

Quality challenges in flexible professional education

The purpose of this study is to provide a foundation for assessing whether there are any additional requirements for quality assurance associated with one or more flexible forms of education.

Summary

An increasing proportion of the students in higher education are registered on flexible education programmes, 6.5% of all Norwegian students in 2011. NOKUT have in recent years evaluated three large professional educational degrees: teacher training, preschool teacher training and engineering degree programmes. Increasingly the institutions offer flexible alternatives to the campus based programmes of these professional degrees. This was the background for NOKUT's decision to have a closer examination of the organization and implementation of two flexible provisions within each of the three professional fields. The data was collected by document studies and interviews with students and staff.

Organisation and IT

The assumption that flexible education was generally web based was not supported by this study. This is consistent with the findings from the Norway Opening Universities' IT monitor survey 2011 (Norgesuniversitetet 2012). Even if research, reports and government incentives have focused on e-learning, this study indicates that flexible professional education is normally seminar based. Half of the educational programmes in the sample were based on seminars. One former seminar based teacher training programme had developed into a purely web based course. One engineering programme was delivered in both a campus based and web based version. Another engineering degree turned out to be a campus based part-time programme with reduced hours of teaching.

Half of the programmes were organized as full time studies and half as part time. A number of the programmes offered the students the opportunity for further flexibility, by allowing them to switch from flexible to campus based and vice versa, shortening or lengthening their time to completion and admitting students who had already completed part of the degree.

The importance of institutional strategy for flexible learning

This study confirms that it is mainly institutions and programmes with declining student recruitment that offer flexible education. The majority of the institutions had plans to increase the number of flexible programmes, and several had established units for technological and pedagogical IT support. Nonetheless, the overall institutional strategies, with respect to IT among other areas, appeared to have little impact on the choice of organizational model for the educational programmes in the sample. Rather, the decisions were to a large extent based on tradition and the experience of the academic departments, and this tendency was particularly apparent in the seminar based programmes. This organization was often explained as a response to academic and pedagogical requirements, such as the need for socialization into the profession, and sufficient contact between the teachers and students to be able to determine the students' suitability for the profession.

Students in flexible education

The students enrolled in the flexible programmes were, as expected, older than the average student and had families and financial obligations which restricted their opportunity to move away from home. Those responsible for the education were generally aware that this group of students had a particular need for a thorough introduction, for example to the use of technology, referencing sources, and academic writing, and that they required a structured organization and detailed plan which would allow them to schedule the studying around their busy lives. In return, the institutions providing this attracted what in one interview was described as "existentially motivated students" who only had one alternative on their application and who had chosen the education both because it was flexible and because they knew that there were employment opportunities in their hometown. Many also brought with them practical experiences from a relevant profession, which enriched the teaching for themselves and others.

Challenges

Lack of time

The hours allocated to traditional teaching is reduced in flexible education. Reduced teaching time gives less time for discussion and critical reflection in the face-to-face meetings between teacher and student. This led to concerns about the opportunity for development of attitudes and capacity for critical judgment which is important for good professional practice.

Lack of time for teaching also reduced the opportunity for in-depth reading of the course material. There was thus more cramming and copying, and little time and resources for providing support to students who were falling behind. The geographical distance made it easier for students to drop out when the challenges of academic or personal life became too demanding.

Practice

Distance was also a problem for the implementation of practical training in the four educations that included practice as part of the degree. Earlier evaluations have shown that the integration of theory and practice could be a problem. It was found that there it was difficult to find enough qualified supervisors for practice in decentralized and web based education. The collaboration with particular schools and nurseries was less close and committed and the communication with these practice sites was less satisfactory than in campus based education. Online dialogue meetings in the practice period and plans to give supervisors access to the learning platforms were introduced in attempts to improve the situation.

Information

The students appreciated correct and detailed information in advance about the purpose and content of the education and what was expected of them, so that they had the opportunity to plan their lives around the studies for the next years. Educational programmes that failed to meet the expectations created by the advance information experienced high drop-out rates.

Criteria for success

The students emphasized the importance of being given the educational content and organization they were promised, and that the programme was adapted to its target group.

Detailed and correct information to potential applicants and new students emerged as a crucial criterion for success. The same could be said for a carefully planned, detailed and tightly structured education with good arrangements for student support and regular control of the rate of progression. Relatively strict academic control, teacher collaborations and a common view of the form of education and the pedagogical methods to be used, made the students better prepared and thus characterized the programmes with high retention rates.

Following up the study

On different levels, it could be relevant to consider the admission requirements and the actual admission of students, curriculum design and implementation as well as quality routines and controls. Much indicates that the institutional level should take greater responsibility for the resource allocation to and quality assurance of flexible education.