K. Hämäläinen

J. Haakstad

J. Kangasniemi

T. Lindeberg

M. Sjölund

Quality Assurance in the Nordic Higher Education

– accreditation-like practices

ENQA Occasional Papers 2

European Network for Quality Assurance
in Higher Education • Helsinki

The views expressed in this Occasional Paper are those of the authors. Publication does not imply either approval or endorsement by the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education or any of its members.

Foreword

ENQA has in various contexts been actively involved in the process of follow up on the Bologna declaration. One implication has been a focus on the potential role of accreditation in quality assurance of higher education. A group of member agencies from the Nordic countries joined in 2000 in a common project to analyse the concept of accreditation and identify accreditation procedures and other practices, similar to accreditation, in the Nordic countries. The agencies involved were the Danish Evaluation Institute, The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council, The National Agency for Higher Education, Sweden and The Network Norway Council.

The project has resulted in a report that provides a clear account of Nordic thinking on accreditation and evaluation, but also contains a very coherent and understandable general account of the various issues surrounding accreditation and evaluation at the present time.

The Steering Group has therefore decided to publish the report as an ENQA Occasional Paper making the report one of ENQA's contributions to stimulating the forthcoming European discussions on quality assurance and accreditation.

Christian Thune
Chairman of the Steering Group

Contents

1 Introduction

1.1 Context

For about ten years, representatives from the national higher education evaluation agencies in the Nordic countries have convened for annual network meetings in order to share experiences and discuss current issues. One form of this co-operation has been the publishing of joint reports. A good example of this work is the book, Evaluation of Higher Education in the Nordic Countries (1996). Its aim was to sum up and disseminate Nordic evaluation experiences for the benefit of institutions, agencies and ministries.

In May 2000, the following agencies met in Copenhagen:

- the Danish Evaluation Institute
- the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council
- the National Agency for Higher Education, Sweden
- the Network Norway Council

The main theme of this meeting was accreditation, which has become one of the central topics in discussions on higher education policy in Europe in the wake of the Bologna process. This shift towards discussing and recommending the use of accreditation schemes as a more prominent tool of quality assurance poses a challenge to the Nordic countries, who have traditionally relied more on the dual mechanism of governmental approval and development-oriented evaluations.

In spite of a general reluctance to run explicit accreditation programmes, there are still quality assurance activities in place in the Nordic countries that are essentially accreditation, although they do not carry that label. It is also evident that even inside the culturally homogeneous Nordic region, accreditation-related procedures are far from identical. There are variations in practice from one country to another, and even standard terms may carry different nuances of meaning.

For these reasons, the Copenhagen meeting took the initiative to have the status of accreditation in the Nordic countries reviewed and analysed. Hopefully, this may help each of the four countries in forming useful strategies for their internal quality assurance work, and facilitate the mutual understanding of accreditation and recognition procedures across the national borders.

However, a discussion of accreditation from a Nordic perspective must also reflect the need for wider international mechanisms to ascertain the quality of degrees and to promote their trans-national mobility. The report may, therefore, also be of interest and value in a European context, with particular reference to the commitment of the Bologna Declaration to "promote European co-operation in quality assurance with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies."

This report is a joint effort of five writers from the participating Nordic countries. First of all, they formulated the aims of the report and planned its structure. Each one has participated in the writing process. The texts have been circulated between the writers via e-mail. The writers have also met five times to discuss the texts. This report represents the opinions of the writers.

1.2 Objectives

Higher education institutions in the Nordic countries derive their formal degree-awarding capacity from the State. National degrees are supposed to be directly comparable and of equal standard, and the aims, scope and general structure of degrees are, therefore, prescribed by law. The State protects the value and quality of degrees by controlling which institutions can award them, and which educational programmes can qualify for them. In this sense, Nordic governments keep for themselves the formal power to grant official approval in the field of higher education. It is only natural that the State wants to maintain some control over the provision of higher education – private as well as public – as long as it is mainly funded by public money.

On the other hand, higher education institutions also enjoy great autonomy, partly ensured by law. Among other things, this autonomy implies that the institutions themselves take full responsibility for the standard and quality of the educational services they provide. Responsibility, though, is an empty word unless it also means *accountability*, that is, responsibility *to* some authority. As direct government control through a system of reporting and steering would contradict the very principle of institutional autonomy, the answer has been to build up semi-independent national quality assurance agencies and evaluation systems to obtain the necessary quality judgements. Quality control by evaluation is gradually replacing quality control by government steering. But it is still a typically "Nordic" feature that the role of independent evaluations *vis-à-vis* the government is to inform and advise, whereas the government has the last word in questions of approval.

Each of the Nordic countries has found its own way of balancing the roles and powers of the institutions, the national quality assurance agency and the government. At the same time, these roles and powers are continuously under debate and scrutiny, as the question of how closely the institutions should be monitored and assessed is always a delicate matter. To complicate matters still further, the Bologna Declaration indicates the need of a more harmonised practice on approval and quality assurance in a "European higher education area". To what extent will European policy have a standardising effect on national practice? And will accreditation then be the answer?

The modest ambition behind this report is to help clarify what is meant by accreditation, to describe how accreditation is related to other approving or recognising functions in the four Nordic countries, and to discuss, tentatively, some options for the future. The report will try to illuminate the following points:

- What is meant by accreditation?
- Why does the importance of accreditation seem to be increasing?
- What accreditation (and accreditation-like) procedures can be identified in the Nordic countries today?
- What challenges do international developments in this field present to quality assurance in the Nordic countries?
- Do the Nordic countries have common needs and interests in relation to these developments?

2 The Concept of Accreditation

The term accreditation is not a very precise one. In one sense, it expresses the abstract notion of a formal authorising power, acting through official decisions on the approval (or not) of institutions or study programmes. In another sense, the term refers to the issuing of a quality label to institutions or programmes. In both cases, a judgement is reached through certain assessment processes.

Accreditation can be defined in several ways, as in the following three examples:

a) "Accreditation is a formal, published statement regarding the quality of an institution or a programme, following a cyclical evaluation based on agreed standards." (CRE, 2001)

b) "Accreditation is a process of external quality review used by higher education to scrutinise colleges, universities and higher education programs for quality assurance and quality improvement." (CHEA, 2000)

c) "Accreditation is the award of a status. Accreditation as a process is generally based on the application of predefined standards. It is primarily an outcome of evaluation." (The European Training Foundation, 1998)

Accreditation, then, can have different definitions, forms and functions, but the way the term is used in this report, it will always have the following characteristics:

- Accreditation gives acceptance (or not) that a certain standard is met in a higher education course, programme or institution. This may be a minimum standard or a standard of excellence.
- Accreditation, therefore, always involves a benchmarking assessment.
- Accreditation verdicts are based solely on quality criteria, never on political considerations.
- Accreditation verdicts include a binary element and are always *either "yes" or "no"*.

Accreditation can be seen as one of several complementary measures in a quality assurance system, whose starting point is the need to maintain and improve good quality in institutions of higher education. Evaluations will normally assess to what extent a programme or an institution is meeting the level of quality set by the programme planners or the institutions themselves, whereas accreditation passes a verdict on whether a programme, degree or an institution meets certain outside standards or requirements. The specific object of accreditation is to certify a defined standard of quality, although it may be imbedded in a larger evaluation process with multiple aims. The crucial question is: who sets the standards?

2.1 Accreditation and other related terms

Accreditation, in the sense it is used here, should be kept separate from a few other related terms, which in this report will mean the following:

- *Approval*: an official decision (without an explicit accreditation process) that a course or a programme qualifies for a national academic degree, or that an institution has the right to confer national degrees. Such approval is usually given by the Ministry of Education.
- *Recognition*: the formal acceptance that a degree in one country leads to the same rights and consequences, for example, for further degrees or for the access to regulated. professions or to the non-regulated parts of the labour market, in another country.[1]
- *Authorisation*: an official decision that a certain education or training gives the right to practice a certain profession. Such decisions normally lie outside the higher education system itself.

---

[1] "Recognition" might also have been used with the meaning given to "approval"; Our choice of terms is made in order to avoid confusion with ENIC/NARIC terminology, where "recognition" has this meaning.

As a *function*, accreditation comes close to "approval", in the sense that it aims at giving official acceptance to a course, a programme or an institution in relation to the right to confer degrees. The outcome of an accreditation process is always a "yes" or "no", which is also exactly what happens in cases of approval.

All European countries have criteria and procedures for the formal approval of higher education institutions, programmes or courses. In many cases, such approval will follow automatically from once-given rights that established institutions enjoy, whereas a specific qualifying process may be required in other cases. National policy on approval varies considerably from one country to another. For such approval procedures – where they exist – to come under the "accreditation" category, one would expect that the process is:

- systematic, all-inclusive and explicit.
- based on academic criteria only, that is, removed from political influence.

If these conditions are met, accreditation and approval overlap completely and the term "accreditation" is usually preferred. Few countries in Western Europe have as yet introduced such explicit accreditation schemes, at least not for the university sector.

When, on the other hand, decisions on approval include considerations based on, for example, educational needs, such as dimensioning, discipline development or geographical distribution, the accreditation function becomes mixed with the exercise of political steering: There is still an identifiable accrediting function at work, but it is more or less "hidden" inside a wider procedure. "Approval" would then be the preferred term.

A special type of accreditation has no connection with official approval or degree-conferring rights at all: when a private association accredits educational units according to its own quality standards, it issues a quality stamp, not an official approval (see 2.3).

2.2 Accreditation and evaluation

Accreditation is not the same as *evaluation,* although accreditation involves evaluating procedures and evaluations may (or may not) have an accrediting function. Whereas accreditation has a very limited objective (the yes–no verdict), evaluations usually have a broad set of purposes (for example, SWOT-analysis, goal oriented, fitness for purpose, quality enhancement, organisational learning, strategic recommendations). Whereas accreditation always refers to a standard, evaluations may or may not, or only partly. It is important to keep these differences in mind when evaluations are given accrediting functions.

When looking at the accreditation *process,* accreditation usually mingles with evaluation.

Both evaluation and accreditation include the same methodological key elements:

- an independent undertaking of the investigation (normally manifested in an agency independent from universities and ministries)
- internal self-evaluation
- external review or evaluation by experts
- a site visit
- a public report/public register

The unofficial, or private, type of accreditation mentioned above is typically an evaluation process with the single aim of deciding whether the unit in question will be accredited or not. "Evaluation" and "accreditation" would here seem to overlap.

With official accreditation (or approval), there is usually a similar relationship, although it is less clear: The different systematic evaluations that national quality assurance agencies carry out span a continuum ranging from an explicit accrediting function to little or no impact on accreditation at all. In one country, the agency's evaluations may be formally invested with a clear and undivided accrediting mission, while in another the accrediting power may be retained as a function of government (as "approval"), whose decisions are, in turn, informed by the evaluations. In still other countries, evaluations may have no systematic accreditation function at all.

2.3 Accreditation in practice

Accreditation can play a more or less dominant role in the field of different measures that aim at monitoring, steering, recognising and quality assuring higher education. But as pointed out earlier, accreditation can, by no means, be reduced to one simple function, or one standard procedure. Accreditation is performed by government/ministries, official accrediting agencies, private organisations, associations of institutions and professional associations, with differing authority and objectives. The best way of broadening our understanding of the concept, beyond basic definitions, may be to map various practical functions of accreditation inside the field of higher education and the way in which these may be carried out. The following dichotomies may help to clarify these functions.

Official vs. private accreditation

National authorities of quality assurance, either the Ministry itself or a quality assurance agency, make formal judgements on the approval/accreditation of programmes or institutions, basing their rulings on set standards for awards and diplomas. Private organisations with academic legitimacy (for example EQUIS), on the other hand, accredit institutions, faculties and programmes – often in several countries – according to certain threshold levels which they themselves define. Such "certifying" or "classification" procedures may help define cross-national standards, but they are essentially private and voluntary. Private accreditation may enhance a unit's reputation, but it does not alter its formal status inside a nation's higher education system. Of these two categories, official accreditation is the one that concerns us in this report.

Accreditation by government vs. delegated arrangements

In all Nordic countries, the official approval of higher education rests on a national authority over degrees and diplomas, rooted in legislation and ultimately a function of government. But ministries face two big problems in exercising this accrediting power: for one thing, they are more equipped for steering educational policies than for making academic quality assessments and they must, therefore, rely heavily on informed judgements from outside experts. The other problem concerns legitimacy and transparency, as approval (or accreditation) by governmental decision conflicts with established ideals of academic objectivity and institutional autonomy. Over the last ten or fifteen years, there has been a tendency for governments to delegate an important role in the accrediting/approval process to an agency that operates "at arm's length" from political authorities. Normally, such delegation takes one of four forms:

- An independent quality assurance agency with full accrediting authority may be established. This would happen through legislation, transferring the State's accrediting powers formally to the outside agency. This is usually also an evaluation agency. Such explicit transfer of the accrediting power from government to a national agency is still rare.
- An independent (or semi-independent) quality assurance agency with an advisory function may be established, in which case the government retains the right to have the last word in licensing matters, basing its decisions on assessments and advice from the agency. With minor individual variations, this is the current arrangement in the Nordic countries.
- Where a national agency under the State is lacking, an association of higher education institutions may exercise national quality assurance functions. In Europe, these functions will hardly include accreditation powers, although this is not, theoretically, unthinkable[2]. In any case, such formal powers would have to be considered as delegated from the State. The general trend, though, has been a shift from early systems of quality assurance with roots in the institutions themselves to systems operated by national agencies set up through legislation.

---

[2] In the USA and Canada, where no accreditation with roots in government takes place, such associations – along with professional associations – perform the only recognised accreditations.

- Even individual institutions may exercise accreditation powers, both through their right to recognise education from other institutions as integrated in their own awards and diplomas and through the right to offer programmes and courses without any specific process of recognition[3] . Formally, though, such "self-accrediting" powers are also *delegated*.

Institutional vs. subject/programme

An important issue in relation to accreditation is the question of what level it should be directed at. The answer to that question is usually institutions, educational programmes or both. Other potential targets could be degrees or subjects.

The focus in programme accreditation is on whether or not the quality of a programme meets a certain standard. The purpose is to provide the public (potential students, financial bodies and potential partners) with a guarantee that a specific programme has gone through a process of quality assurance and that it has been found to hold an acceptable quality standard. Assessments conducted in connection with programme accreditation may include some or all of the following themes: the purpose and aim of the programme, its general design and content, administrative and physical infrastructure, the competence of the teaching staff, the student body, including recruitment profile, internationalisation, etc. A more detailed set of criteria (indicators) would be set for each of these aspects.

Institutional accreditation focuses on the institution as a whole organisation. The purpose of institutional accreditation is to ensure that there is a sound organisational foundation for the educational activities. Institutional accreditation may include some or all of the following themes: the appropriateness of mission and aims statements, steering and management, administrative efficiency, financial resources and allocation systems, student and staff recruitment policies, staff competencies, appropri-

ate learning resources/support, internal quality assurance system, as well as research activity and educational outcomes. Institutional accreditation may also be carried out through the narrower method of institutional quality audit, which focuses specifically on the institution's internal quality assurance systems and its indicators of educational quality. Accreditation would then demand robust internal quality assurance procedures, as the accountability of individual programmes would rely indirectly on this.

Initial vs. follow-up

If accreditation procedures are directed towards the programme level, there will usually be a difference between the kind of accrediting process that precedes the launching of a new programme (*ex ante*) and the accreditation control that is exercised towards established ones (*ex post*). The latter is often carried out in connection with ordinary (cyclical) evaluations, whereas the former, where it exists[4] , tends to have a lighter touch: the matter may be decided administratively in the Ministry or by the decision of an accrediting agency, according to set criteria and after advice from a group of experts.

Institutional accreditation is most likely to be of the initial type, as the prospect of "disqualifying" whole existing institutions would be an unlikely event in any case. Although it is still a relatively rare phenomenon, it is not unlikely that institutional accreditation will become more common in a more deregulated higher education sector in the future. For example:

- In countries where legislation on higher education recognises different categories of institutions – with different degree-awarding powers, the possibility of transfer from one category to another (from "college" to "university") would require a kind of accreditation process, which would share many characteristics with a full-scale evaluation. Such re-categorisation procedures have recently

---

[3] With certain restrictions, for example, Norwegian universities and state colleges can freely open new programmes of up to 90 credits (1.5 years) inside subject areas that are already well established at the institution.

[4] In some countries, institutions can set up new courses without any initial recognition process; in others, the government (or the quality assurance agency) will regulate this through a process of quality assurance/recognition.

been carried out in Sweden, and are currently being discussed in Norway.

- In accordance with aims stated by the European Commission, private institutions might be given the right to achieve a more equal position concerning degree-awarding powers by letting them undergo a process of institutional accreditation.
- With a high degree of deregulation of the higher education sector, institutional accreditation may also become a more common procedure in State institutions. A recent report on reforms in higher education in Norway recommended that even State institutions become legal subjects in their own right. The Government, however, has declined to follow up this proposal.

Contrary to programme accreditation, a systematic approach to institutional accreditation would probably have its "heaviest" evaluating procedures on initial accreditation, whereas the follow-up of already accredited institutions might be done through some kind of audit of the internal quality assurance system.

2.4 Limits of accreditation

Accreditation does not *prohibit* the delivery of unaccredited courses or the establishment of unaccredited institutions; nor does it prohibit the use of the terms "higher education" about such courses or even "university" about such institutions, as these terms are not legally protected in most countries.

Accreditation does not automatically secure public funding. Whereas decisions on accreditation are based on set quality standards and are supposed to be objective, the funding authority is a strictly political one and rests with the government, on whose discretion accredited courses may be funded or not. However, it is the firm practice in most countries that only accredited (or "approved") courses will receive public money. Typically, this is the most important *practical implication* of accreditation.

Accreditation, as such, does not include the right to practice certain regulated professions, as criteria

for such decisions are made by the employing authority. However, an accredited (or "approved") academic programme is normally a prerequisite for such a right.

2.5 Critical points of accreditation

Accreditation is closely entwined with the concept of quality. Accreditation and quality should be targeted at those issues, which are considered important from the point of view of the basic task of universities. It is often difficult, however, to reach an agreement about the definition of quality. A Finnish interview research (Sohlo 2000) surveying the notions of university rectors of good quality, illustrates this aptly: the conclusion was that, on a general level, it is next to impossible to define quality. This is quite obvious when we think of the different missions of, for example, broadly-based universities, schools of economics and business administration as well as art academies.

Accountability

A main purpose of institutional accreditation, as well as programme accreditation, is accountability or, phrased differently, the creation of a "window in to higher education institution". A major advantage of programme accreditation is that it provides a high degree of accountability, because it is clear to the stakeholders which criteria apply to a programme. Institutional accreditation certifies, in the same way, that the institution fulfils certain criteria. However, this does not provide any information about the quality of the specific programmes.

The key question, in terms of accountability in relation to institutional accreditation, is whether or not it is possible to create internal quality assurance procedures that make the public confident in the quality of that programme. In terms of accountability, this would require transparency in the internal quality assurance procedures.

Problem of focus

One of the problems is whether the focus is on the right issues. The theoretical basis for accreditation and evaluations can be questioned. It is rather difficult to explain what makes teaching effective, or what the critical points are in the operations of the organisation, which would support learning. The selection of foci is often based on the contemplation of experts rather than theories on human learning. Learning results are, thus, essential and we should avoid concentrating solely on how these results were reached. For example, traditional accreditation fails with regard to the different virtual teaching arrangements.

Different educational systems in different countries present obstacles to international accreditation co-operation. Moreover, the relationship between the regional role of universities and national and international criteria should be discussed. Which perspective should be stressed most? The importance of a university as a regional flagship or the international correspondence between degrees?

Obstacle to development

One of the intrinsic problems of accreditation is that by setting standards a certain level is guaranteed, but, at the same time, it may become difficult for an innovative programme or institution to fulfil the standards, either because the standards are not automatically set at the front level, or because the programme operates on the borders of a discipline. A similar problem is that accreditation can have an unintended and unwanted harmonising function. These problems are partly related to the question of how detailed the accreditation criteria should be. The more detailed criteria the less scope for innovative and developing programmes.

At its worst, accreditation may turn out to be a conservative system, which underpins the existing procedures so that it is 'easiest' to establish criteria that the majority of experts agree upon. Thus, ideas outside the mainstream, as well as new education and training experiments, may face difficulties. New, cross-disciplinary programmes, which cannot be classified as belonging to any individual discipline, are likely to pose problems in a subject-based accreditation scheme. Furthermore, it is worth pondering whether the same accreditation models suit all disciplines.

Costly arrangement

Accreditation must be repeated in a cycle (for instance, every 5–10 years) to ensure that quality continues to meet the defined standard. For multi-faculty universities, this means that there could be a large number of programmes in an accreditation cycle. The burden on the institutions could be lightened by institutional accreditation. The key question, in this regard, is whether it is possible to create internal quality assurance procedures that make the public confident in the quality of that programme. When setting up an accreditation system, it is crucial that it adds value to the educational system, which means that it provides more benefits than it costs.

It could be argued that programme accreditation and institutional accreditation must be combined to ensure the highest degree of accountability. This would give the benefits of both approaches in terms of accountability, because it would certify that the institution, as well as programmes provided by the institution, is at a certain level. However, in terms of promoting quality and cost efficiency, the combined approach is more ambiguous. It holds the same problems as programme accreditation in relation to development, and it is more costly than an approach based on programme accreditation alone. One option to be considered is a combined approach in which the follow-up accreditation at the programme level is conducted with a lighter touch, that is, accreditations primarily based on reports from the internal quality systems on the institutions.

Insufficient evidence of quality

When implementing accreditation, we must discuss what is sufficient proof of the level of a particular operation. Is self-evaluation data sufficiently supplemented by interviews? Which would be the best way to gather information about the level of teaching and learning results? Would assessment of the-

ses be enough? What are the available criteria if the goals of different programmes vary from each other? The selection of the accreditation criteria is also a question of power: do institutions of higher education decide on the criteria, or should representatives from working life have an opportunity to participate in the decision-making? What is the role of the financiers and the State? Should students' opinions be taken into account? In short, the selection of elements to be accredited, and the criteria, should encompass the needs and views of the various stakeholders.

3 Why Has Accreditation Become a Central Issue?

There is certainly more than one explanation as to why accreditation has become a central issue in Europe (as well as in the USA). At least, there seems to be several structural and historical explanations for the demand of accreditation of higher education in Europe today.

3.1 Trust and accountability

The demand for accountability and trust was raised on the political agenda, parallel with the development of decentralisation and greater freedom for universities to take decisions at their own discretion. How do politicians, government, parliament, citizens or students know that the higher education institutions provide a good education? One tool for governments to control, and even support, the quality of the work performed by the higher education institutions has been to implement different kinds of evaluation and accreditation procedures.

As the universities in the Nordic countries belong to the public sector, this development can be regarded as a part of a broader development towards a new mode of controlling public organisations. The key issues in those reforms in the public sector were decentralisation of decision-making, (economic) incentive structures for units and personnel, output control and a business-type management. These changes in the doctrine concerning the management of public institutions developed at different stages in the OECD countries in the 1980s. This mode has been labelled New Public Management (NPM) (Hood 1991). The Higher Education reform in Sweden, 1993, is often regarded as a reform of higher education (Askling and Bauer 2000). But it could also be looked upon as a public administration reform with NPM connotations. Self-regulation, autonomy and a funding system based on output measurement were some of the main ingredients in the reform. As a consequence of the increased autonomy and self-regulation, the Government stressed the need for evaluations and accreditation of universities and university colleges.

The author of the book, *The Audit Society, Rituals of Verification*, Michael Power (1999), is convinced that we are in the middle of a huge and unavoidable social experiment, which is conspicuously cross-sectional and trans-national. This trend affects both the private and public sectors. According to Power, the audit society started to develop during the 1980s. Key words in the development for controlling sectors and organisations were a) decentralisation, b) management by objectives, c) empowerment of local leadership, d) evaluation and accountability. The accounting systems in organisations, private or public, became one of the main tools for the leaders and politicians to control the efficiency and output of the work.

The foundation of bodies for accreditation and certification, with the task to verify standards, is part of the development of the audit society. This is seen as a reaction to the deregulation of the public sector. Accreditation and standardisation are tools to make a differentiated and complex environment more easy and transparent. Information and co-ordination will contribute to an overview of the field for different groups, such as students, parents, teachers and employers. It is a reaction to the development of the modern risk society (Sahlin-Andersson and Hedmo, 2000).

3.2 A common labour market and student mobility requirements

The second explanation is the European convergence process, which has put accreditation firmly on the European higher education agenda, particularly since the Bologna Declaration singled out the

development of an ECTS-compatible credit system (the European Credit Transfer System) and "a European dimension" in quality assurance as specific objectives. The Bologna Declaration has created a growing awareness that national quality assurance systems need to have concrete outcomes in terms of the legibility and comparability of degrees. (Haug and Tauch 2001)

The Bologna Declaration started an intense discussion immediately it was released. The focus of European higher education shifted to the 'new structure' of higher education. It raised the question of the equivalence of a Bachelor's/Master's degree in a certain discipline in one country with the same degree in the same discipline in another country. One main topic here is the development of the ECTS, which will make it easier for students to move between universities and countries.

A common labour market, with some hundreds of millions of people, will not be efficient without a common or transparent higher education system. As higher education in Europe comprises many different national systems with a high degree of differentiation, the requirements for accreditation have appeared on the European agenda (Kälvemark 2001).

From the students' point of view, the following list describes some of the reasons why accreditation has become a central issue in Europe, in the late 1990s.

1. Due to an increasing student mobility in Europe, there is a need to recognise good quality institutions and acknowledge their studies for credit transferring purposes.
2. Need to protect the "consumers" (students as well as employers) of education against low quality programmes (information needs of students)
3. Creation of international labour markets has created a need to recruit internationally and inform employers about the level of employees' (students') education.

3.3 Borderless markets for higher education

The third explanation for the attention to accreditation can be the development of global non-national higher education providers, so-called new private for-profit, virtual, and corporate, providers in the domestic and international markets for higher education. The Business of Borderless Education has been a label for such "universities". The term 'borderless higher education' (coined in Australia) is used extensively to indicate the development of organisations crossing the traditional borders of higher education, whether geographical or conceptual.

There was an intensified development of accreditation during the 1990s in various European countries. This trend is parallel with the rapid growth in international and trans-national organisations after the Second World War. Especially, the so called International non-governmental organisations, (INGOs), have increased dramatically. Even the so-called IGOs, Intergovernmental organisations, have increased in number.

It may be in the interest of national governments to protect their own institutions from competition from such companies selling education of an opaque quality, and leading to different kinds of unrecognised diplomas. It may also be in the interest of national governments that students can make a good and safe choice of study programmes and institutions. One way of doing this is to run State-commissioned accreditation activities for institutions or study programmes.

There is also a parallel driving force for different providers of higher education, on the global market, to be an accredited institution. One clear example of this is the development of accreditation of Master of Business Administration (MBA). MBA is a nearly one hundred year old American education in management. The first American MBA programme started 1902 at Amos Tuck School, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, USA. Today, there are around 1,250 programmes around the world,

about 400 of which are in Europe. As MBA programmes have proliferated in Europe, different systems of standards, external evaluations, ranking and accreditation procedures have developed.

3.4 The proliferation of accreditation systems: from USA to Europe

Accreditation is not a new phenomenon in the field of higher education. For example, in the United States, different accreditation systems have already existed for almost a century. The basis for creating a system for accreditation is based on the need to define the minimum standards for higher education establishments. The number of institutions in the USA offering programmes in higher education is close to 3,500. Accreditation has been used as a tool for selecting those institutions, whose quality of education is at an 'adequate' level and for choosing the ones eligible for public funding.

In the USA, accreditation is organised and certified by associations, for example, of universities or their departments. The accreditation work is performed by many different, non-governmental organisations. It concerns institutions, programmes and degrees. It is implemented on a voluntary basis, but is needed for public funds and grants as well as for the competition for students and staff. It is a collegial process based on self- and peer-assessment for improvement of academic quality and public accountability.

In Europe, the oldest tradition of accreditation-like quality assurance is in England. The tradition of auditing the quality systems and assessment of education programmes also has a long history. In some Central Eastern European countries, for example, Hungary, the minimum requirements (criteria) for the educational programmes have been assured through accreditation, since the beginning of the 1990s.

One of the 'newcomers' in this field is Germany. It decided in 1998 to start to accredit the graduate degrees in higher education. The Conference of Ministers of Culture and the Rectors' Conference have established an Accreditation Council affiliated to the Rectors' Conference, which is responsible for the accreditation of newly-established Bachelor and Master Programmes of Universities and Polytechnics (Fachhochschulen). It aims to set common standards especially for those programmes, which have not earlier been under a national approval system (to award degrees).

Austria and The Netherlands have also started to develop accreditation systems for their own national education. In Austria, legislation was passed to establish an Accreditation Council to accredit private institutions of higher education, thus, authorising an institution to call itself "Privatuniversität", award official academic degrees as well as giving the academic staff the right to use the title of the university system. In the Netherlands, accreditation will be compulsory for all degree programmes of government-funded or approved private institutions. Accreditation will be a condition for funding and for granting titles and certificates.

3.5 Trans-national accreditation systems

Traditionally, each country is responsible for accrediting its own educational institutions and systems in general. The multiplicity of programmes and institutions has created a system with a variety of bilateral and multilateral agreements with European institutions of higher education recognising another's study programmes and non-European accreditation organisations of the professions (mainly business and engineering). During the last decade, the internationalisation of education has triggered, to some extend, a need to develop international accreditation systems and/or agreements. Institutions try, for example, to obtain international recognition by calling in a foreign quality assessment authority for an external programme review or by co-operating with foreign institutions.

A good example is EQUIS (European Quality Improvement System) developed by the efmd (European Foundation for Management Development) to provide a framework for accrediting management education institutions across Europe and boosting their continuous improvement. Participation in the

system is on a voluntary basis. Moreover, the Association of European Universities – CRE has recognised the need for a wider opportunity to clarify the concepts linked to accreditation. The Association received funding from the EU last year (year 2000) to promote the project.

The European accreditation systems face increasing competition from abroad. Especially, the American accreditation organisations are actively selling their services to European institutions. For example, in the field of technology, some of the Central European universities have received an American accreditation. It is quite natural to think that Europeans should have their own accreditation systems and not to yield their position and authority to others.

There has been competition between the organisations for accreditation of the MBA in the USA (AACSB) and the European one (emfd). To keep its position in Europe as the co-ordinator of the discussion concerning management programmes, the emfd felt it important to compete with the ASCSB. With support from the EU, the European version of accreditation has been developed. Many universities in Europe have labelled their management programmes, MBA, in order to compete with other institutions. In the long run, it might be important to be accredited by the emfd in order to compete for students. The accreditation of the MBA programmes in Europe has lead to standardisation and variation of the programmes in different institutions. A prestigious institution will be able to offer an MBA programme. The label will be easily recognised by students and employers. But, at the same time, institutions are shaping the programmes in their own way, thus leading to a vast variation in MBA programme content (Sahlin-Andersson and Hedmo 2000).

4 Quality assurance and accreditation-like practices in higher education

4.1 Denmark

In Denmark, the system of higher education is administered centrally by the Ministry of Education's Department of Higher Education. Only certain programmes within such fields as art, architecture, librarianship and marine engineering are placed under other ministries (Danish Ministry of Education 1996). The system is mainly financed by the State and tuition is free of charge for the students.

Higher education in Denmark is characterised by a binary structure, based on a separation of the non-university sector, that is the vocationally-oriented programmes and the university sector. The non-university sector offers short-cycle higher education and medium-cycle higher education, and the university sector offers long-cycle higher education programmes. Each category will be further discussed below.

For a small country, Denmark has succeeded in building up a remarkably complex and differentiated educational system. In higher education, this is evidenced, especially, in the non-university sector, where a large number of institutions offer study programmes of varying lengths and levels: the short-cycle higher education area includes 70 institutions, the medium-cycle higher education area 112 institutions, and the long-cycle higher education institutions area includes 11 institutions. In addition, the Ministry of Cultural Affairs administers 21 schools, which are either medium-cycle or long-cycle higher education institutions.

The gross intake to higher education, in general, is 56% of a year group. Of these 9% are in the short-cycle, 38% in the medium-cycle and 53% in the long-cycle higher education programmes. Approximately 40% of a year group completes a degree (Ministry of Education 2000:30). It is the stated Government policy that 50% of a year group obtain a higher education degree.

The size of the student intake is an institutional decision based on the available resources and the physical framework. The admission requirements are, however, set by the Ministry of Education. They are normally based on the examination result obtained at the end of upper secondary education, in some cases supplemented with points obtained for occupational experience, etc.

Accreditation procedures

The Danish Evaluation Institute is responsible for the systematic evaluation of the whole educational sector, higher education included. Accreditation is on of the evaluation methods covered by the legal framework of the Institute. However, accreditation procedures are not widely used in Denmark. The only example of accreditation is in relation to the approval of the Danish State grant for students of private courses normally at the short cycle higher education level and further education level (in Danish "SU-vurderinger"). These accreditations are part of the Ministry of Education's procedure to determine whether students at private teaching establishments should receive the Danish State grant. The Danish Evaluation Institute conducts the accreditations, while the Ministry of Education is the approval authority on the basis of the accreditations. The Ministry of Education approves the grant for a period of no more than four years after which the institutions must be re-accredited. The accreditation framework consists of more than forty criteria formulated within thirteen areas. Criteria are established for purpose and content, labour market perspective and competence, educational structure, exams, enrolment of students, staffing, organisation, economy, study facilities and internal quality assurance. However, all of these criteria do not necessarily have to be met. The programme provider

must, nevertheless, demonstrate that the majority of the criteria are fulfilled in a substantial way.

The accreditation model consist of three elements:

1. A self-study. The self-study must be conducted by the institution under scrutiny according to a manual provided by the Danish Evaluation Institute. In the self-study, it is the institution's responsibility to prove that it meets the criteria or the vast majority of them. The purpose of the self-study is to provide qualitative and quantitative documentation for the accreditation.
2. A labour market survey. The survey is conducted by Statistics Denmark. The purpose of the survey is to establish that the former students have a relevant occupation.
3. A site visit. The visit is of a one-day duration. The aim is to validate the self-study and to observe the study facilities. The visit includes meeting with the management, students, staff and external examiners.

The general model for quality assurance of higher education

The vast majority of higher education in Denmark is State financed and State regulated. Accreditation is not used in this area. The quality of higher education is assured by a system of ministerial approval of new programmes and institutions, external examiners and an evaluation system. There are, however, considerations about accreditation partly initiated by the Bologna process. These considerations involve the Ministry of Education, the Rectors' Conference and the Danish Evaluation Institute.

Ministerial orders

The Ministry of Education approves all new programmes as well as institutions. Neither universities nor other higher education institutions are allowed to provide any programme without a ministerial order. There is no systematic pre-test of programmes, but there is a hearing of the relevant educational council.

Traditionally, new institutions have been established *ad hoc*. However, with the institutional reform of the medium cycle higher education sector

passed by Parliament in 2000, the Ministry has established a procedure for the recognition of mergers and individual institutions as Centres for Higher Education. The recognition is subject to legal approval by the Minister. The recognition takes into consideration conditions like intake, staff, educational profile, co-operation with university-level institution, employability, management and regional factors

External examiners

There is an extensive use of external examiners in Denmark compared with most other countries. External examiners are used in a majority of exams and other assessments in higher education throughout the period of study. It is the responsibility of the external examiners to ensure that the exams and other assessments (oral as well as written) are conducted according to regulations including the ministerial order on the specific programme. External examiners must also ensure that the students are treated fair and equal. Finally, the external examiner must give the institution feed-back on quality issues.

Evaluation

Since 1992, the Danish Evaluation Institute and its predecessor, the Centre for Evaluation and Quality Assurance of Higher Education, have completed a cycle of programme evaluations of almost all of the programmes in Denmark. The basic model for this has been a fitness-for-purpose approach including internal self-evaluation, an external expert team, a user survey and a site visit. It is the Institute that decides what system of evaluation will follow the programme evaluations. The first years of operation will be spent conducting a number of pilot studies testing various methods. These pilots will form the basis for future decisions as to how higher education will be systematically evaluated. In 2001, the Danish Evaluation Institute has scheduled a faculty evaluation and there are considerations concerning the employment of a framework for quality as an alternative to the fitness-for-purpose approach.

4.2 Finland

The Finnish higher education system consists of two sectors: there are altogether 20 universities and 29 polytechnics in Finland. The higher education system, as a whole, offers openings for 66% of the relevant age group (universities 29%, polytechnics 37%).

In the university sector, there are ten multi-faculty universities, three universities of technology, three schools of economics and business administration, and four art academies. Geographically, the network covers the whole country. University-level education is also provided by the National Defence College, which comes under the Ministry of Defence.

The basic mission of universities is to carry out research and provide education based on it. The underlying principle in university education is the freedom of research and university autonomy, which gives them extensive latitude for independent decisions. All Finnish universities are State-run, with the Government providing some 70% of their funding. Each university and the Ministry of Education conclude a three-year agreement on target outcome to determine the operational principles. The most important legislation governing the universities are the Universities Act and Decree, the Decree on the Higher Education Degree System and field-specific Decrees, which lay down such things as the responsibility for education in a given discipline, degree titles, and the structure, extent, objectives and content of education.

Universities select their own students, and the competition for openings is stiff. All fields apply *numerus clausus*, in which entrance examinations are a key element. Universities offer openings for about one third of the age group. The annual number of applications is nearly 66,000, and only 23,000 candidates are admitted. The aim is to offer a place in universities and polytechnics to 60–65% of the age group, which will be achieved soon.

The polytechnics were created gradually over the 1990s in Finland. The standard of former higher vocational education was raised and institutions incorporated into multidisciplinary polytechnics.

The Polytechnics Act was passed in 1995. The national polytechnics network is now complete. Since August 1, 2000, all Finnish polytechnics operate on a permanent basis.

Most of the polytechnics are multidisciplinary, regional institutions, which give particular weight to contacts with business and industry. Furthermore, there are the Police College of Finland which is financed by the Ministry of the Interior, and Ålands Yrkeshögskola Polytechnic, subordinate to the Government of the self-governing Åland Islands.

Finnish polytechnics, which are either municipal or private, are co-financed by the Government and the local authorities. The Ministry of Education and each polytechnic conclude a three-year agreement on target outcome to determine the objectives, intakes, and project and performance-based funding. There is no tuition fee for degree studies. In 1999, the total intake in polytechnics was little over 24,000.

In Finland, the establishment of new higher education institutions is decided by the Council of State and recognised by law. The Government accredits universities automatically when/if a decision is made to establish one. Furthermore, a (professional) higher education institution can then offer recognised degrees to the students. In almost all cases, a student does not need, after completing his/her studies successfully, additional professional accreditation (or recognition) from a professional/specialised body.

The aim of quality assurance in higher education

In Finland, the evaluation of higher education issues is carried out by the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council. It is an independent expert body assisting universities, polytechnics and the Ministry of Education in matters relating to evaluation. The evaluation work is financed mostly by the Ministry of Education and other sources are also utilised on a contract basis. The aims, and to some extent, the policies of the FINHEEC are based on the decree regarding its work (1320/1995) The council was set up as an evaluation agency for the purpose of

1. assisting institutions of higher education and the Ministry of Education in evaluation;
2. conducting evaluation for the accreditation of the polytechnics
3. organising evaluations of the operations and policies of institutions of higher education;
4. initiating evaluations of higher education and its development;
5. engaging in international co-operation in evaluation
6. promoting research on evaluation of higher education.

The Higher Education Evaluation Council improves the quality of higher education through evaluation work. The Evaluation Council publishes reports, issues statements and makes proposals. The improvement of evaluation expertise in the higher education institutions is also seen as an important objective. One of the longer-term targets in Finnish higher education policy is to incorporate evaluation into the everyday routines of the institutions.

In 1998, an amending decree (465/1998) assigned the Council the task of evaluating and recording professional courses offered by institutions of higher education. The decree had the impact of including also officially binding decisions to its work, when the Accreditation Board of Professional Courses (a subcommittee of the Council) became responsible for the accreditation of professional courses and the keeping of a register of the accredited courses.

The introduction of accreditation into the higher education sector in Finland is one element in quality assurance systems. However, improvement and assessment of the quality of education is seen as more important than accreditation. Two models, illustrating how the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council is involved in accreditation-like practices, will be discussed in the text below.

Since 1996, the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) has assisted the Council of State on accrediting issues, for example, when establishing (or accrediting) 'new polytechnics' or granting extension of their operating licences. Moreover, since 1998, FINHEEC has been responsible for accrediting professional development courses (continuing education).

Accreditation of the polytechnics

One of the tasks of the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council has been to assist the Council of State in the accreditation of the polytechnics. The Evaluation Council evaluated applications made by the polytechnics for accreditation and establishment. A separate Accreditation Subcommittee was established. The Members of the Accreditation Subcommittee consist of the representatives of polytechnics, teachers working in the polytechnic, students and representatives of working life.

In 1995 and 1996, the accreditation and extension of polytechnics were evaluated on the basis of applications. Since 1997, site visits have been added to the procedure. The Accreditation Subcommittee has compiled public reports of each evaluation and, since 1998, these reports have been published in the publication series of the Evaluation Council.

Furthermore, the Accreditation Subcommittee has implemented evaluations in case there has been a change in the scope of activities of an accredited polytechnic, or in the event new educational establishments (former independent institutions) have been incorporated with it.

The criteria used in the accreditation of permanent polytechnics include mainly proven excellence in experimental and development work. The criteria were set by an independent adviser for the Ministry of Education, who had developed the criteria in mutual discussions involving various partners from the polytechnics, regional authorities, students and representatives of industry and commerce.

The following framework for criteria was used in the assessment:

1. Mission, vision, goals and aims
2. Curriculum design (up-to-date, programme diversity and co-operation etc.)
3. Strength of the operational plan
4. Adequate student volumes
5. Teaching and learning
6. Library and information services
7. Co-operation with the working life
8. Co-operation with other higher education institutions

9. International co-operation
10. Regional purpose of the institution
11. Quality assurance systems

The aim of forming the criteria was to agree on minimum standards for permanent polytechnics.

Accreditation of professional courses

The evaluation and accreditation of professional courses has been on the agenda in Finland since 1996. At that time, the Minister of Education had to publicly assume responsibility for the invalid qualifications offered by a Continuing Education Centre of a certain university. In 1998, the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council was assigned the task of registering professional courses. The Evaluation Council appointed a subsection, the Accreditation Board of Professional Courses (ABPC), whose task was to assess professional courses and decide on accreditation. The Board consists of 12 members representing universities, polytechnics, working life and students.

The term 'Accreditation of Professional Courses' is commonly used. The law defines the practice as 'Evaluation and registration of professional courses'. Accreditation of professional courses is a process that gives public recognition or registration to professional, non-degree courses that meet certain (adequate quality) standards. It is a 'promise' that the course will provide the quality of education it claims to offer. Accreditation assures the student that the course is offered on a sound basis. It is important to note that the institutions themselves apply accreditation for the professional courses on a voluntary basis.

During its two-year term of operation, the Accreditation Board of Professional Courses has adopted the role of advisor and developer in higher education matters. It has rejected the role of controller, which, at first, seems inevitably to follow from keeping an official accreditation register. In the first two years of operation, 49 courses have been evaluated, 33 of which have been accepted and registered as meeting the sufficient quality. The aim of the accreditation is to credit the programmes on the basis of their capacity to deliver good qual-ity educational services and not just meeting the minimum standards.

When accrediting the Professional Courses, the Accreditation Board of Professional Courses (ABPC) is responsible for setting the criteria for good practices. During a site-visit to the course organiser, the following aspects are analysed:

1. Basic requirements
2. Co-operation with the working life
3. Course content and objectives
4. Educational process
5. Educational arrangements
6. Practical arrangements
7. Quality assurance

Additional criteria are set for courses taught through a foreign language and for virtual courses.

It is up to the institution to look for the best way to meet the criteria.

The accreditation process includes a review of the relevant documentation (application), a visit to the course and the immediate feedback after the site visit. However, the final decision is made by a subcommittee. The decision is made on a yes/no (registered/not registered) basis. Feedback and recommendations for the programme are provided after the registration decision is made.

International accreditation

The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council also carries out institutional evaluations. The majority of evaluations have been in the form of co-operation between the higher education institutions and the FINHEEC. In two projects, the evaluations (accreditation) have also involved a foreign co-operation partner. With financial support from the Council, EQUIS accreditations have been organised by the European Foundation for Management Development in two universities of business and administration. Some polytechnics have independently acquired, for example, international accreditation for their quality systems (by Norske Veritas). The European Foundation for the Accreditation of Hotel School Programmes has accredited (recognised) Bachelor of Science degree programmes in Hotel, Restaurant & Tourism Management in one polytechnic in the field.

Discussion on the Finnish experience

Quality assurance agencies in higher education mushroom around Europe. FINHEEC has been operating since 1996 and is already considered a "middle-aged" evaluation agency in Nordic and European comparison. From the beginning, the aim of the FINHEEC's evaluation has been empowerment of educational institutions rather than control. The purpose of accreditation-like practices and evaluation in Finland has been to improve learning, teaching methods, the processes of providing transparent information and practices within higher education institutions.

The institutions themselves participate actively in the process of evaluation. It is seen as important that the higher education institutions themselves are responsible for quality. When the institutions can influence the choice of objects, aims, methods, and criteria for evaluation, they can gain ownership of evaluation. Even when accrediting the professional courses, the site visit is designed to be participative and constructive (Hämäläinen & Kauppi, 2000). When the professional courses are being accredited, criteria are set by an outside body. If the course fails to meet the criteria, the institute may continue to run the course, but, as often is the case, it leads to immediate further self-development and improvement.

Accreditation of professional courses is voluntary for the higher education institutions. Often, the institutions apply with their best courses. The status of becoming accredited is not as significant. The result, if favourable, is sometimes used for marketing purposes. In unfavourable cases, the process is seen as a valuable tool for obtaining an outside view of the course or institute. Increasingly often, students are asking the organiser of the course to participate in accreditation.

One of the quality assurance mechanisms in Finland, as well as Sweden, has been the audit of quality work. The focus is not on 'quality' but on 'quality work': how an institution satisfies itself that its chosen academic standards are being achieved. This is inherently simpler and less expensive to conduct than institutional accreditations. There is a growing realisation to support the view that the focus of an academic audit on improvement and institutional quality assurance processes may be a more appropriate means of accountability given the evolution of polytechnics (and universities) throughout the world into self-regulatory 'learning organisations' (Dill 1999). There is an increasing interest in academic audit and its orientation towards improving academic quality assurance processes within higher education institutions.

Follow-up procedures have been developed for the accreditation of polytechnics. When granting the operating licences, some of the polytechnics were given (at the time of granting a permanent licence) a recommendation to develop some assessed areas within a fixed period of time, (usually 2 years). A follow-up site visit is then arranged.

The follow-up of the accreditation of professional courses is left to the organisers of the courses themselves. They are obliged to report to the Board for Professional Courses all substantive changes occurring after the registration.

Increasing interest in virtual learning, no doubt, sets new challenges for accreditation. The newly-established Finnish Virtual University and Virtual Polytechnic allow flexible delivery of education internationally. In this context, especially, the transfer of credits becomes important. This might call increased attention to the need for some kind of quality label for the content of the studies, or institutions offering the courses, especially, if the course is offered for an international group of students. The criteria for accrediting virtual courses would still need to be developed. So far, the criteria used for professional courses is also applied in virtual courses.

4.3 Iceland

There are currently eight higher education institutions in Iceland, offering studies for degrees at university level. Five of these institutions are state-run and three are private institutions. Three of the institutions offer graduate programmes for a master's degree but the University of Iceland is the only institution that offers doctoral studies.

All universities and institutions at university level come under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, except the Agricultural University, which belongs to the Ministry of Agriculture. A new framework law on the higher education was passed in December 1997. According to the law, the general objectives of higher education institutions are to serve as scientific research and educational institutions, to provide students with education preparing them for working independently in science, innovation and the arts and to fill the various employment positions in society that require higher education. Universities are also to educate the public and to serve society through its knowledge. More specified objectives are outlined in individual laws for each higher education institution.

The enactment of the law gives Icelandic universities increased autonomy in their own matters, and has altered the relations between the higher education institutions and the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. The Ministry's emphasis is on agreements and monitoring, rather than on interference with particular internal matters of the institutions.

Admission to most institutions of higher education is subject to matriculation from an Icelandic upper secondary school or equivalent education. Universities may set specific requirements as to prerequisite specialization at the secondary level for some programs of study. In the state-run universities there is generally no ceiling on the number of students admitted. However, in some programs the number of students allowed to continue after the end of the first term is limited, either by competitive examination at the end of the first year as in law or by *numerus clausus* as in subjects within the health sciences.

In the academic year 1999–2000, 10.283 students were enrolled in higher education institutions in Iceland. The demand for university level education in Iceland has increased significantly in the last few years and decades. From 1977 to 1998 the number of university level students has increased nearly fourfold.

Accreditation-like practices in Iceland

There is no formal accreditation system in Iceland. The Ministry of Education has several means to check the standards and quality of study programmes offered by the higher education institutions. The universities are obliged, according to the Law on Higher Education and regulation regarding quality control of university instruction, to set up an internal quality system, and the Ministry has the authority to undertake an external evaluation of defined units within the institutions or the institutions as a whole. The Ministry can also influence the standards through financial and performance agreements that are made with each university. Furthermore, the Ministry is responsible for approving new degrees.

According to the Universities Act private parties may establish universities upon receiving the consent of the Minister of Education. The Minister of Education may grant operating permits to universities funded by private parties if they operate in accordance with statutes or charters ratified by the Minister of Education. Should a university, which has been granted an operation permit, fail to fulfil the provisions of this Act or the demands made concerning instruction and research, the Minister of Education may revoke its operating permit.

As required by law and subject to review by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, university institutions are responsible for issuing certificates and defining the content and method of courses leading to certification. The Ministry is also to issue a list of degrees and their content recognized by the Ministry.

International Accreditation

Some programmes have independently requested an international accreditation. The Faculty of Engineering at the University of Iceland was evaluated in 1992–1993 by the Accrediting Board for Engineering and Technology, Inc. (ABET), an American engineering accrediting agency. The Ministry of Culture and Education, the Ministry of Industry and Commerce, the Association of Chartered Engineers and the University of Iceland sponsored

the accreditation. A self-evaluation report was written, based on criteria set by the American accrediting agency. The main focus was on the curriculum and the structure of the programme, quality control and asserting whether the programme met the basic requirements for accreditation. The ABET evaluation report had some influence on the University of Iceland as a whole. It was the first time a foreign body was invited to evaluate an educational programme at the University and as such it generated interest and discussions in other faculties.

In 1997, the BSc in Diagnostic Radiography offered by the Icelandic College of Engineering and Technology was validated and accredited by the Technology College of Radiographers. The programme was accredited for a period of five years. The follow up will be conducted during 2002.

The aim of quality assurance in higher education in Iceland

Iceland does not have a separate national agency for evaluation of education, but a separate division of evaluation and supervision in the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture was established in 1996. The division is responsible for evaluation at all school levels from pre-school to higher education.

In line with the law on higher education the Minister of Education, Science and Culture passed a regulation in May 1999 regarding quality control of university instruction, which requires universities to set up a formal, internal quality assessment system.

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture takes the initiative to conduct an external evaluation, when it will be carried out and the focus. For this task an external, independent group of specialists, is appointed to implement the quality assessment. The evaluations that have been carried out in higher education have so far focused on programmes or disciplines. A specific programme within higher education such as the political science programme at the University of Iceland have been evaluated and also disciplines across institutions, for example business management, teacher education and nursing education.

The main elements of the external evaluation process are a self-evaluation, conducted within the respective institution(s) and a peer review team visiting the institution(s)/faculty. The peer review team verifies and comments on the content of the self-evaluation report, as well as responds to questions raised by the report and during the site visit and write a report on its findings. The results are published, after the institutions in question have made their comments. External evaluations of higher education have focused on educational activities (teaching and learning).

Higher education institutions have to fulfil their obligations on quality assurance in teaching by setting up a formal internal quality assessment system. This consists of a systematic evaluation of teachers work, for example, assessment of teaching by students, teachers self-evaluation and formal reaction of the governing body in question, (the department or the faculty), with the purpose of improving the quality of the teaching. In May 2001 higher education institutions have to send a description of its quality system to the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture and publish it officially.

Discussion on the Icelandic experience

Higher education institutions in Iceland shall constantly be working on internal quality assessment. On the other hand there are no rules on how often external evaluation is to be carried out. For the last years approximately one or two external evaluations have been carried out annually.

Quality assessment in higher education does not have conditional effects on the institution in question, like for example on grants. On the other hand the objectives of an evaluation are to improve the quality of teaching in higher education institution, encourage institutions to use the tools of quality management to improve their organization and increase flexibility in their operations and make the institutions more accountable for their activities.

So far, there has been a limited debate on accreditation in Iceland.

4.4 Norway

Before 1998, when the Network Norway Council (NNR) was established, there had been scattered evaluations of Norwegian higher education, but no consistent evaluation programme. From the start, the NNR was given the responsibility for national quality assurance in higher education as part of its mission[5] . The NNR now carries out various types of evaluations and, by the end of 1999, a quality assurance system, designed to cover all institutions, had been developed and is currently being tested in a pilot project with four institutions. The system is scheduled to become fully operative from 2003, when it may also accommodate an accreditation mission, if such a mechanism is chosen.

The NNR has only an advisory function to the Ministry of Education, which retains all powers of issuing formal approval to courses, programmes or institutions. This power is not exercised through any kind of explicit accreditation arrangement, but rather through certain standard procedures prior to the Ministry's decisions and, to some extent, even through direct delegation to the institutions themselves. The term "accreditation" is, therefore, not used in any technical sense, so "approval"[6] is the preferred term. The process only affects new programmes that the institutions want to introduce, with no systematic follow-up control of approved programmes.

When discussing present-day accreditation-like practices in Norway, a major distinction must be made between State-owned and privately-owned institutions. The two types are covered by separate laws and have their educational programmes approved through different procedures. State institutions are covered by the Universities and Colleges Act, 1995, whereas decisions concerning the private sector are made under the Private Colleges Act, 1986.

---

[5] The Network Norway Council is a multi-mission agency. In addition to serving as a quality assurance agency, it is also the Ministry's chief advisory body in all other matters concerning higher education in Norway.

[6] In Norwegian: "godkjenning". (See definitions under 2.1)

Institutions owned by the State

In 2000, the State-owned institutions had 92% of the total student population and received 98% of public expenditure on higher education in Norway. The State sector includes 38 institutions, all mentioned by name and under its specific category in the Universities and Colleges Act:

- all 4 of Norway's full-scale universities
- 6 specialist university colleges
- 26 state colleges
- 2 art colleges

Although the Act mentions four different categories, it recognises only one formal distinction between them: the special responsibility that universities and university colleges have for educating researchers, that is, to maintain doctoral programmes and to award doctoral degrees. But even doctoral degrees have, for some time now, been awarded by a few private colleges as well and in 2000, three state colleges obtained the same right in defined subject areas.

There are, however, clear structural differences between the categories of institutions:

- Research activity is much higher in universities and university colleges than in the State and art colleges, which is reflected in the pattern of funding.
- Universities/university colleges offer programmes at the higher degree level in most established fields, whereas State colleges generally have fewer such programmes.
- Certain programmes for professional qualifications (for example, law, theology, psychology, medicine, dental medicine, veterinary medicine) are restricted to universities or university colleges, whereas State colleges dominate in fields like teaching, nursing and professions related to the arts.

The system of programme approval in State-owned institutions

The fact that the State institutions exist by law, and are subject to governmental regulation, implicitly makes them institutionally accredited. According to the Universities and Colleges Act, the Govern-

ment decides which degrees, subjects, professional training programmes and other educational programmes an institution can offer, but the Act also provides for the possibility of delegating some of these powers to the institutions. At present, the Government has delegated the following powers:

- Subject to guidelines given by the Ministry, the institutions themselves make decisions on the recognition or validation of education from private institutions or from institutions abroad. In some cases, such decisions can be appealed at the national level. The NAIC (ENIC) section of The Network Norway Council advises the institutions in cases of international credit transfer.
- Guidelines given by the Ministry also describe how all types of State institutions, without any further process of approval, can offer courses of up to 90 (ECTS) credits at the lower degree level within subject areas that are already established at the institution. The Government recently announced its intention to extend this to 120 credits.

In other cases, State institutions need the Ministry's approval in order to launch a new programme, that is, for all programmes outside established disciplines, all programmes covering more than 90 credits, all programmes that lead to professional authorisation (for example, teachers) and all programmes at the higher (Master's) degree level.

In order to obtain an approval, the institution must present a study plan for the new course or programme and account for the competence of the teaching staff, the curriculum, exam arrangements, infrastructure such as teaching facilities, library, computers and other necessary equipment, etc. The institution's presentation is then scrutinised by a number of institutions who already offer the same type of programme, before the Ministry gives its final word. In some cases, where no equivalent exists in Norway, such an assessment is obtained from foreign institutions.

In the Ministry's decision, academic quality assessment – what we might call the proper "accreditation" function – is mingled with other considerations. Since a licence to start a new programme automatically entails State funding, a needs analy-

sis will also be made. However, the Ministry will always give its reasons for turning down an application. More often than not, denial of approval is grounded in a failure, on the part of the institution, to account for the need to offer the programme and make a convincing argument that it will attract students.

Applications for new programmes are occasionally assessed by the Network Norway Council, who then advise the Ministry on what decision to make. This is done in all cases when State or private colleges apply for the right to award doctoral degrees in a defined subject area. For this purpose, the Council has developed guidelines that spell out what requirements must be fulfilled by the institution. Some applications to establish new programmes on the higher degree level are also heard by the Council. The Council will then concentrate on making an academic assessment, leaving considerations of need to the Ministry.

The system of programme approval in private colleges

For the academic year of 1999/2000, Norway had 19 private colleges that offered approved courses or programmes of higher education, with student numbers (in approved courses) ranging from 22 to 9,631. Many of the smaller institutions, in fact, provide a variety of other courses that do not qualify as "higher education". Seven private colleges had student numbers of 500 or more in approved courses, whereas only two had more than a thousand. By far the largest private institution is the Norwegian School of Management BI.

Since private institutions of higher education are not steered by the Government like the State institutions are, they do not enjoy the same rights as *de facto* "accredited" institutions either. Consequently, they cannot start up new courses, however small, without approval by the Ministry. Under the Private Colleges Act, the Ministry recognises the private colleges' right to examinations and degrees at the single programme (or course) level. Such recognition automatically entails public funding (as a fixed percentage of an estimated standard cost) if the college meets one of the following conditions:

- that it is founded for religious or ethical purposes, or
- that it is founded as a pedagogical alternative to public provision, or
- that it completes public provision in fields where there are unmet needs.

As preconditions for obtaining approvals, the Private Colleges Act lists certain requirements concerning the colleges' steering system and administrative procedures. The Act then defines the *quality standard* for approval by simply referring to the State provision, stating that private programmes must have "the same quality". In turn, recognition gives access to public funding and to national titles and degrees. The Private Colleges Act explicitly instructs the Government to approve of all private education that meets the requirements of the Act.

In its application for approval, a college must demonstrate "equal quality" in terms of entrance requirements, course content and literature, teaching methods, the competence of teachers and external examiners as well as examination arrangements. The application is routinely sent to the Network Norway Council, which makes its recommendation based on advice from a group of experts, after which the Ministry will make its decision. For subsequent changes in the programme – even quite minor ones – the college will have to file an entirely new application. In 2000, there were 53 such applications from private colleges.

Discussion on Norwegian experiences

At the same time as the Network Norway Council came into being, the Mjøs Commission (after the name of its leader) was set up by the Government to propose reforms in Norwegian higher education. The Commission published its report (Norwegian Ministry of Education, Research and Church Affairs, 2000) in May 2000 and one of its recommendations was that an independent "Evaluation and Accreditation Centre" be set up in order to organise national evaluations and a systematic accreditation programme. In the Commission's view, this was a natural consequence of the increased *de facto* autonomy of higher education institutions in Norway, and even more necessary in the light of the Com-

mission's proposals for further deregulation. However, the idea of a new accreditation agency was not followed up in the Government's White Paper on higher education (St.meld, nr. 27 (2000–2001). Norwegian ministry of Education, Research and Church Affairs). Instead, the Government wants to build on the present NNR, while making it more exclusively an "instrument for quality".

Parliament will handle the Government's White Paper in the early summer of 2001. Based on Parliament's ruling, it will be left to the Ministry to design a policy in this area. In the meantime, uncertainty and debate continue around the following issues:

- Should national quality assurance of higher education be organised with a higher degree of independence from the Ministry? This could mean that the quality assurance function is taken from the present Network Norway Council and organised in a separate agency. Or it could mean that the present structure is preserved, following a redefinition of the Council's position. Nor is it made clear whether the NNR should still have its dual character of general advisory body to the Ministry and quality assurance agency.
- Should national quality assurance contain a specific and explicit accreditation function? Or will systematic evaluations without such a function provide sufficient information to students and stakeholders and sufficient transparency for state funding?
- Should the power to recognise foreign education as part of national diplomas still rest with the institutions, or should the present advisory function of the Network Norway Council/NAIC be extended to include recognition?
- Should accreditation – in case it is introduced – meet higher education at the programme or institutional level? So far, the policy and practice of the Network Norway Council points in the direction of the institutional level, but a new or redefined agency will obviously have to reconsider its strategy in the light of new regulations.
- Should private institutions be given the opportunity to apply for institutional accreditation, so that they may obtain the same autonomy in relation

to their own programmes as the State institutions presently enjoy? For a long time, it has been the complaint of private colleges that present arrangements are unnecessarily cumbersome and bureaucratic. The White Paper, however, fails to announce any changes in the Private Colleges Act.

- Should institutions be "forever" defined as belonging to a certain category, or should there be an open structure, where transfer from one category to another is possible, following a process of institutional accreditation? At this point the White Paper goes further than the Mjøs Report by indicating that any college that awards doctoral degrees in a single subject area may be recognised as a university. This arrangement, if it is accepted by Parliament, would increase the number of universities in Norway from four to more than 15 at a single stroke, and is now one of the most heatedly debated issues of the higher education reform.

So far, there has not really been a public debate on accreditation in Norway. Before the university and college sectors came under the same law, the University Council would set the academic standards for admitting programmes in the college sector (both State and private) into university degrees, and there were those who thought that a more formalised accreditation scheme ought to be established for this purpose. After 1995, however, as the new Act reorganised the college sector into fewer and stronger institutions and did away with formal distinctions between universities and colleges, the idea lost support.

Among the private colleges, on the other hand, there has, for a long time, been a number of institutions of sufficient breadth and quality to nourish ambitions of becoming "institutionally accredited" with the same rights as institutions in the State sector. The demand for an accreditation instrument to award such recognition has increased in intensity over the last few years and it is expected that the private colleges will try to persuade Parliament to write this function into the Private Colleges Act in connection with its treatment of the White Paper.

The Mjøs Commission brought the issue of accreditation back on the agenda, when it recommended the establishing of an independent accreditation and evaluation agency. This proposal was linked to several others, all of them springing out of a general philosophy that advocated a further deregulation of higher education. But it is a sign of how little interest the question of accreditation arouses that the debate that followed the Mjøs Report hardly touched on the quality assurance issue at all (although much was said about quality, and the White Paper was subtitled "a quality reform for higher education"). As it turned out, the White Paper said no to most of the proposed deregulation measures and made no hints at an accreditation programme. That may have settled the issue, although a minority Government cannot be certain of having its way in Parliament.

4.5 Sweden

Accreditation of higher education in Sweden is understood as a quality evaluation of a subject, programme, an institution or a professional degree ending in a decision saying yes or no. There will always be a follow up and the process will be reiterated after a given time.

The accreditation activity may follow after an application from an institution (private or public) or on a regular basis according to a national programme for evaluation. The criteria for the assessment, if not already in place, will be developed in co-operation between the State and the institutions in the higher education sector.

Swedish system

There are 39 institutions in the higher education sector in Sweden. There are 16 universities with a general right to award doctoral degrees in all topics and another three institutions with a limited right to award doctoral degrees. The university colleges have the right to award degrees at the undergraduate level. There is a performance-based funding system for the undergraduate level from the Government. The Government also funds the doctoral

programmes, although there are also external funders of doctoral education. There is a Higher Education Act and ordinance regulating the work of higher education institutions.

Accreditation was introduced in Sweden by a new act for higher education in 1993. The aim of the act was to give more freedom to the institutions and the national system for curricula was abolished. The established universities were given a general right to award all exams including doctoral degrees at their own discretion. The university colleges were given the right to award Bachelor's degrees.

Such a decentralised system required a system for quality control in order to create trust and make the institutions accountable for their activities. A quality audit system and accreditation procedures were implemented in order to support and control the quality in higher education. A system for evaluations was even implemented.

The National Agency for Higher Education was established by the Swedish Government in 1995 as a successor to previous Government agencies with the mandate to evaluate higher education. The Agency has performed quality audits, evaluation of subjects/disciplines and programmes, accreditation of institutions and subjects. The Agency derives its authority from the Government, but its agenda is only partially set by the Government. The Agency is reaches a decision after a quality assessment on the right for the institutions to award exams.

However, the establishment of new universities is decided by the Government and recognised by law. The Government will also make decisions for new professional degrees and all applications from private institutions, after a quality assessment performed by the Agency.

The costs for all quality reviews are paid by the Agency from the budget set by the Parliament, and cover the costs for experts, travelling, writing a report, etc. The higher education institutions will carry the costs for their own self-evaluation report.

The purpose of quality reviews in Sweden

The policy of the National Agency for Higher Education, responsible for the accreditation activity, is based on an act of Parliament (the Government Bill 1999/2000:28). According to the Government Bill, the new quality assurance system will be developed to ensure that:

- "the quality of the programme and the results of the quality work are placed at the focus of the evaluation process,
- a review system will be created that is comprehensive both for institutions and programmes, and is carried out periodically,
- students will be provided with better opportunities for participation and influence, and
- the independent responsibility for universities and university colleges for quality assurance and development, as well as the independent review function of the National Agency for Higher Education will be safeguarded."

The Agency performs two different kinds of accreditation activities. There are reviews of all subjects and programmes in a period of six years, starting 2001 and ending 2006, and quality assessment on request from an institution (private or public) to upgrade their right to award degrees. These assessments will end in a yes or no decision by the Agency. The Government will make the final decision for private institutions, and for questions concerning the right to award doctoral degrees for both private and public institutions.

The aims of the quality reviews of all subjects and programmes are:

- Control: In order to get or retain the right to award degrees, the higher education institutions must reach a certain level of quality. The subject and programme will be reviewed in relation to the general goals and instructions for higher education given in the Higher Education Act and the Higher Education Ordinance. Students should be offered equivalent education of good quality, regardless of their choice of higher education institution.

- Development: The higher education institutions should be able to use the evaluations in their own quality development work. The evaluations should stimulate renewal and diversity in disciplines and programmes.
- Information: To support the need for easily available information about different subjects and programmes by students and other stakeholders.
- Comparisons: The information should be such that the students and others may compare subjects and programmes at different higher education institutions in order to decide which is the most suitable programme for them. It should also be possible to compare Swedish higher education internationally, particularly in the light of increased mobility across national borders.

The primary aim of these evaluations, according to the bill, is to "mobilise the inner forces of the higher education institutions' quality work", – As the Agency sees it that includes all levels and from different perspectives in order to stimulate the renewal and development of education and the ambitions from the higher education institution to meet new demands and challenges from a changing world. The reviews can contribute to emphasise and support different initiatives to constructive renewals in the organisation of education, content and pedagogy among the different programmes. Comparison does not mean one-dimensional ranking of different programmes. Equivalent education does not mean that education in the same subject must be the same at every higher education institution. On the contrary, such an order would hamper creativity, renewal and development of higher education.

For the higher education institutions, important aspects include further development of their quality assurance systems, the internal process of self-assessment at different levels, and providing the students with better opportunities for participation and influence. Naturally, the participation of teachers and other staff in the developmental processes is also very important.

The National Agency for Higher Education will review quality development in subjects and programmes and report the results of those reviews to the institution, the government, and the general public. The main purpose of these reviews is to stimulate quality development in the higher education institutions and their different educational courses and programmes. But it is also a process for control, in order to accredit subjects and programmes in the interests of the student. A certain academic standard must always be offered.

The Agency also performs institutional reviews in a cycle of three years, but this is not an accreditation process. There will be no decision on a yes or no basis according to the institutional reviews. The aim here is to support the development of the higher education institutions' quality assurance system. There will be a public report with criticism and recommendations.

Who sets the criteria

The aspects which will be the focus for evaluations, and the criteria, are developed in a dialogue between the Agency and higher education institutions. The Agency will suggest what aspects will be evaluated in the review. Various partners from the higher education institutions such as deans, professors and vice chancellors will discuss and confirm the aspects or criteria.

Important aspects for the review of subjects and programmes are:

Prerequisites for education
- Recruitment and student groups
- Teaching skills, scientific expertise and opportunities for staff development
- Goals, content and organisation of education
- Library and other information support
- Facilities and equipment

Process of education
- The student/doctoral student working situation
- The teachers' working situation
- Programme structure
- Modes of examination
- A critical and creative environment for learning

Results of education
- Quality assurance of courses and programmes, monitoring and assuring quality within courses, programmes, departments, faculties and institu-

tions and higher education institution's system for quality enhancement

- Follow ups of quality assurances, from former students (for example, alumni) and from other stakeholders such as employers
- Throughput.

The general structure of these evaluations is as follows:

- Self-assessment (supported by developed guidelines).
- External assessment group (including international assessors and student representatives) for peer reviews.
- On-site visit of the assessment group, in order to observe the institution in action and discuss the institution and/or programme with various members of the staff and students.
- Feedback with statements and recommendations for further development from the assessment group and opportunities for the department, faculty or programme in question to react on that feedback.
- Public report and a decision by the University Chancellor (the head of the Agency) on approval or disapproval.
- Follow-ups.

In case a review shows an unexpected low quality, the University Chancellor will, according to a Government regulation, give the institution one or two years to improve the quality. A special review will follow the decision. If the quality has not been improved to an acceptable level, the right to award the degree in that subject or programme will be withdrawn from the institution. The institution is then responsible to ensure the students can take their exams. In practice, this implies that the institution must purchase the service from another university who will offer the degree to the students.

Discussion on the Swedish experience

As the six year review programme of subjects and programmes was implemented in 2001, there is as yet nothing to discuss. The Swedish experience of accreditation is more related to assessments concerning new degrees on request from the institutions. This has been a process of both support and control on the part of the Agency. It has been in the interest of the institutions to gain new rights to award degrees, for example, Master's (magister) and PhD. The accreditation procedure has worked as a driving force concerning the quality in the institutions in order to gain new rights. The 'stick and carrot' have been efficient tools in the process.

5 Conclusions and Suggestions

5.1 Tradition and background

The higher education sector in the Nordic countries shows great similarities. That also goes for the relationship between the state and the (predominantly state-owned) institutions and for the philosophies and methodologies that the quality assurance agencies base their evaluation practice on. As to the way in which higher education has been steered, monitored and controlled in the Nordic countries, three features stand out:

1. Institutional protection and autonomy.

Traditionally, the institutions have enjoyed trust, autonomy and a large measure of protection and secure funding. Government steering and control have mainly taken the forms of setting targets and demanding reports on institutional economy, student places and candidate production. Under the protection of regulated systems of student intake, there was also for a long time relatively little pressure to compete for funds and students among the institutions. Inside this broad framework of macro-level regulation, it has been left to academia itself to define its own tasks and set its own standards. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy, however, has been offset by a lack of scope for strategic action. While there is obviously a connection between these two features, the institutions' relative inability to act strategically has chiefly been due to a combination of massive growth in the student population after the mid-80s, the linking of funding to student numbers, and the institutions' societal obligation to reproduce, develop and disseminate broad fields of knowledge. The institutions have been locked in a system that linked economy to linear growth rather than to strategic and methodological innovation. With modern-type deregulation, the gradual opening of a national (and international) education market and the advent of the "audit society", however, this is now about to change. The focus is now very much on meeting new challenges and finding viable strategies in a changing world of higher education.

2. Development-oriented quality assurance.

The aims of evaluations have traditionally emphasised quality development more than quality control. In this sense, the term "quality assurance", with its obvious connotations of control and auditing, may seem a little misleading. Evaluations have rested firmly on the evaluated units' own self-assessments and a kind of external assessment where "critical friends" – or peers/experts – look at each others' professional competence and practise. Although there have been – and still are – good reasons for this, not least the very complex and dynamic concept of quality one must relate to in higher education, this practice is also open to criticism for taking little account of outside needs and interests. But even this feature is changing. Tracing studies, more emphasis on student and employer opinion, the use of evaluators with experience outside higher education, greater stress on goal-fulfilment, etc are gradually making quality assurance more universally transparent and accountable. The introduction of accreditation would be just another means of meeting the increasing demand for accountability.

3. Government steering and approval.

In the "Nordic model", the licensing of higher education is not just an isolated matter of quality assurance, but also linked with considerations of educational policy, and consequently with needs analysis and funding. Accordingly, the final authority on licensing – or approval – rests with the Government, as part of its total steering of the sector. But the gradual shift from steering by regulation to steering by objectives and results, and the setting up of national quality assurance agencies, have meant that much of the actual approval function has been transferred to these agencies and thus become more

professionalised, although the formal power relations have remained much the same. The introduction of an accreditation regime would make the distinction between academic (or quality) accreditation and political steering even more explicit and conspicuous.

5.2 Accreditation and quality assurance in the Nordic countries today

In procedures of initial approval, the role of the quality assurance agency varies slightly from one Nordic country to another. It also depends on whether the case in point concerns a course, a programme, education at the bachelor, master or doctoral degree level, a private or a state institution, or the status of an entire institution. The main function of the quality assurance agency is always to be an umpire of whether the unit in question holds – or can be expected to hold – an acceptable level of quality. A systematic accreditation arrangement would require that the agency must treat all cases of initial approval according to set procedures.

A systematic accreditation arrangement would also require that all initially approved/accredited units must be regularly checked at certain intervals. The normal mechanism for carrying out such follow-ups would be evaluation based on predefined standards resulting in accreditation, which so far have been the main business of the quality assurance agencies:

• Denmark has, for many years, followed a policy of evaluating all higher education by subject or programme. Such evaluations are common in many European countries, for instance, in Great Britain and the Netherlands, where they also have – or will have – an explicit accrediting function. So far, however, Danish subject evaluations have mainly had a developmental aim. The Evaluation Institute has not yet decided how the evaluations of HE will be carried out in the future. The decision will be taken on the basis of a number of pilot projects conducted over the next couple of years.

• Finland has partial procedures for following up the accreditations of polytechnics. In the university sector, institutional evaluations may inform government decisions on approval and funding, but there is no formal mechanism. Institutional evaluations in Finland emphasise the developmental aspect and the relationship between the institution and society. Accreditation of Professional courses emphasises heavily on developmental aspects. The results of the described procedures seem promising.

• Norway is about to choose its future approach to national quality assurance. After a trial period with institutional evaluations of the four universities, various programme and theme evaluations and a pilot project with a proposed "quality assurance system", this latter system, which is a kind of "fortified" institutional audit, is scheduled to become operative as from 2003. If Norway should opt for accreditation, this system might probably be designed to include such a function too.

• Sweden has performed accreditation activities since 1993 after application from the institutions. The Agency has also carried out a full cycle of institutional audits, in addition to various other evaluations. The audits, which emphasised development rather than control, are now being toned down, whereas a programme of comprehensive and systematic subject evaluations is being introduced and will be carried out between 2001 and 2006. The planned round of subject evaluations will include some kind of accrediting mission, as they will affect the right to give examinations or award degrees.

The most important consequence of shifting to an accreditation system would probably be the effect that this would have on evaluation practice. In making this shift, each country would have to analyse how their current evaluation practice and methodologies would have to be modified or extended in order to carry this additional function, and whether accreditation would then be cost-effective and add value in terms of total quality assurance and quality development.

5.3 Accreditation in a Nordic perspective

The previous discussion in this paper would seem to indicate the following conclusions on the question of accreditation, as seen in a Nordic perspective:

1. The main argument against accreditation as a systematic tool for quality assurance would be that this might have a negative effect on other aspects of quality work. If evaluations are to focus on yes–no verdicts according to set standards, there may be less scope for evaluation methodologies that promote quality development and innovation. Set standards may have the effect of conserving a static and reductionist concept of quality, which would seem to break with an established tradition in the Nordic countries that values support over control in evaluations. Also, there are the very real dangers of bureaucracy, ritualism and defensive strategies. If Nordic countries were to opt for accreditation, it would be a crucial task to identify how it could be conducted without too heavy and standardised procedures, and without undermining academic autonomy and the institutions' own responsibilities for maintaining good quality education.

2. Only Sweden has, to some extent, procedures for initial accreditation today. Sweden is also the only Nordic country that has taken steps to systematically *control* approved units of higher education via evaluations. In the other Nordic countries, and partly even in Sweden, decisions on the initial accreditation/approval of higher education take place in the Ministry of Education, where they merge with deliberations founded in educational policy. As for follow-up measures, evaluations have hitherto been little concerned with the control function. For reasons of transparency and accountability, a more explicit mechanism of accreditation might be favourable.

3. Deregulation and increased autonomy for higher education institutions also speak in favour of more systematic arrangements of formal approval, carried out by independent quality assurance agencies. So do the massification of higher education, the spread of new (virtual) modes of delivery and the increasing occurrence of franchising arrangements. Pressure from the outside is another factor: if a pro-accreditation policy gains ground in Europe, the Nordic countries may feel obliged to conform in order to maintain their international position in a situation with new patterns of mobility and inter-institutional competition.

4. Quality assurance with a stress on accountability and transparency does not necessarily mean that the formal power of approval/accreditation has to move from the Ministry to an outside agency. Rather, the important point is that there *is* an independent agency to give systematic, formal and public judgement on approval/accreditation according to explicit (academic) criteria, so that academic and political processes are clearly separated.

5. Quality assurance in the Nordic countries shows great similarities, but the actual evaluation methodologies still vary from one country to another. Therefore, there is no ready basis for a common Nordic system of accreditation. Each country must have the opportunity to choose whether it wants to implement this mechanism, and to found an eventual accreditation arrangement on evaluation methodologies of its own choice. For instance, it must be possible to carry out accreditations either via the *institutional* or via the *programme/subject* level. A "second level" of Nordic accreditation – on top of national arrangements – is not a viable option, as it would add bureaucracy rather than value.

6. There is still scope for co-operative Nordic arrangements without establishing new bureaucracies. The Nordic quality assurance agencies maintain a useful network for the purpose of exchanging information and learning from each other's operations. This also provides an arena for deepening the mutual understanding of the quality requirements that underpin recognitions in each country. Further work along these lines, in part organised as single projects, may help

extend and facilitate the inter-Nordic mobility of students and degrees (e.g. the existing Nordic agreement on mutual professional recognition), and promote the acceptance of Nordic degrees in other countries. Also, the defining of a broad, common platform of quality assurance would reflect favourably back on the credibility of higher education in each Nordic country, and might be an effective means of promoting the Nordic values and methodologies of quality assurance in the outside world.

5.4 Accreditation in a wider international perspective

Neither a free accreditation market, nor a unitary system of European accreditation, is likely to materialise in the near future. For all its emphasis on the need to create a "European space of higher education", the Bologna Declaration makes it clear that the individual nations' approach to quality assurance must be respected and that any European dimension in this field must rest on national systems. At the same time, the need for Europe to put its house in order is stressed. A recent project entitled *Towards Accreditation Schemes for Higher Education in Europe?*, organised by the Association of European Universities and co-funded by the Socrates Programme, concluded at its validation seminar in Lisbon in February 2001 that there is "a need for a trans-European quality assurance framework which would ensure the international visibility, compatibility and credibility of European higher education degrees".

Based on the present situation, the following points may indicate a shared Nordic position on the issue of accreditation of higher education inside a European framework:

1. With regard to the international acceptance of credits and degrees across national boundaries, the right for individual countries to choose its own method of approving/accrediting higher education should be preserved, as long as these procedures adhere to broad common definitions of what higher education is, and to generally accepted principles of quality assurance.

2. Supra-national accrediting arrangements should be based on mutual acceptance or recognition, depending on responsible and transparent quality assurance systems in each country. International information exchange and co-operation in the field of quality assurance should be encouraged, as done by the European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies. A European system of accreditation, however, is not to be wished for, for the following (and other) reasons:

- Different national traditions and cultures in the higher education sector – and in quality assurance – are a value of diversity in themselves and should be safeguarded.

- Correspondence must be ensured between the politically authorising level and the level of quality assurance practice. Quality assurance must have a national foundation as long as higher education is primarily funded and regulated nationally.

- Accreditations have to be rooted in commonly accepted standards. Detailed European standards would not be able to take account of the enormous diversity in institutions, degrees and programmes that will exist in Europe, even after a convergence process towards a Bachelor's/Master's degree structure. And if it did, it could not do so without a standardising and conserving effect on aims and content that is undesirable.

- Costs and bureaucracy load would be intolerable.

3. In general, European higher education enjoys a high reputation in the world. It is not proven that the competitiveness of European higher education in a global education market will be enhanced through a unified system of accreditation. In this situation, a European co-ordinated effort in quality assurance should rather stress a development towards excellence by stimulating international benchmarking arrangements and exchange of information about good practices inside the various disciplines and for whole institutions.

5.5 Final remarks

Governments may be reluctant to hand over their traditional power of accreditation or approval to an outside accrediting body, and thus separate approval from policy and steering. There may be good arguments for that, particularly in terms of national economics. For reasons of fairness and transparency, though, it can be argued that decisions on approval or accreditation must be based on a system of independent quality assurance, exercised according to a defined mandate by an autonomous authority, whose findings and verdicts are made public. The important thing is to make clear to stakeholders and the general public which is which: quality assurance and political decision-making.

As long as quality assurance is comprehensive, competent, open and independent, the question of whether to adopt a system of explicit accreditation is more a one of principle and a practical one. The most important consequence of opting for accreditation would be that this would add new demands to the way evaluations are conducted: it would require a certain scope and format in order to cover all higher education in a responsible way, and it would have methodological implications, some of which might in fact be negative.

On the whole, the established quality assurance agencies of the Nordic countries have developed sufficient expertise and experience to handle an accreditation mission, should they be given such a task by their respective political authorities. It could be argued, though, whether this is really necessary, and whether it would be a wise quality assurance policy for our educational environment.

The present Nordic accreditation project was undertaken on the assumption that there is a shared understanding of academic quality and quality assurance in the Nordic countries. It also sprang out uncertainty as to whether higher education in the Nordic countries would benefit from introducing accreditation systems. While hopefully contributing to illuminate the issue, this report cannot possibly come up with a definite "Nordic" position on the question of accreditation. But the project has clearly affirmed the assumption of shared attitudes to quality assurance. In spite of interesting and important nuances, the ideas of academic quality, and the philosophies that inform the endeavours to assure and promote this quality, are very similar in the Nordic higher education area.

On this background, it may seem like a worthwhile task to try to define a Nordic platform of quality assurance in higher education, by recording in greater depth and detail the common denominators that actually exist. The Nordic countries have traditionally represented a development-oriented stance in these matters, and may have philosophies and evaluations practices that are worth promoting more forcefully to the world outside. Particularly if the Nordic countries should decide *not* to choose accreditation as the way forward, a Nordic platform might have considerable value – not unlike a quality guarantee, in fact.

References and related bibliography

Bauer, M., Askling B., Marton, S.G. & Marton F. (1999). Transforming Universities. Changing Patterns of Governance, Structure and Learning in Swedish Higher Education. Higher Education Policy Series 48. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Campbell & van der Wende, M. (2000). International Initiatives and Trends in Quality Assurance for European Higher education. Exploratory Trend Report. ENQA Occasional Papers. Monila. Helsinki. Also on http://www.enqa.net/pubs.lasso

CHEA (2000). Judith S. Eaton in U.S. Accreditation Review. Available on the Internet http://www.chea.org/About/accreditation.html

CRE (2001). Towards Accreditation Schemes for Higher Education in Europe? The Association of European Universities.

Dill, D. (2000). Designing Academic Audit: lessons learned in Europe and Asia in Quality in Higher Education. Volume 6. Number 3, November 2000. Taylor & Francis Ltd. Philadelphia, USA.

Evaluation of European Higher Education (1998). A status report. The Centre of Quality Assurance and Evaluation of Higher Education Denmark.

Norwegian Ministry of Education, Research and Church Affairs (2000). Freedom with Responsibility. On Higher Education and Research in Norway, NOU 2000: 14.

Haug and Tauch (2001). Trends in Learning Structures in Higher Education (II). Follow-up Report prepared for the Salamanca and Prague Conferences of March/May 2001. National Board of Education, Finland. Edita Oy. Also on http://www.oph.fi/publications/trends2

Hood, C. (1991). A Public Management for All Seasons? in Rhodes, R.A. W. (ed.) The New Public Management. Public Administration, 69 Number 1 (Spring).

Mjøs Report (2000). Ministry of Education, Research and Church Affairs. Norway.

Hämäläinen, K. and Kauppi, A. (2000). Evaluation in Today's Education. From Control to Empowerment. LLine, Lifelong Learning in Europe. Vol V, Issue 2/2000. Westpoint. Rauma, Finland.

Hämäläinen, K., Pehu-Voima, S. & Wahlén, S. (2001). Institutional Evaluations in Europe. ENQA Workshop Reports 1. Helsinki. Also on http://www.enqa.net/pubs.lasso

Power M. (1999). The Audit Society, Rituals of Verification. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sahlin-Andersson, K. & Hedmo, T. (2000). "Från spridning till reglering. MBA-modellers utbredning och utveckling i Europa", Nordiske Organisationsstudier, Vol. 2, No.1, pp. 8–33.

Sohlo, S. (2000). Laatu polttopisteessä. Suomen yliopistojen rehtorien näkemyksiä laadusta ja sen kehittämisestä. (In English: Quality in Focus. The University rectors view to quality and quality work.) Suomen yliopistojen rehtorien neuvoston julkaisuja 1/2000.