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Encouraging Collaboration in the field of Quality Assurance and Quality Enhancement

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Abstract

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Higher education institutions (HEIs) are facing increased complexity and increasing pressure of proving their worth, documenting the relevance of research and teaching, and being transparent and accountable. In order to reflect upon the balance between assurance and enhancement and between responsibility and accountability, we ask how quality assurance agencies can foster collaboration within and across HEIs. We analyse and discuss how the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education has tried and tries to foster collaboration through two different measures. Our underlying assumption is that increased collaboration, sharing of practices, experiences and reflections within and across HEIs drive quality enhancement.

Presentation

Encouraging Collaboration in the field of Quality Assurance and Quality Enhancement

Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are facing increased complexity and increasing pressure. This pressure can stem from higher student numbers, a more diverse student group, economic constraints, internationalisation and international competition, a larger focus on value for money and many stakeholders demanding increased quality, operationalised in different and sometimes conflicting ways. Institutions in higher education are increasingly pressured to prove their worth and document societal relevance of research and teaching. While this documentation used to be considerations of organisational effectiveness and performance, the new currency is quality (Land & Gordon, 2016). HEIs must document their worth focusing on innovation, enhancement and research-based approaches to practice, as scholarship of teaching and learning. Hénard and Roseveare (2012) call this the "new paradigm for quality teaching".

This quality paradigm has transformed activities and actions of enhancement and assurance, argues Land and Gordon (2016), from previously being unrecorded, localised and locally controlled, to being more formalised and explicit procedures and practices – publicly reported and evaluated. The result is a greater demand that HEIs should document quality, both within quality assurance (QA) and quality enhancement (QE). That means that there is pressure on higher education institutions to be transparent and accountable. The need for transparency and accountability is a need for rationality and justification (Molander, 2016), which has increased over the past three decades. King (2018) calls this "the regulatory turn". Quality assurance agencies are the ones exercising such pressure, as they are supervising the institutions' quality work and study programmes so that society can trust their educational quality. However, the development towards increased transparency may just as well be a result of more institutions having greater autonomy in the sector, and more economic resources spent on being "education for all", which in turn demands or leads to more supervision (Trow, 2005). Hence, HEIs often respond to, and accept, the accountability logic, although it contradicts the logic of responsibility and collegiality that previously dominated higher education (Sugrue and Solbrekke, 2011).

In order to reflect upon the balance between assurance and enhancement, between doing and documenting, and between responsibility and accountability, we ask how quality assurance agencies can foster collaboration within and across higher education institutions. How can collaboration contribute to the strengthening of possible links between quality enhancement and quality assurance? And is there room for enhancement and assurance within the same measures?

In this paper, we will analyse and discuss how the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT), an independent quality agency under the Ministry of Education and Research in Norway, has tried and tries to foster collaboration through two very different measures. The measures are a) periodic supervision of the institutions' systematic work to assure and enhance the quality of the education they offer, and b) the Centres for Excellence in Education Initiative (SFU). These two measures reflect the duality in NOKUT's mandate: to assure quality, and to contribute to quality enhancement. Our underlying assumption is that increased collaboration, sharing of (good) practices, experiences and reflections within and across HEIs will drive quality enhancement.

The concepts of Quality Assurance and Quality Enhancement

The dual mandate of NOKUT comprises the two notions "Quality Assurance" (QA) and "Quality Enhancement" (QE). Harvey (2004-19) defines QA as "a process of establishing stakeholder confidence that provision (input, process and outcomes) fulfils expectations or measures up to threshold minimum requirements", while QE is "a process of augmentation or

improvement". Bamber et al. (2009) argue that enhancement requires change and involves a deliberate move towards making things better, either by (i) improving on something that exists, (II) adding innovation - which is deliberate and new but can have unexpected results - or (III) rethink existing approaches, even fundamental purposes and practices, i.e. is purposeful attempts to change practices for the better.

There is a range of perspectives on how QA and QE are interlinked (Williams, 2016). Some claim that QA and QE, accountability and improvement, are and should be two distinct processes, both practically and conceptually, with separate resourcing. Even in NOKUT this view is visible. QA and QE are hence seen as separate activities, or even in opposition to each other. In this view, academics often see QA as burdensome ritualised compliance, and QA fails to be a part of everyday activity. Others view QA and QE as interdependent, in which QA leads to QE, or more as integral parts of the same holistic approach (Williams, 2016). We consider the relationship between QA and QE as interlinked, as part of the same holistic process.

We will now present two measures managed by NOKUT: a) periodic supervision of the institutions' systematic work to assure and enhance the quality of the education they offer, as an example of QA, and b) the Centres for Excellence in Education Initiative (SFU), as an example of QE.

Example of Quality Assurance: periodic supervision managed by NOKUT

Norwegian universities and university colleges are responsible for ensuring that the study programmes they offer are of high quality and their quality assurance should be carried out through internal systems. NOKUT is responsible for periodic supervision of the institutions' systematic work to assure and enhance the quality of the education they offer. Each institution must go through an audit process every 6-8 years. The Academic Supervision Regulations set out requirements for the institutions' systematic quality assurance practices and were recently revised (in 2017). From previously being audits based on comprehensive evaluations, the audits are now based on legal requirements. In order to pass, the institutions must fulfil each requirement. NOKUT and the reviewers also advise the institutions on how to further develop their quality assurance practices, which touches upon quality enhancement. It is NOKUT's intention that supervisory activities should inspire the institutions to re-think existing practices and to try out new ideas, so that QA stimulate QE.

This paper emphasizes collaboration across and within HEIs. An important change made for the current audits (2018-2024), is that the institutions are organised in groups, according to their characteristics. That means institutions that have recently merged, institutions with several campuses, institutions with the same authorizations, or institutions offering education within the same professions or disciplines, are examples of how NOKUT has chosen to set up "audit heats". In each audit heat, there are 4-6 institutions. Both during and after the audits, the institutions are encouraged to talk to each other about their QA work, about documentation, sharing of good practices, and so on. NOKUT believes that such activities have the potential to bring forth mutual inspiration within QA work. In order to foster collaboration and sharing, NOKUT arranges an information meeting for each audit heat 4-5 months before the deadline for submitting the documentation. The intention is that this activity should serve as an important basis for further networking and contact between the institutions.

Example of Quality Enhancement: the SFU Initiative previously managed by NOKUT

The other measure we present in this paper is the Centres for Excellence in Education (SFU) initiative, which was established in 2010 as the first national prestige initiative for education in Norway. The aim of the initiative was to enhance quality in higher education, to drive excellence at bachelor and master's levels, and to stimulate scholarly approaches to teaching and learning across the sector.

SFU status is awarded to excellent academic communities after an application process where successful candidates needed to demonstrate: (1) excellence in existing provision (2) a centre plan for

five years outlining innovation and enhancement and (3) a plan for dissemination to stimulate enhancement beyond their discipline and institution(s).

Successful centres receive up to NOK 8 million annually, around 870 000 Euros, to be matched by the institution. The centres gained hence status and funding. Another important element is how the centres have cooperated closely with NOKUT and constitute a national network of Centres for Excellence¹. NOKUT aimed at being a partner in development for the centres by fostering collaboration between the centres. In this way, NOKUT stimulated enhancement and made the SFU initiative more than the sum of the individual centres. This close collaboration also meant that the centres influenced the development of the initiative and higher education policy in Norway (Førland and Bråten 2018). The centres are awarded SFU status for five years, with the possibility of prolongation for another five years. This is subject to an interim evaluation.

So far, we have looked at the concepts of quality assurance and quality enhancement, as well as examples of NOKUT activities connected to these two approaches. Next, we will discuss the notion of collaboration within the context of this paper's topic.

The notion of collaboration within and across higher education institutions

In general, collaboration can be described as a cooperative activity, set out in order to accomplish a shared outcome. In this paper, and in the context of quality in higher education, the notion of collaboration should include the sharing of experiences, ideas, practices and reflections, peer reviewing/feedback, partnership etc. In practice, this means including informal ways of connecting and networking to a larger degree, and hence, it goes beyond regular collaborative initiatives in Higher Education, such as Joint Study Programmes and so on.

The next question is between whom collaboration may take place. Our suggestion is that there are two main categories of collaboration in Higher Education: the first is the kind of collaboration taking place *within* an institution, and the other is the one taking place *across* higher education institutions. As regards collaboration within an institution, there can be interaction between teachers, students, administrative staff and management, in all kinds of combinations. What NOKUT has experienced in our most recent audits, and through the SFU initiative, is that students are increasingly considered as partners, and they are more often included in the management groups, and as representatives at faculty level. As regards collaboration across institutions, there can be both national and international initiatives, and the collaborative activities could be facilitated by the institutions themselves, or by NOKUT or other bodies. There is also a third category of collaboration, and that is the interaction between the institutions and governing authorities (such as NOKUT), the regional business life, or other organisations.

In the next paragraphs, we will elaborate on and discuss the notion of collaboration further, through the lenses of the following concepts: "communities of practice", "quality culture" and "quality work".

Communities of Practice - mutual engagement for quality

In order to better understand how collaboration within and across HEIs can come about, we will adopt a sociocultural perspective, understanding learning within a communicative and sociohistorical perspective, and consider activities as situated within a cultural, historical and institutional context.

Anticipating that the sharing of knowledge is crucial to HEIs, we are going to look at the concept of "Communities of Practice" (CoPs). This concept refers to social systems of practice, where social practice is the unit of analysis instead of individuals. One sees individuals as carrying understandings, knowledge and routines, that they negotiate with others in order to create meaning. As Wenger (1998) states, the

¹ The SFU was managed by NOKUT until 1. January 2019. Then, the initiative was moved to a new Directorate, Diku, (the Norwegian agency for international cooperation and quality enhancement in higher education) constituting a core element in a new programme for enhancement. This paper is based on the experiences up until 1. January 2019.

“negotiation of meaning (...) is the level of discourse at which the concept of practice should be understood” (p. 72).

Wenger (1998) further describes three dimensions of CoPs, which are: 1) mutual engagement, 2) a joint enterprise, and 3) a shared repertoire. By mutual engagement, Wenger means that a practice exists because people are engaged in actions, and within these actions they are negotiating meaning with one another. In the case of quality assurance and enhancement in HEIs, there is no doubt that there is a possibility for mutual engagement. National legislation, politics and societal expectations will demand certain (similar) actions taken by the HEIs. The second dimension, a joint enterprise, is to be decided by the participants of a CoP – it is their negotiated response to their ‘situation’. For HEIs, this might be their negotiated views on different topics related to educational quality. The third dimension, a shared repertoire, describes resources that a CoP develops over time, resources that they use for negotiation. Such resources could be a joint understanding of different concepts of quality, tools for quality assurance, or other kinds of resources.

One of Wenger’s (1998) main points about CoPs is that people often come together in order to discuss and learn from one another when they have certain common interests. However, he states very clearly that there will be, and should be, diversity within a CoP. That means that people do not have to be like-minded, but they do need to have mutual engagement for negotiation about something. Taking the two measures in this paper as a starting point, the periodic supervision and the SFU initiative, one could argue that putting institutions in audit heats, and putting SFUs together in workshops, is quite the opposite – that NOKUT is contributing too much to the shaping of the CoPs. To a certain extent, that argument is true. However, within periodic supervision, collaboration and sharing of knowledge within the audit heats was encouraged, not imposed. As for the SFUs, the HEIs had control of what they shared and how the collaboration evolved – and in that sense, they possess the power, after all.

Quality culture and quality work

Another concept related to QA and QE that has gained importance in Norway in recent years is “quality culture”. The recent White paper on higher education (St. Meld 16 (2016-2017)) is even named *Quality Culture in Higher Education*. The European University Association (EUA, 2006, p.10) defines quality culture as an organisation with a permanent drive towards enhancement. The culture is characterised by ‘soft aspects’ as shared values, beliefs and commitment towards quality, and “hard aspects”, such as quality management strategies with well-defined processes that enhance quality and coordinate efforts. These structural and cultural elements are interlinked and knitted together by leadership, communication, commitment, trust and participation (Kottman et al. 2016; Bendermacher 2016; 2019; St. Meld 16 (2016-2017)).

Kottmann et al. (2016, p.15-16) emphasise that “quality culture is hard to define because of its multifarious constituents, the uniqueness of each institution’s organisational culture and various activities”. Harvey and Stensaker (2008) urge us to use the complex concept of quality culture cautiously. They link the concept back to new public management and organisational perspectives from the 1980s, and see it as a way to “force” HEIs to engage with QA in a constructive manner, to develop an internal quality culture as a way to deal with autonomy and develop stronger internal management systems and aid dissemination of best practices. Harvey & Stensaker (2008) emphasise external driving forces, lack of control and accountability, consequently implying less collegiality.

Bendermacher et al. (2016) seem more positive about the concept of quality culture. They see quality culture as an organisational culture in which all stakeholders, internal and external, contribute to the improvement through critical reflection. Hence, it reflects a shift from control, accountability and regulation, to autonomy, credibility and educational enhancement based on an institution’s experiences, expertise and values. Their understanding links QA to QE in a holistic process adapted to the institutions’ needs and context to contribute to improvement. We see that this understanding of quality culture emphasises the institutional context, practises and reflection as Elken and Stensaker (2018) will accentuate in their concept “quality work”.

Elken and Stensaker (2018) argue that in general there have been two responses to external quality assurance. Firstly, the managerial response where leadership and management is seen to be crucial to control quality issues, with a belief in indicators, quality management systems, rules and routines. Consequently, the focus is accountability and to comply with standards. Secondly, a quality culture response, which sets out a shared rational and commitment for driving excellence based on shared and taken for granted notions of quality. Moreover, Elken and Stensaker (2018) propose a third concept, “quality work”, which links the two previously discussed responses, and which emphasises daily practices. They define “quality work” as “a set of activities and practices within higher education institutions, that address the quality of its educational provision” (Elken & Stensaker, 2018, p. 190), focusing more on the contextual, situated practices where quality work includes multi-actor and multi-level approaches at both formal and informal arenas in HEIs.

This view on quality work is shared by Nerland (2019). She emphasises, as Land and Gordon (2016) do, that quality work is a challenging continuous process demanding analytical engagement, analysing and evaluating learning activities across levels and actors. Nerland (2019) argues that planning, coordination and collaboration between actors and levels need to be recognised as important elements in teaching and educational work.

These understandings of quality work correspond well with NOKUT’s understanding of quality in education and excellence, as seen and documented in the SFU initiative and in how NOKUT describes the periodic supervision discussed in this paper – as supervision of the HEIs’ “quality work”.

It is possible to argue, that quality work and quality culture are deeply connected, both conceptually and in practice. Roxå (NOKUT 2017) argues in the SFU Magazine that “Culture is constructed and maintained through everyday interactions. A quality culture is hence constructed through the totality of all interaction and collaboration within the organisation”. Returning to the two suggested pronouns for describing collaboration – *within* and *across* – both quality culture and quality work seem to be collaborative efforts that happen primarily *within* institutions.

We will now look at how collaboration appears within the two measures managed by NOKUT.

Results from a survey: HEIs’ collaborative approaches to audits

An important part of an audit process is the evaluation. Hence, NOKUT distributes a survey to all the institutions within one audit heat, as soon as the reviewers and NOKUT have completed the final report and the institutions gain access to it. The survey includes questions about information, documentation, the site visit, the review, the cooperation with NOKUT, as well as questions about the sharing of experiences with others. We will now look at some of the findings from NOKUT’s most recent survey of this kind, emphasizing the institutions’ reflections on their collaborative approaches to the audit. Four universities and university colleges were part of the audit heat and received the survey. Three have responded so far.

On the question of whether the institutions shared or discussed problems with the other institutions within their audit heat during the audit process, all three institutions responded ‘yes’. When being asked about what topics they discussed, how they collaborated and in what ways they found sharing a useful activity, the results show that the pro-rectors for education in all four institutions had several Skype meetings during the audit process, and that two of the responding institutions regarded this as useful. According to the survey response, the pro-rectors discussed quality work in general, such as quality in Ph.D.-programmes and student engagement. However, as the deadline for submitting documentation got closer, they also discussed how to interpret the Regulations, and how to choose and present evidence. The responding institutions also report that they discussed and commented on each other’s self-evaluations to some degree. From a NOKUT perspective, a development towards a culture of learning and sharing when it comes to quality work and quality enhancement, is very positive.

However, when asking the institutions whether they have been inspired to share their practices and experiences in new ways, within or across HEIs, only one institution answered ‘yes’. This might be because they regard the threshold for what counts as “new ways” as higher than what NOKUT does, and that they did not include the collaborative activity between the pro-rectors. It may also indicate that they have not taken any further steps (yet), in order to share their quality work.

Furthermore, the survey shows that two of the institutions explicitly support the idea that NOKUT should facilitate seminars/workshops for each audit heat, where sharing of experiences is the main goal. The two institutions sharing their thoughts on NOKUT’s role in the survey state that creating meeting places and facilitate discussions across institutions, but also across the institutions and NOKUT, is an important activity. One institution explicitly gives NOKUT credit for doing a good job on this already. Written reports analysing the findings from the periodic supervision across the audit heats, is also a request. Through the survey, we see that collaboration across institutions has taken place. They are encouraged by NOKUT, but are carried out independently and with similar traits as a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). That means, the survey indicates that there has been mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire.

Collaboration through the SFU initiative

We also see collaboration through the SFU initiative. While many see excellence initiatives as interconnected with competition, elite students and exclusivity NOKUT tried managing the excellence scheme to stimulate cooperation and quality enhancement. Firstly, we will look at how collaboration is visible in the understanding of excellence and criteria. Then we will look at how NOKUT have tried to foster collaboration in managing the initiative by establishing networks and collaboration between the Centres for Excellence and within the centres.

Collaboration within institutions is inherent in the understanding of excellence within the SFU programme. Excellence is seen as a continuous enhancement process and a multi-actor and multi-level endeavour (Helseth et al. 2019; Helseth & Bråten 2018; Helseth et al. 2017; Bråten & Børshheim 2016; Hénard & Roseveare 2012; Elton 1998). Collaboration is also alluded to in the use of the concept Centre for excellence in **Education**, illustrating a broad understanding of teaching and learning, the interplay between these dimensions as well as relationship and collaboration needed between many actors at different levels, horizontally and vertically within – and even between – higher education institutions.

Another key element is how the centres should cooperate to be centres **for** excellence rather than centres **of** excellence, i.e the emphasis put on dissemination and to impact and lead to “enhanced quality in higher education both within and outside their host institutions” (DIKU 2019).

Dissemination is regarded as an ongoing two-way process of exchanging ideas and collaboration that is beneficial to all (McKenzie et al. 2005) and can be seen as a planned process of interacting with stakeholders and potential adopters throughout the project to facilitate commitment and sustained change (Hinton et al. 2011, p.6). Collaboration is hence inherent in the concept of dissemination. The centres must have an outwards orientation and interact with other academic communities helping them improve. The centres themselves are also gaining from this process. The aim is dissemination for action (Harmsworth & Turpin 2000; Lawson 2016). Lawson puts this eloquently (2016, p.140): “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”.

Dissemination is hence about collaboration within and between institutions and shows one example of how the criteria are devised to stimulate collaboration and enhancement (see more in Helseth & Bråten, 2018).

When HEIs prepare bids they report on and document enhancement processes, enthusiasm for education and collaboration internally; between staff, between staff and students, between teaching

staff and administrative staff, between the learning centre and the teaching staff and across levels (Ramberg 2016; Anderson et al. 2017; Carlsten & Aamodt 2015). HEIs report on systematizing quality work, in this way applying for status drives enhancement and create quality work. Internally HEIs start to discuss quality, enhancement and share experiences and help each other. Preparing a bid also makes HEIs collaborate with consortium partners, which can be other HEIs, industry partners or societal actors, hence also facilitating collaboration across HEIs and with external partners. In some of the Centres they have created strong communities of practice (Ashwin et al. 2017).

Collaboration has also been encouraged in the management of the initiative. This can be seen for instance in the follow-up of the centres and how NOKUT established a network between the centres. In the follow-up of the centres, NOKUT put more emphasis on sharing experiences and practice, facilitating dialogue and enhancement, and less on formal monitoring mechanisms. The importance of fostering collaboration between the centres and between the centres and the funding body had been stressed in evaluations of a similar initiative in the U.K., the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) (Lawson, 2016; SQW, 2011; Centre for Study in Education and Training, 2008). This was a means to ensure sustainable impact beyond the host institutions and make the initiative more than the sum of the centres.

NOKUT tried to be a partner in development through following up the centres and in facilitating dialogue and networks between the centres. In building an SFU-network NOKUT intended to facilitate a community of practice. However there is the question of power, and as previously shown one might argue that NOKUT controlled too much for this to happen. In looking at these networks in a more quality work perspective (Elken and Stensaker 2018), we see that the coordination and communication between actors who could respond and react according to their institutional context facilitated innovation and actors who were ‘problem solvers’. One could argue that this is in line with Benchermarcher’s et al. (2016) understanding of quality culture.

Nevertheless, we see that the centres developed projects together. Examples are for instance how bioCEED², a centre in biology education cooperated with a centre in mathematics teaching, MatRIC³, about mathematics teaching in biology, collaborated with a centre in music performance, CEMPE⁴, about work placements and with CCSE⁵, Centre for Computing in Science Education, about developing and accessing excellent teachers in a reward and recognition scheme. All these centres are from different universities, hence showing collaboration across institutions.

Another example is how NOKUT has put emphasis on students as partners and co-creators and hence facilitated collaboration between students and staff. NOKUT provided small stipends for the centres in order for students to develop and lead enhancement projects in the centres. In CEMPE, students developed a programme for music students to shadow their role models at work (NOUKUT 2017). Students also became co-directors in the centre. In bioCEED, students developed a project where senior students are coaching and mentoring new students both in the formal and informal aspects of student life. This initiative won a prestigious prize at the University of Bergen, and it was the first time ever that students received this prize⁶. Promoting collaboration between students and staff has also been facilitated through other means such as workshops for staff and students with international experts, an SFU-magazine (NOKUT 2017), and stipends for master students writing about the topic (c.f. Holen 2019). In this way, the SFU initiative has fostered collaboration between students and staff.

2 Centre for Excellence in Biology Education- bioCEED: www.bioceed.no

3 Centre for Research, Innovation and Coordination of Mathematics Teaching – MatRIC: www.matric.no

4 Centre for Excellence in Music Performance Education, CEMPE: www.cempe.no

5 Centre for Computing in Science Education, CCSE: <https://www.mn.uio.no/ccse/english/>

6 Read more about students as partners in the SFU initiative in NOKUT (2017) or Helseth et al. (2019).

We have seen that the SFU initiative stimulates collaboration and enhancement in several ways including the understanding of excellence, the criteria for SFU status, the fostering of networks and in NOKUT's managing role of being a partner in development.

Discussion

In the beginning of this paper, we set out to reflect upon the balance between assurance and enhancement, between doing and documenting, and between responsibility and accountability. We asked how quality assurance agencies could foster collaboration within and across higher education institutions and how collaboration could contribute to the strengthening of possible links between quality enhancement and quality assurance. Finally, we asked if there is room for enhancement and assurance within the same measures.

We will argue that there *is* a tension between Quality Assurance on the one hand, and Quality Enhancement on the other, but we also believe that this tension is being maintained by those who are linking QA purely to the accountability logic, or underplaying the possibility of letting assurance and enhancement be of mutual inspiration. There is a risk that the accountability logic outmanoeuvres the responsibility logic, and that QA and QE remains separate activities. If we are to counteract such a development, quality agencies such as NOKUT could discuss with HEIs how QA can inform QE and how QE can inform QA, and just as important: how the different measures can be designed in order to include both assurance and enhancement elements.

In this paper, we have seen institutions within an audit heat showing signs of forming a community of practice related to quality work, and we have seen the Centres for Excellence doing similar kinds of networking. Based on the investigation of these two measures within NOKUT, we do see tendencies of collaborative activities *across* higher education institutions.

We also see that collaborative activities appear *within* the institutions. External evaluations of the SFU initiative have documented an increase in cooperation between teaching staff, between teaching staff and administrative staff, between staff and students and between teaching staff and pedagogical units within institutions in academic communities preparing bids and in the centres themselves (Carlsten & Vabø, 2015; Kottman et al., 2016). The initiative has also led to more cooperation in anchoring strategies and enhancement initiatives with senior management (Carlsten & Vabø, 2015; Kottman et al., 2016; Ramberg, 2016). Furthermore, the SFU programme has fostered collaboration between disciplines and facilitated more international cooperation (Carlsten & Vabø, 2015; Ashwin et al., 2017; Helseth et al., 2019). There is more collaboration, both vertically and horizontally, within the institutions. The SFUs are linking QA to QE, and there are signs of academic communities developing communities of practice as well as quality cultures. NOKUT can also see such signs in the periodic supervision of quality work – many of the HEIs fulfil the legal requirement for quality culture. Our findings of collaboration being positive within institutions, is supported by research Wittek (2017) refers to several studies showing how collaboration on teaching might contribute to increased quality within the study programmes. The White Paper (2016) also declares that the teachers in higher education are expected to develop study programmes collaboratively, and that peer review and peer assessment should be a natural part of an institution's quality work.

But what are the threats to a collaborative approach to quality work across and within higher education? There is a possibility that the institutions' quality work becomes too similar. According to Solbrekke (2008), being unique and attractive is still somewhat new to the universities, but it has become more and more prominent lately, because the HEIs need to attract students and employees as well as funding. In order to do so, one must be unique in some way. Hence, this is a threat, because it may lead to a competitive spirit and a protection of innovative ideas that can hurt an environment of collaboration and the sharing of practices. On the other hand, collaboration may counteract the competitiveness.

Another threat is that external Quality Assurance, following the accountability logic, may lead to instrumental, as well as individual ways of approaching quality work. Institutions accounting for their

quality may know the thresholds for minimum standards well enough to fulfil the requirements. A risk, then, is that they are less motivated to strive for further quality enhancement and less motivated to share and collaborate. The audit may also be perceived as an individual affair, since each institution must answer for their own quality. Audit heats is one way of trying to counteract the ‘loneliness’ of supervision.

So, how do we believe NOKUT succeed in our wish for more collaboration and sharing? And how do we think NOKUT succeed in making room for enhancement and assurance within the same measures? One might say that both in the audit heats and in the SFU initiative, the participating HEIs are chosen because they have certain (similar) qualities. This leads to a lack of diversity in the first place. But do we think they would have collaborated without NOKUT facilitating? Perhaps not, and hence we hope that we are contributing to more collaboration through our methods. As for our wish for a holistic view on QA and QE, we do believe that more can be done. We see tendencies. For example, institutions with SFUs are linking enhancement of educational quality to their quality work. Also, the periodic supervision encourages to enhancement through developmental suggestions in the reports, and there is a collective approach to audits through the audit heats. However, there is a job to do, in making the connections between QA and QE more explicit to both ourselves and the HEIs, and also to make all of our measures to be more than “happenings” – both enhancement initiatives and assurance procedures can just as well lead to non-sustainable efforts and the feeling that one is ticking off boxes more than enhancing or assuring quality. This needs further attention, and we are convinced that increased collaboration, sharing of (good) practices, experiences and reflections within and across HEIs is part of the solution.

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