

Inspiring Excellence – The Norwegian Way

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Introduction

The concept of ‘excellence’ is increasingly permeating the international higher education policy discourse as well as national and institutional strategies. Defining excellence however, has caused discussions amongst both academics, students and policy-makers alike and has proved somewhat “protean”. There is contention around not only the definitions of excellence in education, teaching excellence, learning excellence and teacher excellence but also the relationships between these concepts (Land and Gordon 2015; Gunn and Fisk 2013; Little et al 2007).

With the increased focus on excellence there has been various initiatives to drive excellence in education (Land and Gordon 2015; Gunn and Fisk 2013). One of these initiatives is the Norwegian Centres for Excellence (The SFU initiative). Although there are similarities in the aims and challenges of different excellence initiatives, we see that there are different approaches to excellence (Bråten and Børsheim 2016:167).

In this paper, we aim at presenting the way excellence is interpreted in the SFU initiative as a contribution to the debate around the concept and dimensions of excellence. Furthermore, we want to discuss how national initiatives, like the SFU initiative, may be conducive to quality enhancement.

Short introduction of the SFU initiative²

‘Centres for Excellence in Education (SFU)’ was established in 2010. The main aim of the initiative is to stimulate teaching and learning excellence, and research and knowledge based developments of educational activities in higher education at bachelor and master levels.

The SFU initiative is managed by NOKUT, an independent quality agency under the Ministry of Education and Research. The national prestige initiative is a parallel to Centres of Excellence in Research and Research-based Innovation³ to highlight the fact that teaching and research are equally important activities for the higher education institutions, i.e. increasing the status of educational and teaching endeavours.

Calls for bids for SFU status are open to all disciplines, and the intention is to put out a call for new centres every three years. SFU status is awarded for five years, with the possibility of prolongation for another five years, subject to an interim evaluation.

The centres gaining this status receive up to NOK 8 million annually, around 87 000 Euros, as top funding. A successful centre can hence gain NOK 80 million of additional state funding. In addition to receiving status and funding, the centres cooperate closely with NOKUT and constitute a national network of Centres for Excellence.

¹ The authors of this paper is responsible for managing the SFU initiative.

² This introduction is based on NOKUT (2016a) and information on our website www.nokut.no/en/Centres-for-Excellence-in-Higher-Education/.

³ Norway have different Centres of Excellence schemes: a) Centres of Research-based Innovation, managed by Innovation Norway; b) Centres of Excellence in Research, managed by the Norwegian Research Council; and c) Centres for Excellence in Higher Education, managed by NOKUT.

There are currently eight Centres for Excellence in Education:

- bioCEED – Centre for Excellence in Biology Education
- CCSE – Center for Computing in Science Education
- CEFIMA – Centre of Excellence in Film and Interactive Media Arts
- CEMPE – Centre of Excellence in Music Performance Education
- ENgage – Centre for Engaged Education through Entrepreneurship
- ExclTEd – Centre for Excellent IT Education
- MatRIC – Centre for Research, Innovation and Coordination of Mathematics Teaching
- ProTed – Centre for Professional Learning in Teacher Education

An educational community that is awarded status as an SFU must be excellence in terms of three core criteria:

- (1) Documented excellence in existing provision, as compared to other provision within the same subject/discipline area, both nationally and internationally on several factors including input, process and outcome factors,
- (2) Centre plan outlining plans for innovation and enhancement and
- (3) Plans for dissemination, i.e. sharing knowledge and practices developed by the Centre to different target groups within its own discipline and across disciplines inside its own institution(s), nationally and internationally including engaging others (dissemination for action) in developing their own provision and the Centre (c.f. Harmsworth and Turpin 2000).

The interpretation of excellence in the SFU initiative

Excellence as contextual and multifaceted

First, we want to comment on the use of the concept *education* and then elaborate on what we perceive as quality and key quality factors when considering teaching and learning and defining excellence.

In Norway, we have chosen the term “Centres for Excellence in *Education*”, and not “Teaching” nor “Learning”, to highlight a broad approach to learning and factors that influence student learning. Education comprises both learning, teaching and teacher dimensions as well as support services, educational management, design of programmes, learning environment and all other factors that influence the student learning experience. This broad approach to teaching and learning is also reflected in the rest of NOKUT’s work with quality.

NOKUT’s quality framework (2016b) emphasises the importance of institutions’ and specifically programmes’ facilitation of the student learning experiences so that it meets the intended learning outcome and is relevant for society today and tomorrow. Equally, the learning experience should contribute to the student’s personal development, transformation or ‘Bildung’ (NOKUT 2016b), corresponding to the Council of Europe’s primary goals with higher education⁴.

⁴ The Council of Europe has defined four overarching goals for higher education, quoted in the Norwegian white paper on quality in higher education (Meld.St. 16 [2016-2017] (box 1.1.): “preparation for sustainable

In order to define excellence we need to take the aims of higher education as a starting point (c.f. Skelton 2005:22; Skelton 2007). The SFU initiative's and NOKUT's take on quality is in tune with Lawson (2016:139); the aim must be "to present students with opportunities for transformation". Or as put in the words of the Higher Education Academy in the UK:

"Higher education should be a transformative process that supports the development of graduates who can make a meaningful contribution to wider society, local communities and to the economy" (the Higher Education Academy in Gibbs 2010:2).

Governments and other stakeholders alike often search for clear answers to the complex question of what quality in higher education is, how it can be measured and initiatives to govern and develop the higher education sector. The solution employed is often based on a few quantifiable and comparable indicators (including composite indicators) to serve as proxies for the quality of education at an institution or in a study programme. There is a number of methodological problems associated with such approaches. Learning is difficult to measure and the quality of the student learning processes is often neglected. This might be explained by the lack of readily available data or that these are resource demanding to compile.

NOKUT argue that in order to analyse or assess quality in higher education in a meaningful way, the quality concept should be decomposed into distinct areas of quality, for which relevant qualitative or quantitative indicators exist or can be designed, rather than compiling various available data sources to derive an overall statement of quality for instance at institutional level. The recent Norwegian white paper (Meld St. 19 [2016-2017]:21) underlines that quality in education mainly is constructed locally at institutions and is context dependent. However, resources, measures and incentives from the national government can help facilitate and make way for quality. The SFU initiative is one tool to stimulate enhancement and excellence.

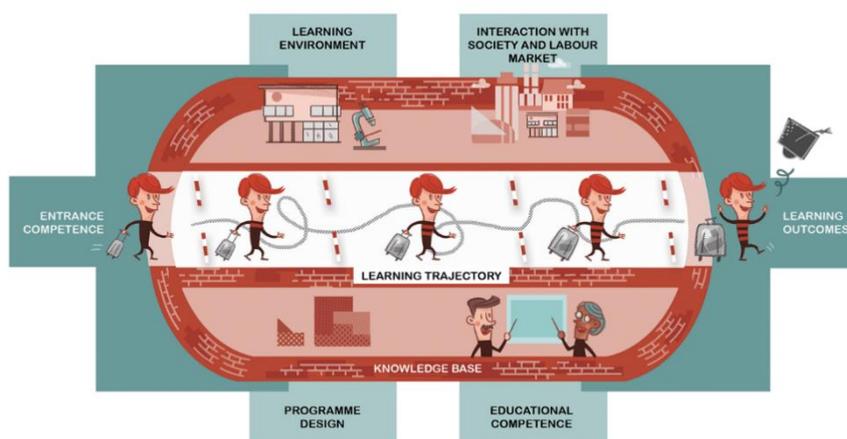


Figure 1. NOKUT's model for quality with several interrelated dimensions of quality.

participation in the labor market , preparation to be active citizens in democratic societies, personal growth and transformation, development and enhancement of the advanced knowledge-base through learning, teaching and research (our translation)".

It has been discussed whether excellence can be defined, measured and seen as a universal size (Fizmaurice 2010 in Gunn and Fisk 2013), or is relative and context dependent (Skelton 2005; 2007; Gunn and Fisk 2015). To NOKUT excellence is relative and contextual in the sense that it is historic contingent, dependent on context and changes over time.

Excellence in the SFU initiative is considered in processual and developmental terms and is a continuous enhancement process. Accordingly, we find excellence in education to be the result of continuous effort, but the goal is always moving. What was excellent two years ago is not necessarily the same as what is excellent today (Bråten and Børsheim 2016), especially given the pace of changes in today's society (Abbas et al 2016).

This contextual approach to excellence in the SFU initiative is manifested in several ways, first in the criteria to become an SFU. As part of the three main criteria previously mentioned, applicants need to demonstrate excellence in existing provision. This is a necessary but not sufficient condition. There are however no fixed parameters that the bidders have to meet, rather there are questions to be answered, given in the guidance document (NOKUT 2016a). These questions can be answered according to the discourse and knowledge around excellence at the time and put stronger emphasis on the enhancement and distance travelled than fixed metrics.

NOKUT has not defined any specific or fixed metrics that needs to be documented. The institutions and the programmes themselves define their focus and demonstrate their excellence according to their own documentation, metrics and ability. The documentation can then be dependent upon the mission and vision of the institutions applying, their teaching philosophy, the discipline and other contexts. Excellence is hence multifaceted, dependent on the purpose of the institution, discipline, the study programme and the way the centres documents excellence. The SFU initiative can hence adapt to institutional differences and disciplinary differences in excellence (Abbas et al 2016). Institutions highlight this in external evaluations as important for the relevance of the initiative (Carlsten and Aamodt 2013; Carlsten and Vabø 2015). The aims of the program do however highlight some dimensions that we regard as important and will be elaborated upon in the following.

Excellence by knowledge-based development and national and international comparisons

As described above, we find excellence to be as contextual and multidimensional as quality itself (c.f. Elton 1998). Nevertheless, in its most general form, we find excellence to entail standing out from the rest. As put in the words of Elton:

“To ‘excel’ means to surpass, to be pre-eminent, and hence ‘excellence’ in teaching and learning implies being pre-eminent in teaching and learning. The term connotes a sense of certain distinguishing features such that those exhibiting excellence stand out from the rest (Elton 1998:4 in Little et al. 2007:5).“

In the SFU criteria applicants needs to demonstrate that the current educational provision is excellent, as compared to other provision within the same subject/discipline area, both nationally and internationally. The SFU bidders hence has to document that they “stand out from the rest”.

In order to do this they must have knowledge of their own strength and weaknesses as well as knowledge of how other institutions are working with learning, and relate this to research. This emphasises an important goal for the SFU initiative: contributing to knowledge-based analysis and development of teaching and learning and that this underpins quality

enhancement and innovation. The initiative has therefore put more emphasis on “Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) (Boyer 1990; Ashwin 2015: 339)” and research in education. The focus on knowing what others do and what works is one of the main reasons the initiative has led to increased cooperation within and between institutions. Within institutions, there has been an increase in cooperation between teaching staff, between teaching staff and administrative staff, between staff and students and between teaching staff and pedagogical units. The initiative has also led to more cooperation in anchoring strategies and enhancement initiatives with senior management. Between institutions, the increase in cooperation can be explained by, among other things, different institutions creating a consortium to apply for centre status or cooperation due to the requirement for dissemination in the criteria (Carlsten and Vabø 2015). This is a testimony to excellence as a multi-actor and the multi-level endeavour (Bråten and Børsheim 2016; Hénard and Roseveare 2012; Elton 1998).

A significant aim of the SFU initiative is to stimulate and reward the work that takes place in the interaction between students, academic staff, support services, the labour market, professional bodies and the wider society, as well as the knowledge base of educational activities. This also underlines the multi-dimensional aspects of excellence valued in the SFU initiative. As Land and Gordon (2015: 3) puts it:

“As early as 1998 Elton emphasized the multi-dimensionality of teaching excellence, arguing that individual teaching excellence (beyond mere competence) should be matched with complementary excellence at departmental and institutional levels”.

Another goal of the SFU initiative is to promote excellent R&D-based education and develop innovative ways of working with R&D-based education⁵. In Norway, this entails everything from developing teaching and teaching material according to recent research, to teach in your own field of research and to involve students in research activities. The latter also includes a focus on the processes of inquiry and transferable skills as critical thinking, problem solving, communication, cross-cultural interaction, to mention a few known as “21st century skills (OECD 2009)”. Involving students in research and inquiry is emphasised in the SFU initiative. Connecting R&D-based education and the focus on knowledge-based development could be SoTL activities, which include students in inquiry and research. This is often and increasingly associated with excellence (Gunn and Fisk 2013; Gale 2007; Kreber 2002).

Often these integrated models are associated with R&D-based education and students engaging in research. In general, a key goal and a sign of excellence is the involvement and engagement of students, both as partners, co-creators and change agents influencing and forming not only their own learning but also the curricula and the academic communities (Ashwin and McVitty 2015; Healey et al. 2014; Dunne and Zandstra 2011:17). This corresponds to Skelton’s (2007; 2005) critical model of excellence. The initiative seeks to contribute to developing new forms of student involvement and partnership. Innovative approaches to learning is an important goal.

Centres FOR excellence: exclusive but inclusive

In the sense that we interpret excellence as ‘standing out from the rest’ and that competition for status as an SFU limits the number of environments deemed excellent, the initiative can

⁵ In Norway R&D-based education means, based on the Universities and University College Act, §1-3, education based on the forefront of knowledge gained from research, academic and artistic development work and work experience.

be seen as “exclusive”. However, there is not a focus on elite students nor elite universities. The goal is learning gain and in principle, every institution can attain SFU status. The criteria are devised to be relevant across all institutional categories and disciplines, and open in the sense that it is up to the applicants to define and argue their case for excellence. Their claims for excellence must be supported by evidence (Little and Lock 2011:135), but the applicants are free to choose the kinds of evidence they want to provide, as mentioned above.

Such an open approach can be termed as “low fidelity” (Saunders 2009 in Land and Gordon 2015). Low fidelity approaches are characterized by allowing applicants considerable freedom and variability in how they argue their case, as compared to high fidelity models where all criteria must be met and where the degree of prescription is much stronger (Land and Gordon 2015:16). High levels of trust of local practice is a known characteristic of many initiatives within the Norwegian (and Scandinavian) context (Land and Gordon 2015:11), including the higher education sector. Context, which was emphasized above, is an important notion in low fidelity models.

The risk of low fidelity approaches is that the enhancement activity remains very context-specific, e.g. contained to a specific discipline (Land and Gordon 2015:17). In the SFU initiative, we want the centres activities, results and impact to transgress discipline lines and contribute to enhancing quality in education at large. That is why dissemination is such an important feature of the criteria, as for many other contextual enhancement activities (Land and Gordon 2016:15).

The SFU centres must have solid plans for how to be centres *for* excellence, meaning that dissemination and cooperation is essential. This entails that the centres should share knowledge and practices and help others improve. But there is also another aspect to this inclusive approach to excellence. As Lawson puts it:

A key characteristic for a successful SFU is humility: an acceptance that all new ideas do not necessarily originate here, that there are other excellent teachers elsewhere (Lawson 2016:140).

This inclusive and developmental focus is also reflected in the management of the initiative, for instance in the assessment process of the bids. The assessment process has two stages:

- (1) Assessment of all submitted applications and selection of the best candidates for progression to the second round.
- (2) Site visits with interviews with the proposed Centre teams and key stakeholders such as students, staff, senior management and other partners.

In both stages, the applicants get written feedback from the expert panel. This put emphasis on the developmental aspect of writing an application, also for the bids that are not successful. Furthermore, all the applications and the feedback are available online. The process is hence transparent. More importantly, the application processes can be inspirational and developmental beyond the applicants. The initiative shares in this way practices and knowledge across the sector (Carlsten and Vabø 2015). Rather than evoking an exclusive concept of excellence, excellence in the SFU initiative is an inclusive concept where collaboration and not ranking or elite thinking, is key. SFUs are centres *for* excellence.

Concluding remarks

In this paper, we have shown that interpretations of excellence in the SFU initiative are situationally and historically contingent. That the term 'excellence' is situationally and historically constructed also means that a paper like this cannot present a final, never-changing definition, but must rather put forward an interpretation under constant development.

In the management of the SFU initiative, we argue that excellence needs a multi-actor, multi-level and multi-dimensional approach. Excellence as a continuous effort is furthermore important to us. The will and search for quality enhancement is a prominent characteristic of individuals and academic environments, putting emphasis on quality cultures (cf. Kottman et al. 2016; Elton 1998). With the focus on knowledge and research-based development of education the initiative has developed new arenas to discuss teaching and learning and fostered increased awareness about the concept of excellence, use of indicators to document excellence in higher education as well as strategies and resources for education and cooperation between institutions and internally in institutions.

The centres and the management of the initiative put emphasis on dissemination and sharing of knowledge and experience hence being centres *for* excellence advocating an inclusive and enhancement based notion of excellence.

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