necessary ‘push’ and efficiency factor, and others who see them as an attack by New Public Management/corporate cultures on academic autonomy (Karlsen, 2010 and Østrem, 2011)<sup>10</sup>.

The overall impression from our interviews is that national reforms are complied with in terms of structural arrangements and vocabulary, but that their potentially transformative effect is otherwise often absorbed and diluted through accommodation strategies and ‘going under the radar’. Institutional leaderships, on their side, seem to lack the power, knowledge or motivation to act as reformers in the educational field. Instead, the interviews brought out a rather unanimous view that in those cases where innovative practices had been introduced, the driving force behind the changes was typically the discipline community itself.

## The most effective factor for change: time resources?

There was however one contextual factor that the informants repeatedly mentioned as having affected their teaching: cuts in time resources<sup>11</sup>. Nearly all our informants expressed that they experience a more *stressful* work situation compared with 10 – 15 years ago: fewer lessons to cover the same ground as before, larger student groups and consequently less face-to-face contact with the students. To quote one informant: (**margin notes: Competing for time with research and administrative chores**) “More students, more feedback work, fewer teaching hours and more pressure to do research.” Many informants would also point at the increased demand for documentation and reporting. As one of them said: “ICT technology has changed our work a lot: it makes many operations easier but it has also created new challenges and demands. It is difficult to say that it has made our work any easier. Increased bureaucracy makes our day busier than before but this does not show in the time accounts.”

This harks back to Trow (2005, p. 51), who argues that many European countries have systematically underfinanced the transition to mass higher education, without compensating for this by means of a “coherent pedagogical basis for the initiative” (**margin note: Cuts in time resources**). On the one

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<sup>10</sup> This topic was highlighted in a debate in one of Norway’s national newspapers on the effects of the commercialisation of HEIs (Aftenposten, 5 January 2017), between a former Under-Secretary in the Ministry of Education and Research and a biology professor from the University of Oslo. Where the former asserted that higher education would ‘fall asleep’ if not prompted to change by external (governmentally initiated) reform pressures, the other stressed the very innovative and autonomous nature of academic communities themselves and that reforms mainly comes from inside the HEIs.

<sup>11</sup> This finding is also very clear in the Teacher surveys of 2016 and 2017. Time resources is one of the aspects that the teachers are most dissatisfied with.

hand, such cuts are pressing through certain money-saving changes in the offer to students<sup>12</sup>; on the other hand, less time resources contribute to a work overload that drains the teaching staff of energy and prevents them from being more proactive in reforming their didactic practice. This agrees with Stensaker's findings that increased bureaucratic and entrepreneurial demands contribute to create a work overload that threatens professional quality (Stensaker 2006). It also agrees with what Tight found for the UK (Tight 2010) and it echoes the findings in the Norwegian Teacher Survey (Amundsen, Damen et al. 2017), where the majority of respondents pointed at increased time resources as the single factor that would do most to improve educational quality. The experience of meagre time resources for teaching may also help explain a seeming 'paradox' in the Teacher Survey: while a majority of the respondents valued interactive teaching methods the highest, an equally large majority stated that lectures are still the preferred form.

## Collegial cooperation and engagement for teaching

One of our reasons for conducting this follow-up study were some results in the Teacher Survey that indicated a higher level of collegial cooperation around teaching, and more enthusiasm for the teaching mission, than we had expected. The interviews confirmed this picture. **(margin note: Teaching: a core task)** For one thing, the informants supported Mårtensson's finding (Mårtensson & al. 2012) that teaching makes up an essential part of academics' professional identities. It is thus difficult to assert that teaching lives in the shadow of research. Secondly, they generally agreed that there is much more cooperation now than 10-15 years ago. It may take different forms and there are variations in degree, but nobody can withdraw from it completely anymore. **(Margin note: Increased cooperation)** In some cases, we heard, teaching is organised in teams that work tightly together, often even by sharing lessons. And if not, nearly all respondents would claim that cooperation is widespread through the exchange of information, ideas, project plans and study materials, etc. They would describe their discipline cultures as open, with little envy or unsound competition, which they clearly perceived as a positive change compared with two decades back. Judging from our informants' descriptions, the 'myths' of the unwilling and lonely teacher needs some adjustments.

If there has in fact been a positive development in discipline cultures and collegial cooperation, this may explain why most of our informants would claim that teaching had improved during their careers, in spite of the cuts in time resources. **(margin note: Improved teaching?)** Although the lecture remains at the core of the teaching tool-kit, the totality was described as more varied, dynamic and interactive than before. Teaching is often organised in fewer but longer sequences, with variation between lecture bits, short work assignments and seminar-like discussions. Many programmes also include project work, while increased use of written assignments serves to strengthen the students' communicative and other generic skills. In the words of one informant: "Teaching has clearly improved in later years. It has become more practical, more instructive, and easier for the students to follow. Better teaching has been necessary in order to compensate for less teaching hours and more heterogeneous student groups." The myth of the methodologically conservative teacher was to some extent contradicted by our informants.

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<sup>12</sup> Although there is no one-to-one relationship between funding and time resources, which may have several causes, there is obviously a strong connection.

## Quality culture?

**(margin note: The importance of ‘close’ leadership)** Our findings present a contradictory picture as far as the question of teachers’ conservatism versus enhancement orientation is concerned. And it was rather striking to see how these variations followed variations in the description of how their nearest academic leaders function. Our informants unanimously stressed the importance of this group: “If they are not in a position to decide and command, their influence as culture-makers is crucial”, one informant said. Those discipline communities where informants claimed inventiveness, cooperation and engagement for teaching would typically be described by the same informants as having inspiring mid-level leadership who manage to gather their colleagues around enhancement efforts, whereas communities that were said to have more remote leaders would answer more to the traditional pattern of the isolated teacher.

Our overall impression was in fact one of reasonably engaged, progressively minded discipline communities that held their commitment to teaching high. So if national reforms and other interventions seem to have limited impact on discipline cultures, what is it then that has motivated these enhancement drives? **(margin note: Self-driven improvements)** The causes may be many: improved technology, improved communication and an increased awareness of varied pedagogical options. But the typical story that we heard in the interviews described how the communities have adapted their practice in response to changes in the external circumstances that they often found negative: teaching was said to have become better because of these efforts. It may seem as if the pressures from the outside have had the effect of improving teaching for the ‘wrong’ reasons: New demands and cuts in time resources have triggered inventiveness and necessitated cooperative practices. Judging from the interviews, we may conclude that teaching may have changed partly as a defensive measure.

During the last ten years there has been much talk of ‘quality culture’, often in connection with quality work and quality assurance systems.<sup>13</sup> **(margin note: Participation in quality work)** The Teacher Survey had some questions about this and came up with responses that were a bit surprising: they contradicted, as it seemed, the ‘myths’ of the lonely and anti-reform teacher, as clear majorities answered that they participate in enhancement-oriented discussions around their programme. Nearly two thirds of them even stated that they had taken part in processes of producing ‘status or quality reports’ - related to the internal quality assurance system – about their programme, ‘to some extent’ or ‘to a great extent’.

The interviews both confirmed and qualified this picture of wide participation. The quality assurance systems now seem to be implemented and accepted in work routines. To quote from a typical statement: “We conduct halfway and full cycle evaluations of our programmes every one and three years respectively. Much is based on quantitative information and the students’ course evaluations. **(margin note: Effectiveness of system-related quality work)** Programme leaders and programme committees analyse the information and produce reports for the faculty leadership, who seem genuinely interested in what we do. But although these routines work well, it is difficult to see how they lead to any change.” Another typical statement echoes this: “The system works, but not very collectively, and without offering much feedback. We fill in our comments and pass them on individually, but seldom get to know if things are followed up by those responsible higher up in the organisation.” Typically, our informants did not see the quality assurance systems as strong drivers for collective enhancement efforts. They accepted them as “probably necessary” but revealed little genuine enthusiasm for them. According to our informants, collective enhancement efforts largely

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<sup>13</sup> For instance, the term is central in the Ministry’s White Paper, even occurring in its title, *Culture for Quality in Higher Education*. In addition, the annual European Quality Assurance Forums have had this as a central theme.

happen outside the systems. These findings seem to indicate that there has been some development towards a more positive view of quality monitoring and improvement work than Newton (2001) found in England one and a half decade ago, but also that a major challenge remains in the task of integrating system-driven quality work as a natural and essential part of the teaching job.

When asked what they associated with the term ‘quality culture’, most of our informants gave uncertain answers. Many of them were not even familiar with the term. **(Margin note: quality culture)** But after a few verbal exchanges, most of them would agree that having a quality culture must imply that all or most of the teaching community has a shared ambition and engagement for quality and improvement in their work. Our informants would typically stress that they did indeed have such a culture, and that it includes enthusiasm for teaching, not only research. So much for the ‘unwilling teacher’. This culture, however, was not seen as connected with a heightened didactic consciousness. Rather, our informants associated the term, including its collaborative element, directly with their academic endeavours in research and teaching and would stress that such engagement is an inherent characteristic of academic communities. In the words of one informant: “We have a quality culture because we share the academic interest and pride that always drives us towards high quality.” Another followed on: “Most academic cultures are quality cultures. We do not need this honour word.” Conservative or not, it seems indeed that academic cultures are fairly self-conscious and resilient cultures, which also implies some support to the myth that ‘teaching follows naturally from knowledge’, without necessarily involving much didactic problematisation.

## Resilient and innovative

While keeping in mind the fact that our study mainly rests on information that reflects the teachers’ own opinions and attitudes, the overall results of the survey and our follow up study allow us to suggest that considerable change has taken place in the teaching culture in higher education in Norway during the last 20 years. The results of our study indicate that teachers in higher education understand their role as autonomous, while at the same time acknowledging that innovations in teaching may also result from outside interventions. In this sense, it seems unfair to talk about the ‘conservative’ or ‘unwilling’ teacher. However, academic ‘resilience’ shows itself in the widespread scepticism towards externally driven reforms and in the strategies applied to absorb the shock of these. In spite of the considerable reform efforts on the part of the state, today’s academics prefer to say that the important changes have come from inside the academic community itself, more than because of external pressure from national reforms. They will claim – in spite of incentive patterns that are still heavily weighted in favour of research – that teaching is more on the academics’ own agenda today, and not so much in the shadow of research. They will also say that constrictions in the flow of resources, while simultaneously wearing them out, has forced them to be innovative, actually making teaching better. In addition, most importantly, most of them will assert that collective efforts and cooperation has increased considerably, thus changing the entire culture around teaching. This, many of them will say, has come about in spite of the fact that the formal quality assurance systems that were meant to enhance quality work play a rather modest role in this respect.

However, we also observed that the move towards more varied and innovative didactic approaches is fairly unevenly distributed, with ‘pockets’ of traditional practice lingering on. Most teachers will claim that a research-informed knowledge base is the *sine qua non* of higher education teaching, and for many of them teaching ‘follows naturally’ from this source. Of course, this means that emphasis on didactic professionalism varies greatly and often seems to be weak. But it also indicates that

academics are very resilient in protecting the core elements and values of their profession, as they see them.

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