

Requirements of the discipline community in accredited Master Degree programs: adapted, adequate, active

The aim of this report is to inform about how the expert committees in the accreditation of Master Degree programs judge and evaluate the applications for accreditation from the state and private university colleges regarding the quality and the planned size of the discipline community.

Summary

Material and methods

The applications for accreditation of Master Degree programs must fulfill the requirements given in the regulations decided upon by NOKUT. The regulations describe the minimum requirements that the state and private university colleges must fulfill in order to obtain accreditation. The requirements regarding the discipline community are both quantitative and qualitative.

The quantitative requirements specify that a certain percentage of the discipline community must be fully employed by the institution. Furthermore the discipline community must have a certain percentage of professors and other academic staff with the same level of competencies. The qualitative requirements are summarized into the concepts: adapted, adequate, and active. The discipline community must be adapted to the study plan, the teaching and guidance of the students and the R&D to be performed. They must have the adequate competencies to maintain the necessary R&D and they must take an active part in R&D activities and in national and international cooperation.

The analyzed material in this report covers 154 applications of accreditation of master degree studies, which are accredited by NOKUT over the period 2004-2012. The material is structured in accordance with a predefined definition of the expert committee's evaluation on the discipline community as 1) positive; very well qualified for the task, 2) neutral; sufficient qualifications and 3) negative; barely sufficient. The material is also structured to show how the state and private university colleges plan and estimate the number of students and the size of the discipline community for the Master Degree program. These historical data will give information on the development and the changes in the degree level as a whole over the period.

Essential political background factors

Two regulations of educational politics are essential background factors in the analysis. These are the Quality Reform that was implemented in 2003 (White paper no.27 2000-2001) and the implementation of the National Qualification Framework in 2009. One of the main aims of the Quality Reform was stronger emphasis on the student/teacher –relation, input factors. This might seem to contradict the National Qualification Framework which emphasizes the results and the outcomes of the education; output factors. The analysis might give indications on how the state and private university colleges deal with this dilemma, expressed by how they plan and estimate the number of students and the size of the discipline community over the period.

The analysis

In 24 % of the applications the expert committees gives a positive evaluation of the discipline community, stating that they are very well adapted and competent. The neutral and negative evaluations are each 38 %. Put together the evaluations receiving the least criticism, the positive and the neutral ones, add up to about half of the applications. The two groups receiving neutral and negative evaluations are equal in size, showing how these institutions in many cases have difficulties in meeting the minimum requirements concerning the discipline community. The distribution of the evaluations of the expert committees shows great variations over the years with a slight tendency to an increase in positive evaluations. Given the same development however, the results of the evaluations in 2020 will give a negative outcome for about 1/5 of the accreditations. There is no evidence of improvement from negative via neutral to positive evaluations within the institutions. There are very few institutions without any negative evaluations of the discipline community. There seem to have been equal

difficulties within the different subject areas in meeting the requirements, although slightly more difficult within the health and social sciences. These problems are enhanced by the fact that the state and private university colleges over the period are planning and estimating their Master Degree programs for a smaller number of academic staff, while the estimated number of students is increasing. The average estimated man-labor years decreases from 10,5 in 2005 to 4,8 in 2012 while the average estimation of student numbers increases from 28 to 42 over the same period. This development might have different reasons or a combination of different reasons:

- The institutions have improved their planning and the utilizing of their academic resources.
- The academic competencies are scarce and the competition is high.
- It might seem as if the size of the discipline community is considered irrelevant as long as the minimum requirements are met, no matter how poorly.
- It might seem as if the policy of emphasis on the output factors is more estimated than the policy of emphasis on the input factors.

Even if the requirements are met the analysis shows a Master Degree program level with great differences in the quantitative and qualitative level of the discipline community. Neither the central regulations nor this analysis can give a clear advice on what is the best or the optimal.

Conclusion

The analysis does not give reasons for any firm conclusions, but some questions are relevant to put forward:

- Are the planning and estimation of the discipline community allocated to a master degree study made at random?
- What are the consequences of the differences in the competencies of the discipline community, regarding the quality of education and the students learning outcome?
- What are the consequences for the quality of education and the student's learning outcome when the same type of master degree study is offered at different institutions with huge differences in academic resources?
- How can a decreasing amount of academic resources serve an increasing amount of students, while maintaining student satisfaction?
- How can the need for qualified and competent academic resources keep up with the growth of master degree studies?