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# DEVELOPING EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Lessons learned from the establishment and  
evaluation of the Norwegian Centres for Excellence  
in Education (SFU) initiative



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# INTRODUCTION

By TERJE MØRLAND,  
*Director General of NOKUT*

In this publication, six experts in the field of higher education, including two student representatives and NOKUT<sup>1</sup>, share some reflections on developing educational excellence in higher education. These reflections are based on their experiences of undertaking an interim evaluation of three Norwegian Centres for Excellence in Education (SFUs) in 2017, but also from assessment of applications for SFU status and general management of the initiative. Several of the authors have also been able to draw on experience from other excellence initiatives internationally.

This publication is intended as a contribution to knowledge-based analysis and development of education, which is part of the main aims for the SFU initiative<sup>2</sup>. As the management of the SFU initiative now has been handed over to another organization, the timing also seems appropriate. Our hope is that these reflections or “lessons learned” are useful for the further development of the SFU initiative and similar initiatives nationally and internationally.

When we regard learning as an active and participatory social meaning-making process, students need to be involved. It is this interplay between

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1. An independent quality agency under the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, in charge of managing the Centres for Excellence in Education (SFU) initiative from 2010 to 2018.

2. More information on the SFU initiative is available in Section 1.

students and educators that we have tried to nurture in the SFU initiative. It is not only crucial for the students' learning, but of mutual value for the educators and the institutions. Students as partners has become a key theme within the initiative. CEMPE (Centre for Excellence in Music Performance Education) now has students as co-directors in the Centre management, and students from bioCEED (Centre of Excellence in Biology Education) were the first students ever to win a prestigious award at the University of Bergen with "Bioracle". Through Bioracle, they have established peer-learning mechanisms and social arenas for students to interact across cohorts and subjects. MatRIC (Centre for Research, Innovation and Coordination of Mathematics teaching) has influenced the University of Agder to make students as co-creators key in the institutional strategy. The list really goes on.

At the programme level, students have been involved in developing the initiative as well as assessing applications and Centres. They have done this together with and at the same level as other experts. Highly competent academics from different countries have acted as experts in our evaluative processes together with students, and they have also contributed more generally to the development of the initiative, and in supporting the Centres. This, together with involvement from the wider Norwegian higher education sector in, for instance, development of the SFU criteria, is a testimony to co-creation being vital to the initiative all the way.

The publication that you are now holding in your hands or reading online is a concrete result of the co-creation that runs as a common thread through the SFU initiative. And in the spirit of co-creation, the authors have not indicated specific authors per section, although for each section some of the authors have been more involved than others. All the authors stand behind the entire publication and have commented on the different sections on several occasions. More information on the different authors is available below.

The publication starts off with an introduction to the SFU initiative in Section 1 leading up to a discussion on the characteristics of teaching excellence in Norway in Section 2. In Section 3, the authors elaborate on the

role of students as partners in the educational process, which is emphasised in the SFU initiative. The 2017 interim evaluation of three SFUs had a dual mandate of deciding on further funding of the Centres but also stimulating further development. In Section 4, the authors discuss tensions that arose from this duality, both for the Centres and the assessors.

Dissemination is key for initiatives like the SFU to succeed with stimulating quality enhancement at large, and in Section 5, the authors look into some of the barriers that seems to preclude the dissemination and propose some ways to overcome them. This topic continues into Section 6 where they reflect upon how successful the interim evaluation was in supporting the development of strategies that were explicitly designed to lead to sustained changes in educational practices.

This publication, and others before it, highlight the requirement for academic leadership at all levels, which is discussed in Section 7. The publication ends with an attempt to summarize some of the lessons learned from a NOKUT perspective.

When writing these reflections, the authors build on all the hard work that the SFUs have done to achieve the great successes that they have in their projects, but also to satisfy the demands of our formal processes, including the interim evaluation. All the three Centres that underwent evaluation in 2017 had their SFU status extended for a second five-year period, which would not have happened had they not been able to demonstrate great achievements so far. The Centres have impacted teaching and learning practices and policies in Norway and beyond. These are impressive results that have been achieved in a short period of time.

The authors and I deeply appreciate your efforts and wish you the best of luck with your second period as SFUs. NOKUT has recently stepped down as managers for the SFU initiative, but we will continue to be supporters of all the SFUs, draw on what we learnt through managing the initiative, and champion quality enhancement in Norway through other means.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### INGVILD ANDERSEN HELSETH

Ingvild has been involved in the management of the SFU initiative in NOKUT from 2015 to 2018.

### CHRISTINE ALVEBERG

Christine is currently finishing her master's degree in political science and management at the University of Agder, Norway. She is an experienced student representative, at her own university, in The National Union of Students in Norway (NSO), in the Global Teaching Excellence Award, and more.

Christine took part in the assessment of applications for SFU status in 2016 and has since then been involved in the initiative through contributing to gatherings with the SFU, etc.

### PAUL ASHWIN

Paul Ashwin is Professor of Higher Education in the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University. Paul's research is focused on higher education practices and policies. He has published extensively on the relations between teaching-learn-

ing and knowledge-curriculum practices in higher education. His research interest is also in what counts as excellence and high quality teaching and learning in higher education.

Paul was chair of the expert panel that conducted the 2017 interim evaluation of three SFUs.

### HELEN BRÅTEN

Helen has been the project manager for the SFU initiative in NOKUT from 2012 to 2018.

### CELIA DUFFY

Professor Celia Duffy has held senior positions in the performing arts and academia for over 20 years. She led the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland's Curriculum Reform, an ambitious project aiming to re-define the contemporary conservatoire learning experience that involved managing a significant culture change across the institution. After taking early retirement in 2014, she continues to be active in the sector as a consultant, teacher and Board chair, currently chairing the Boards of Red

Note, Scotland's leading contemporary music ensemble, and The Wallace Collection.

Celia was part of the expert panel for the 2017 interim evaluation of three SFUs.

### STEPHANIE MARSHALL

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### TRINE OFTEDAL

Trine Oftedal acted as the academic officer of the National Union of Students in Norway (NSO) in 2012/2013. She holds a master's degree in arts

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Trine was part of the expert panel for the assessment of applications for SFU status in 2013 and part of the expert panel for the interim evaluation in 2017.

### RICHARD J. REECE

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Richard was part of the expert panel that conducted the 2017 interim evaluation.

## 1

# SHORT INTRODUCTION TO THE SFU INITIATIVE IN NORWAY

In this section, we give a short introduction to the Norwegian Centres for Excellence in Education initiative – in short, “the SFU initiative”<sup>3</sup>. This is meant to serve as a backdrop to the reflections made by the expert panel members and NOKUT in the following sections.



## The SFU initiative in a nutshell

The SFU initiative was established in 2010. The overarching aims of the initiative were to highlight the fact that education was as important a task as research for higher education institutions and to increase the status of teaching and learning. The primary purpose of the initiative was to stimulate teaching and learning excellence through research and knowledge-based development of educational activities at bachelor and master levels in Norwegian higher education.

From 2010 to 2018, the SFU initiative was managed by NOKUT, an independent quality agency under the Ministry of Education and Research. From 2019, it is managed by DIKU, The Norwegian Agency for International Cooperation and Quality Enhancement in Higher Education.

The prestige associated with this national initiative was designed to parallel the Centres of Excellence in Research<sup>4</sup> and Research-based Innovation<sup>5</sup>.

Calls for bids for SFU status are open to all disciplines and, to date, a call for new Centres has been made approximately every three years. In 2011 a pilot Centre in teacher education was started, followed by open calls in 2013 and 2016. There will be a new call in 2019. The information below regarding the application process and the interim evaluation is based on what has been done from the first open call in 2013.

SFU status is awarded for five years, with the possibility of renewal for another five years, subject to an interim evaluation.

4. [https://www.forskingsradet.no/prognett-sff/Home\\_page/122406700181](https://www.forskingsradet.no/prognett-sff/Home_page/122406700181).

5. [https://www.forskingsradet.no/prognett-sfi/Home\\_page/1224067021109](https://www.forskingsradet.no/prognett-sfi/Home_page/1224067021109).

3. Information in this section is largely based on Andersen Helseth & Bråten 2018, Andersen Helseth *et al.* 2017, NOKUT 2016a, [www.nokut.no/sfu](http://www.nokut.no/sfu) and Ashwin *et al.* 2017.

The Centres gaining this status receive up to NOK 8 million, around 870 000 Euros, annually. This amount is to be matched from the centre. In addition to receiving status and funding, the Centres cooperate closely with NOKUT, and constitute a national network of Centres for Excellence.

There are currently eight Centres for Excellence in Education, with one awarded in the first call (2011), three in the second call (2013), and four in the third call (2016) as below:

**2011:**

- ProTed – Centre for Professional Learning in Teacher Education

**2013:**

- bioCEED – Centre for Excellence in Biology Education
- CEMPE – Centre of Excellence in Music Performance Education
- MatRIC – Centre for Research, Innovation and Coordination of Mathematics Teaching

**2016:**

- CCSE – Centre for Computing in Science Education
- CEFIMA – Centre for Excellence in Film and Interactive Media Arts
- Engage – Centre for Engaged Education through Entrepreneurship
- Excited – Centre for Excellent IT Education

### Criteria for awarding SFU status

An educational community that is awarded status as an SFU must be excellent 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. The centre plan should be ambitious, articulating a vision for major enhancement that is capable of transforming the discipline at the local, institutional, national and international level, 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 & Turpin 2000).

The first criterion is a necessary, but not sufficient condition, for the award of Centre status. NOKUT has not defined any specific or fixed metrics that need 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. More on this aspect in Section 2 (see also Andersen Helseth *et al.* 2017).

### The assessment process

NOKUT appoints an international expert panel to assess the bids. The panel is multi-disciplinary, consisting of experts in higher education pedagogy and policy, and a student representative. The panel members were drawn from different countries in order to enable benchmarking against best practice globally. NOKUT acts as the secretariat for the panel.

The assessment of applications for Centre status (against the criteria mentioned above) consists broadly of two rounds. First, the applications submitted to NOKUT are assessed by the external panel based on the written material. All applicants receive written feedback – agreed by panel members - with graded assessments on a scale from 1-6, where 1 denotes poor and 6 denotes excellent quality.

Additional information could be requested from the short-listed bids and then site visits are made to all the finalists. In 2013, the number of finalists was eight (of 24 applications), in 2016 it was nine (of 22 applications). The expert panel is complemented with discipline experts for each of the site visits.

The purpose of the site visit is to evaluate the Centre in greater depth and assess the validity of the documentation and the claims provided in the written applications. The expert panel interviews different stakeholders, such as Centre leadership and core team, senior leaders, teachers, students and other stakeholders of the Centre. The disciplinary expert helps the panel understand the disciplinary context, benchmarks the application against best practice within the discipline globally, and acts as a critical friend from the same discipline in the site visits.

Based on information gained through the site visits, the panel makes a recommendation to the NOKUT board on awarding SFU status. The board then makes a formal decision as to which applicants are awarded SFU status, and the level of funding for each. In making the decision of the awarded Centre status public, all finalists also receive feedback outlining the respective strengths and areas for improvement from their bid. In 2016, all the finalists also met the expert panel to discuss the feedback given and possible further developments.

NOKUT and the expert committees provide extensive written feedback that can be used by the applicants – not only for the next call for SFU applications or the further development of applications in stage two of the application process, but in day-to-day enhancement activities regardless of the result of the application process.

All the feedback, as well as the bids, are publicly available. This transparency makes it possible for the public to examine the application process ensuring equal and fair treatment. In addition, it means that prospective bidders, as well as others looking for good practice, may use the feedback and bids in their work.

## Interim evaluation of SFUs

The pilot Centre in teacher education, ProTed, underwent an interim evaluation in 2015. Based on the experiences made in 2015, the methodology and process for the interim evaluation of bioCEED, CEMPE and MatRIC were developed. These three Centres were awarded SFU status 1 January 2014 and underwent an interim evaluation in 2017.

The 2017 interim evaluation was aimed at:

- Assessing the impact and innovations of each Centre at institutional, national and international level, within their subject discipline and across subjects.
- Supporting the Centres in developing action plans for the second phase of funding.
- Making a recommendation to the NOKUT board on whether each Centre should be funded for an additional five-year period.
- Providing feedforward to both the individual Centres and NOKUT on the working of the Centres and the overall SFU initiative.

The impact was seen in relation to the stated aims in the original application and the overall goals for the SFU programme. Sustainability in the Centres' work was also addressed. As in the process for appointing Centres, an international expert panel was appointed with subject experts and NOKUT served as a secretariat for the panel.

The interim evaluation started with NOKUT inviting the Centres to develop the process and the criteria at a network gathering of all the SFUs. Then initial guidance was given from the expert panel. The Centres had to submit documentation in three phases; first, a written self-evaluation, then verbally through site visits, and, thirdly, through a written action plan.

The panel gave written feedback in all of the three phases and submitted a formal recommendation to the NOKUT board. The board then decided on extension for all the Centres. After the completion of the process, another seminar was set up to reflect on the process, the results, and the common

overarching themes from all the Centres. NOKUT purposefully designed the process to be developmental and future-oriented for the Centres and the academic communities to develop further, regardless of the outcome. At the same time, NOKUT wanted to ensure that a real evaluation took place, and set high standards for the renewal process. The intention was to give the Centres a real push and be a catalyst for quality enhancement in the second phase of funding.

NOKUT saw the effort that the Centres put into this process and acknowledge that they found this to be a demanding process. However, looking at where the Centres are now, a significant change is evident. The Centres have not only produced good results and innovative teaching, but have set up solid communities of practice and are making a difference for the higher education sector in Norway. In addition, the aspirations of the Centres have been lifted. This includes how the Centres' goals are formulated, how the different sub-projects are interacting and how the plans for the second phase of funding have been formulated. NOKUT is therefore confident that the process has contributed to enhancement in these excellent communities. However, here we will reflect on the dual attempts to stimulate further development and making a formal decision on whether the SFU status should be extended.

## Conclusion

Looking beyond the results of the interim evaluation and to the SFU initiative as a whole, external evaluations and commissioned research show that the initiative is making a difference (Carlsten & Vabø 2015; Carlsten & Aamodt 2013; Kottmann *et al.* 2016, (see Section 8; Andersen Helseth & Bråten 2018). It is also highlighted in the recent white paper (Meld. St. 16 [2016-2017]). The initiative inspires excellence and quality enhancement across the sector. It has stimulated collaboration within institutions and across institutions, and have brought together institutions and academic communities that complement each other. It has also stimulated international cooperation. There is now a common language available for discussing quality enhancement in education and educational

leaders find themselves in a position where they can justify prioritizing time and financial resources to education (Carlsten & Vabø 2015). A number of people, events and circumstances have contributed to this development, but the external evaluations and commissioned research speak to the SFU initiative's part in this. In developing the initiative further and in NOKUTs continued work with enhancement in different ways, we hope the following reflections will inspire and inform teaching excellence and the stimulation of enhancement at national level. ●

## 2

## CHARACTERISTICS OF TEACHING EXCELLENCE (TE)

Teaching Excellence (TE) is something of an elusive concept. For those of us working in higher education, we might think we know what TE is when we see it, but providing a precise definition is far harder. Some of these difficulties, perhaps, stem from the variety of guises in which TE may be found. Some of these may be very specific to a discipline or professional field, while others may have a much broader impact on student success across disciplinary boundaries. The national context may also play a part.

The nature of TE itself and TE in the Norwegian context was debated in the very first meeting of the SFU interim evaluation panel. The discussion continued throughout the process as well as in the aftermath. In this section, we share some reflections and articulate a view of TE that has evolved over the months we have worked together.



### Reflecting on TE in the Norwegian context

One issue we reflected upon was the shades of difference in the meaning of the term “excellent” in Norwegian and English. In English, the term ‘excellence’ is now much overused and has become somewhat watered down. In Norwegian the word “*fremragende*” has a sense of moving forward (*frem*) and upward (tall or reaching above the rest, *ragende*) and is reserved to describe something really cutting-edge.

Additionally, and significantly, we noted and discussed the important distinction of the SFUs as Centres *for* Excellence, not *of* Excellence. A Centre *of* Excellence implies its location in a smaller, maybe departmental context, which scores highly on certain metrics, e.g., student destinations, reputation of teaching staff, recruitment statistics, measures of esteem such as prizes and awards, or success in funding. On the other hand, a Centre *for* Excellence implies a wider, more outward-looking, networked and experimentally orientated enterprise (that might well be successful in the metrics noted above, but may also be appropriately assessed by more subtle, qualitative, measures). The aim is for the SFUs to focus on dissemination *for action* (Harmsworth & Turpin 2000; Lawson 2016) rather than simply telling others what they have learnt or how they excel compared to others. The Centre is not only the “sender” of a message, being excellent in everything, teaching and helping others. Change is not only something that should happen “out there”. Interaction means others provide valuable input and advice to the Centres as well and being a Centre for Excellence means recognising that there might be other excellent teachers and practices elsewhere (see also Andersen Helseth & Bråten 2018; Lawson 2016). This two-way interaction is crucial to our understanding of dissemination and what it means to be a Centre for Excellence.

Additionally, a successful SFU needs to be anchored in institutional strategy and commitment - perhaps in contrast with a Centre of Excellence in research. In research, a smaller excellent environment might be rather independent of institutional policy and priority, but indirectly drive it. An SFU needs institutional commitment from the beginning. A high level of funding and a plan for dissemination on an institutional level, i.e., a plan for how the Centre will influence the institution over a ten year period, need backing both in terms of financial support and commitment from senior managers at the host institution to make the SFU succeed.

One of the aims of the SFU initiative is to stimulate and reward cooperation and learning that takes place in the interaction between students, staff, the labour market, professional bodies and wider society (NOKUT 2016a). Particular emphasis has been put on student engagement and ownership of learning, both in the criteria and in the management of the initiative (see also Andersen Helseth & Bråten 2018; Andersen Helseth *et al.* 2017). In Norway, an important element of quality is student participation: a minimum of 20% student representation in formal decision-making processes is required by law (but see the discussion and critique in Section 3). In the SFU initiative however, a sign of excellence is the involvement and engagement of students, not only in representative roles, but as partners, co-creators and change agents influencing and forming not only their own learning but also the curricula and the academic communities (NOKUT 2016a; Ashwin & McVitty 2015; Healey *et al.* 2014; Dunne & Zandstra 2011:17). This cooperation between staff and students has changed the discourse in the Centres and Centre applicants around student involvement, increasing students' ownership of education. From previously talking *about* students and their learning the Centres and applicants are to a larger extent talking *with* the students making them co-directors in the Centres, leading projects and helping to create learning material. You can read more about students as partners in Section 3.

We also noted that to be awarded SFU status, each Centre had already passed a quality threshold of excellence in which preconditions for innovative quality work were articulated. To be awarded status as an SFU,

the Centres need to document excellence in existing provision (NOKUT 2016a). This is a necessary (but not the only) precondition for Centre status and serves as the basis for innovation in teaching and learning and research-based developments.

### The characteristics of teaching excellence

Based on discussions we have had through the interim evaluation process, we have found a view of TE that includes the following broad characteristics:

- TE is about a **process of enhancement**: a journey, rather than a fixed point on some assessment scale; it is not competitive; it is not about being ranked "*better than institution X*"<sup>6</sup>;
- TE is **not risk-averse**; it is experimentally-focussed, receptive to new ideas, open to challenges, and the possibility of failure, and it shares all these characteristics with research - indeed a research-informed approach was always envisaged for the SFUs<sup>7</sup> (see Section 5);
- TE does not thrive in a vacuum or at the level of the individual teacher; rather, **it is supported, encouraged and nurtured by a supportive institutional culture and context** (see Section 7). It is about a continuous striving for excellence and a culture whose values and ethos are open to learning and allow the freedom to experiment and fail (and, to learn from failure see Section 5).

In applying these characteristics to one of the disciplines under consideration in the interim evaluation, that of higher music performance education, the first two are in tune with the notion of artistic excellence which combines respect for and maintenance of the integrity, technical standards and established practices of the discipline with creativity, innovation, challenge and risk-taking (Duffy 2013). They are equally applicable to maths and "Biology", by simply substituting an appropriate discipline-specific adjective for "artistic". Conversely, and less productively,

6. See also Sjøbrend 2018.

7. Andersen Helseth *et al.* 2017 and NOKUT 2016a.

ranking and competition are hard-wired in music performance education in which students have a very clear sense of which of their peers is “better” than them and institutions have a very clear sense of where they are in the global pecking order. As regards the third characteristic, it is possible to have excellent individual teaching in an “average” institution without enlightened leadership (see Section 7), but a pocket of excellence is unlikely to flourish and thrive without being nurtured or widely disseminated.

This way of thinking about the nature of TE as constantly evolving and dynamic does not lend itself to assessment based on quantitative measures. An obvious international comparator is the UK Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (Office for Students, n.d.) that measures TE in three areas: firstly, teaching quality and the extent to which teaching stimulates and challenges students, secondly, the effectiveness of the learning environment and, thirdly, student outcomes and learning gain. These criteria are very much more somewhat better defined and are measured using national data from the National Student Survey (NSS), the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), and the Destination of Leavers in Higher Education (DLHE), combined with supplementary information and evidence from institutions.

By contrast, applicants for SFU status were, from the start, given the freedom to choose their own criteria for excellence rather than conforming to a more standardised framework for assessment. What is important in the SFU initiative is that the case for excellence is strongly aligned with the proposed Centre’s mission, vision and projects (NOKUT 2016a; Andersen Helseth & Bråten 2018). This corresponds to Skelton’s statement that any claim for excellence must be relative to the goals being pursued (Skelton 2005). Furthermore, it means that the SFU initiative can adapt to institutional and disciplinary differences in excellence (Abbas *et al.* 2016).

In external evaluations (Carlsten & Aamodt 2013; Carlsten & Vabø 2015), Norwegian institutions highlight openness as important for the relevance of the SFU initiative. The latest government white paper also underlines how the SFUs are to be defined locally (Meld. St. 16 [2016-2017], p. 84). This is

very much in line with the view of TE that has evolved through the interim evaluation process.

In this section, we have reflected upon the view of TE that developed through the months that we worked together, and which is well linked to the SFU criteria and literature. In the next section, we will look further into one of the important aspects mentioned above, which is students as partners. ●

## 3

## STUDENTS AS PARTNERS AS SEEN FROM AN SFU PERSPECTIVE

*“Students as Partners is one of the most progressive and transformative debates happening in higher education”.*

(Levy 2017)



**Ensuring that students** are partners in the educational process has become an international trend, gaining more traction in discussion about higher education in Norway and being emphasized by the SFU initiative. It is not difficult to understand why: a sound body of literature has established robust correlations between student involvement in a subset of “educationally purposive activities”, and positive outcomes of student success and development, including satisfaction, persistence, academic achievement and social engagement (Trowler 2010). There are many different approaches to including students as partners and there are several different definitions and frameworks that have been constructed (c.f. Ashwin & McVitty 2015; Bovill & Bulley 2011; Könings *et al.* 2017; Healey *et al.* 2014). These illustrate the range of ways to understand the concept. Ashwin and McVitty (2015) argue that the vagueness of the concept can be addressed by analysing the focus and degree of student engagement. The focus of engagement can be the students’ individual understanding, courses and curricula or academic communities. The degree can vary from consultation in which students give their opinion on a fixed object that does not change, to partnership where students participate in the transformation of a pre-existing object, to *leadership* in which students create new objects of engagement.

### Meaningful sharing of power

Students are best equipped to understand their own learning situations. All students, like all assessors, are individuals, but the perspectives brought to the assessment process by learners are invaluable to understanding how well

a programme of study works, for instance. This contribution ensures that the choices made regarding the provision of education are better informed. Students and scholars have different perspectives that are equally important in the assessment of quality, and neither should be considered more valuable than the other. This ties well into Ashwin and McVitty's (2015) definition of partnership as the meaningful sharing of power.

One of the most common ways to include students in quality assurance and enhancement is to ask them about their experiences via questionnaires. Often, this only provides the answers to the questions being asked, with relatively little or no unfiltered feedback. There is seldom room in the questionnaires for students to critique the questions themselves, or to query the intention behind them. Thus, collecting student feedback through questionnaires is not sufficient for succeeding in bringing in students as partners. Moreover, students and teachers often use a different vocabulary about quality and TE, and this opens up the possibility of miscommunication between the two. Creating a mutual understanding about what quality is in higher education will improve the communication about TE for both teachers and students.

In both the awarding of SFU Centre status and the mid-term evaluations, it was clear that different applicants had very different ideas about how the partnership with students should be utilized. We will explore these differences in greater detail below. We will also explore different examples of how student engagement is done in Norway; at the institutional level, the SFU level and the national level. Hopefully, this will provide guidance and inspiration in working with students as partners in the future.

### At the institutional level

Every higher education institution in Norway has a student union, but institutions have something of a free reign in terms of how to involve students. Hence, they are organized very differently depending on a number of factors, such as the number of students represented.

Student participation in decision-making is regulated by law (Act relating to Universities and University Colleges, 2005, § 4.4). This ensures a minimum of 20 percent student representation in formal decision-making processes. However, this only ensures students as partners in the form of consultation in one level of decision-making. The intention of this law is good, and it is a way of formally ensuring that student involvement is present. We argue that the focus on percentage makes it easier to regard student involvement as just *ticking a box*, rather than students being important agents for change for improving TE. We would emphasize that 20 percent is a minimum limit and does not adequately capture the concept of students as partners.

Because of the nature of higher education, in which academic staff have a great deal of autonomy, most of the decisions on the content of projects have already been made before going on to the final decision stages where the students are always present. There is little room for editing content and making suggestions in that final stage of the process of decision-making. Many projects are developed using a bottom-up approach involving a number of academic staff, and there is rarely space to make new suggestions or ideas in the final stage of the process. We argue that students should be involved in the early stages of a project to have a real possibility to affect change.

There will always be those students who take charge of their own education and have the interest and drive to become involved. These are the kind of students that do not need much encouragement from the institutions to become involved, even if the institutional climate is not particularly conducive to student participation. In our view, all students should be enabled to make an informed decision about whether or not they want to involve themselves as partners. Students need to know how, when, where, and above all, *why* they should become involved. In addition, teachers, too, need to understand the benefits of student involvement. This requires that the institutions have a culture for change which encourages receptiveness to constructive feedback and appreciates students as experts on their own learning.

## Students as partners in the Centres

In our experience, the SFUs have a better understanding than the rest of the sector about students as partners. They have worked with students as partners in a systematic way and we therefore see more examples from them than is usual. We would encourage the existing SFUs to acknowledge their own crucial part in disseminating the potential of students as partners as a driving force for TE in Norway.

That said, the level of student involvement varied considerably in both the applicants for SFUs and the existing Centres. Below are some examples of how some of the Centres and applicants have included students as partners:

*INTERACT*: In the 2016 bid from Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences (now OsloMet), the idea for the Centre itself came from a student initiative, focusing on trans-disciplinary skills which they found lacking in their current programme. In this case, the students acted as change agents.

*bioCEED*: Bioracle is a student-led initiative at the University of Bergen. Senior students are coaching and mentoring new students both in the formal and informal aspects of student life. This student initiative won a prestigious prize at the University of Bergen. It was the first time ever that students received the prize.

*Engage*: The Centre for Engaged Education through Entrepreneurship at NTNU is transdisciplinary and therefore has the opportunity to involve a range of students from different disciplines. Here, a group of students make up a media team and, among other things, edit a magazine for the Centre, thus taking an important part in its dissemination activity. These students are undertaking their studies in relevant subjects and are receiving experience in their field.

*CCSE*: At the Center for Computing in Science Education

(CCSE) hosted by the University of Oslo students are part of creating learning materials and developing teaching. The centre also has a strategy for how to involve student as partners and have student-driven activities. (CCSE n.d.).

*CEFIMA*: Every week at the Norwegian Film School, there is a breakfast in which both students and teachers participate. The students can contribute ideas and topics, which the teachers can discuss with them, and incorporate in learning situations on the same day. This is an aspect that creates an educational community in which the students really engage in the Centre's activities. This demands a high degree of receptiveness, agility and flexibility from the teacher, resulting in a feeling of joint enterprise.

## Nationally – as part of the assessment processes in the SFU initiative

We would like to make some remarks about the experiences of the student representatives on the panels and reflect on our own experience. The experience of the students on the panels for the 2013 and 2016 calls for new centres and the 2017 interim evaluation will function as an example of how students can become co-creators – that is, equal partners in the process of assessing SFUs.

The SFU team in NOKUT has succeeded in building excellent working relationships with the student panel representatives and thus enabled them to act as expert partners. The students had the same responsibility, authority, and acknowledgement as the rest of the panel. In this, NOKUT was able to build on experience from including students on assessment panels for a range of different quality assurance activities (which is also regulated in The Academic Supervision Regulations [2017]).

The other members of the SFU panels similarly regarded students as equal partners and experts. The SFU team has also used students as experts in other arenas (such as gatherings for the Centres), as they have with the other panel members. Students are acknowledged as important and that builds confidence.

A vocabulary has been developed and a confirmation that the thoughts and reflections of students are valued as (good and) important. The experience has contributed to building the students' skills base, building confidence and enabling students to trust their own capabilities. The students felt the rest of the panel were properly focused on the student experience. This allowed students to contribute across all elements of the process, not just having to represent the student voice.

The student role on these panels was as an expert on being the learner in the educational situation. In addition, both the students who are co-writing this publication had a great deal of prior expertise in understanding the field of higher education. The expertise involved knowledge about the financial system, quality assurance and processes for carrying out quality assurance. The students understand the Norwegian context, and this expanded their area of expertise. If a student representative did not have such a broad background, it would be important to take action to enable them to build their knowledge base.

It is important to involve students early in the process. In forming the criteria for SFU, NOKUT brought in a student from the NSO. This ensured the student perspective was always presented, and this should be continued in the future.

## Conclusion

In summary, we see the success criteria for students as partners as follows:

- Understanding that academics and students often use a different vocabulary regarding education;
- Creating a culture that is receptive for the unique expertise that

students provide; ensuring that students participate as partners as early as possible in projects;

- Allowing students to be the experts on their own learning situation.

We therefore recommend that any initiatives seeking to bring about TE need to be co-created with students as partners, using simple language that adopts the language of the learner (i.e. the expert student), thereby promoting a culture in which each and every voice is valued as having a worthwhile contribution to make to any discussion of what factors will demonstrate progress towards TE. ●

## 4

## ASSESSING TEACHING EXCELLENCE

In this section, we will consider some of the tensions that both the panel and the three Centres experienced in the process of the 2017 interim evaluation. Perhaps the greatest source of tension comes from misunderstandings of the differences between standard quality assurance and enhancement-led approaches. We will suggest that use of a “critical friend” might be useful in addressing these tensions. Furthermore, we discuss to what extent both the Centres’ international advisory boards, NOKUT and the expert panel have taken and/or been perceived as such critical friends



### The approach of the interim evaluation to assessing teaching excellence

The rubric for the interim evaluation emphasised its intended developmental, enhancement-led, function: “The overarching aim of the interim evaluation was developmental. It was intended to support both the Centres and the overall SFU initiative in reaching their goals and to enhance their contribution to the quality of teaching and learning in higher education (Ashwin *et al.* 2017)”. However, alongside this, the interim evaluation was also making a recommendation as to whether the Centres should qualify for the next funding phase (see also Sections 1 and 6). For the Centres, then, it was a high-stakes game in which developmentally-intentioned feedback and critique from the panel could be seen by Centres to be at odds with the bottom line of continued funding.

Bearing in mind the propositions above in Section 2 about the definition of TE, it is worth evaluating to what extent these characteristics of excellence were reflected in the panel’s assessment criteria. Secondly, how far the Centres, in writing their reports and plans for the future, really understood and were able to respond to what the panel needed and expected, and whether they were confident enough in asserting *their* vision of TE. Finally, whether, in hindsight, the assessment method was most appropriate for this scenario and how that might be adjusted in future.

The assessment methods that we employed in the mid-term evaluation consisted of what maybe *looked like* a familiar quality-assurance style

pattern of scrutiny of written reports from the Centres, a daylong face-to-face meeting consisting of a presentation from the Centres and then questions from the panel. Finally, deliberations on this process resulted in a panel report and judgement. However, the critical difference is that whereas in standard quality assurance processes the criteria are externally imposed, in the SFU scenario the Centres themselves were invited to define their own concept of TE and to contribute to the development of the criteria for the interim evaluation (see Sections 1 and 6 in particular). They would not be judged on external metrics, which might be inappropriate for their discipline and context, but rather on their own concept of what TE looked like for them.

Inappropriate metrics, misunderstanding and misalignment of expectations between the two “sides” (the assessors and the assessed) are common in judging higher education teaching quality. Many individual teachers find the jargon of “edu-speak”, and how it applies to their daily experience on the ground, difficult to relate to and understand. Despite, for example, the advances in professional development in the UK, in which individual TE is examined by a reflective portfolio, there is still mistrust. The use of externally imposed metrics is less apparent in the Norwegian context than in the UK, but nonetheless an important point to make here. Overcoming these language barriers and creating a relationship based on trust is hence important when working with enhancement.

### The evaluation panel for the 2017 interim evaluation

The panel was multi-disciplinary, consisting of experts in higher education pedagogy and policy, a student representative and one subject expert from each of the three discipline areas under scrutiny (maths, biology and music performance). We found our different experiences and backgrounds complementary and all felt able to contribute meaningfully to discussions of teaching in different subjects, locating many points of contact between the teaching practices of the three subject areas. This is not surprising: unlike some of the teachers and students we encountered, we “speak the same language”, are all well-versed in the discourses and practices of enhancement

and quality assurance, and have similar expectations of the kind of documentary evidence used in these settings.

Nevertheless, there was still an element of mismatch between the experiences of the panel and the Centres during the interim evaluation. The panel believed it was offering feedback and criticism in a constructive spirit; on the other hand, Centres (for whom there was a lot both reputationally and financially at stake) felt scrutinised and pressured. For the Centres, open debate on enhancement versus the prospect of losing five years’ funding were not a happy mix. Often we were not speaking the same language: there were misunderstandings about, for example, the types of evidence and evaluative strategies the panel believed it needed to be assured of the impact of Centres’ activities (see Section 6). The panel felt, no doubt to the frustration of the Centres, that it did not have a clear sense of the overarching vision that should drive the Centre’s activities – and, given the philosophy of the self-defining TE in which these Centres were operating, this was a key omission. These misunderstandings occurred despite regular helpful interventions from NOKUT staff and specific workshops on evaluation from a member of the panel.

In the design of the assessment, what clearly was not coming through was how far the Centres understood and were in sympathy with the panel’s sense of the characteristics of TE – especially having the confidence to fail (see Section 5). Again, even though in the questions the Centres were asked to address in their interim report the possibility of failure was absolutely explicit (“Please provide examples of cases where you have been particularly innovative (regardless of whether the results have been successful or not). What did you expect to achieve that has not been achieved? What prevented the Centre from reaching these aims?” [NOKUT 2017]), there was often a tone and attitude of defensiveness in both written submissions and face-to-face interviews. Whereas the panel regarded it as its responsibility to provide a robust challenge to Centres, the Centres themselves seemed not to expect this level of critique or they did not feel in the position to act upon it in a constructive manner.

## Using critical friends to bridge the gap

Prchal and Messas (2017) have recently written on the challenges of making quality assurance assessment meaningful and understandable to the teacher on the ground. This is in the context of MusiQUE, a specialist international quality assurance provider for higher education music performance allied to the Association of European Conservatoires (AEC). One of their conclusions is to extend the standard method of conventional quality assurance (written documentation plus interview with a potentially richer source of evidence) with the addition of a “critical friend”.

A critical friend is an external expert who is considered to be an international authority with regard to the content of the programme(s) that are being reviewed. The critical friend is asked to review one or more programme(s) during a visit of approximately three days. During this visit, the critical friend will speak with management, teachers, students and non-academic staff (e.g., quality assurance officers) both personally and in small groups, visit classes, performances and examinations, sample written work and study relevant materials in order to get an impression of the quality of the programmes both in terms of artistic standards and educational quality. After such a visit, the critical friend will formulate his or her findings in a concise report of about five to seven pages, which should include a set of concrete recommendations. (Prchal & Messas 2017)

The critical friend thus would adopt a qualitative approach, talk to small focus groups, attend classes, and (both through their constructive approach and their personal standing as an international authority) gain a nuanced view of the work under consideration, be able to make constructive recommendations and suggestions and nudge a programme in an appropriate direction if needed.

Handal (2016) points out that the notion of a critical friend implies inherent tension, if not somewhat of an oxymoron: friendship and criticism. Friends often disregard our negative sides and support us, whereas criticism stems

from someone not too close. However, maybe a true friend is one we can trust and who provides this critical perspective if necessary, or, as MacBeath & Jardine (1988, p. 41, quoted in Handal 2016, p. 256) put it, “a true marrying of unconditional support and unconditional critique”.

For the relationship between the critical friend and the academic community to work, it needs trust, honesty, a safe space for deliberation, and acknowledgment of the others’ competence. Handal (2016) points to some crucial characteristics:

- A personal relationship built on trust
- Confidence and belief in the critical friend’s competence and knowledge
- An anticipation of personal integrity
- Confidence that the critical friend wants to support you and your success

Acting as critical friends is also a learning experience where the “expert” benefits greatly by studying and analysing the professional practices and learning philosophies of others. It is very much a collegial approach, and hence in line with for instance the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research’s White Paper’s focus on increasing peer-review mechanisms in education (Meld. St. 16 [2016-2017]).

## International advisory boards as critical friends

The three Centres that underwent the interim evaluation in 2017 all have different advisory and steering groups. This includes international advisory boards with highly esteemed colleagues from around the world, who are well qualified to take on the responsibility of critical friends in line with what was described by Prchal & Messas (2017) and Handal (2016).

The international advisory boards of the Centres do to a large extent consist of colleagues that can be seen as “friends” of the Centre staff with whom there was a pre-existing personal relationship built on trust in line with Handal’s (2016). It is clear that these international advisory boards (either

in the function as advisory boards or individuals also represented on the boards) have supported the Centres' development and been of great value to them. Some of them have also been critical friends concerning the SFU initiative in itself.

However, in light of the way challenges and criticism from the 2017 interim evaluation panel was received, there are a few things that may be worthwhile to consider – not at least for other SFU Centres that have yet to go through an interim evaluation. Perhaps the boards can to an even greater degree challenge the Centre's thinking in a "safe" space before an evaluation, and anticipate areas that are likely to be critiqued and assist in how to respond to them in a constructive and non-defensive manner. Above all, critical friends could help Centres to communicate confidently their vision of TE and how, in their particular context, it is evidenced.

Maybe it is so that the potential of these boards and individuals to act as *critical* friends as opposed to "just" *friends*, has not been exploited to its fullest? It might be that the role of a true critical friend is hard to take up on for a colleague with whom there is a longstanding friendship. As Handal (2016, p. 255) points out, friends, someone who is close to us, support, acknowledge us and disregard our negative sides. Often they do not confront us. A true friend however should nevertheless be able hold up a critical mirror for us and still be trusted.

Most of the members of such international advisory boards are from the same discipline as the Centre, which might entail that they encounter some of the same difficulties as the Centres in articulating the vision of TE, the Centre's achievements and theories of change (see Section 6) to an expert panel consisting of more general higher education experts (and one subject expert). For some disciplines, especially those where there is a limited number of high profile specialized institutions competing at a very global stage for students, staff and reputation, being both friends and critical friends might be particularly challenging. Having critical friends from outside the discipline or the usual context who do not stem from the same culture might stimulate different questions, different concepts and models

as well as point to taken-for granted assumptions, thus can be an option to consider for the Centres.

The issues raised here, may or may not have influenced how the international advisory boards acted as critical friends in advance of the 2017 interim evaluation, but we believe they may be interesting to consider for the future.

### NOKUT and the expert panel as critical friends

We as NOKUT and the expert panel envisaged ourselves to be such critical friends of the three Centres that underwent the 2017 interim evaluation. The response of the Centres, however, indicates that we may not have been perceived this way. As described above, maybe simply too much was at stake? We believe there also other perspectives that are worthwhile to consider for future learning.

Some of the questions raised concerning the international advisory board, may be true for the relationship between NOKUT and the Centres as well. In managing the initiative, NOKUT has put a lot of emphasis on following up on the Centres closely, building personal relationships of trust and support. May it be so that we too have become friends, from whom criticism is not expected?

In addition or on the contrary, could it be that a strong focus on pushing the centres further made the interim evaluation all about challenges, undermining the progress that the Centres had actually made, thus making NOKUT and the expert panel just "critical" and not "friends" at all? Or could it be that the Centres, NOKUT and the expert panel had not invested enough time and effort to develop the same foundations, language and expectations for the evaluation making it a common process based on trust?

Furthermore, perhaps the difficulties in having critical friends from the outside (the discipline, the country etc.) who brings with them different perspectives, concepts and models than those normally used within the existing culture should have been taken more into account?

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## Conclusion

In this section, we have argued that the developmental aspects of the interim evaluation was disturbed by the evaluative side with high stake consequences for the centres. We will argue that there might be an underused potential in using critical friends in enhancement programmes such as the SFU in preparing an application or for an interim evaluation in particular. NOKUT considered having the Centre directors on the evaluation panel to evaluate each other. This was not implemented. Nevertheless, there might be a potential for the centres to act as critical friends to each other and hence help each other prepare for evaluations? The use of critical friends might be further developed in the methodology for the interim evaluation of the SFUs.

Based on the 2017 interim evaluation experiences, we suggest that characteristics put forward by Handal (2016), or something similar, are given thorough consideration by both sides of the relationship and that there should be an initial discussion about the kind of relationship both sides envisage before the review process. It is clear from the points raised in this Section that both having and being critical friends is not easy. This, however, does not mean it is not worthwhile. ●

## 5

## BARRIERS TO THE DISSEMINATION OF EXCELLENT TEACHING PRACTICE

In working with the SFU initiative in Norway, and from knowledge of similar initiatives to stimulate excellence in higher education teaching and education, it is clear that significant barriers to the dissemination of excellent teaching practice exist. Initiatives such as the SFU aim to increase the overall quality of higher education provision across the national higher education sector through the funding of a limited number of Centres for Excellence. This goal is predicated on identified excellence having the ability to shape and influence the teaching activities within the Centre, within the host institution and more widely on the national stage.

Here, we discuss some of the barriers that tend to preclude the dissemination of excellent teaching practice and propose a set of measures that Centres, host institutions and national funding agencies may wish to adopt to ensure that the excellence developed within the Centres is distributed as widely as possible.



### Recognition of excellence

Staff working in higher education often find it difficult to know if what they are doing in their teaching activities might be considered as being excellent. Too often, they rely only on student feedback to know if they are doing a good job – and in many cases this has a tendency to simply reinforce what might be considered to be “normal”, satisfactory practice and behaviours. It does not always either encourage or reward risk-taking to develop new or novel mechanisms for delivery or levels of engagement.

Departmental and institutional recognition of excellence should not need to rely solely on external verification. There is certainly value (either in terms of funding or prestige, or both) in externally validated Centres for TE, but this must map onto institutional structures to enable excellence to be recognised and rewarded (see Section 7). Staff need to be equipped with both the skills and confidence to evaluate their teaching endeavours in terms of the contribution made to student success. Such a judgement is likely to come from a number of sources, but might include:

- Reflective practice (see Ashwin *et al.* 2015)
- Student outcomes
- Student feedback
- Other evidence-informed judgements

Institutions can help by providing a framework for the assessment of teaching practices, within the context of their particular mission and values, offering appropriate training to equip staff with the ability to make

informed judgements. In addition to the need for appropriate training, staff need time. Making changes in teaching takes time and effort. This is an important factor that should not be underestimated and which leaders at all levels should be conscious of.

### Practice dissemination

For TE to make lasting changes to practice in a wider context the methods employed and the results obtained must be disseminated. This does not only mean that the results should be presented in an academic paper or published on a web-site, but positive efforts need to be employed to ensure that the lessons learned are circulated widely and employed where appropriate. Changing practice in higher education has been described as taking place as a series of steps that may be discrete but are more likely overlapping (Saunders et al. 2011):

- *Enclave* – the creation of a practice (or set of practices) with a distinctive characteristic that exist within a wider institutional setting where these are not the norm;
- *Bridgehead* – a platform for the development of the change in practice beyond, perhaps, a single taught module into a wider discipline area;
- *Embedded practice* – the acceptance of an alteration to the practice in preference to the previous dominant culture of the organization.

Ultimately, the new embedded practice can itself become a redefined dominant culture within an organization if evidence shows that it can lead to improved student outcomes (a bottom-up approach to change in practice), or if leadership – either at the local or institutional level – has the desire to drive through a perceived advantageous change (a top-down approach).

### Breaking silos

For the purposes outlined here, examples of TE might be considered as having aspects that are either discipline-specific (e.g., the collaborative approaches of “de-privatising” performance education by CEMPE) or

have a wider context (e.g., the development of programme-wide intended learning outcomes for both subject-specific and transferable skills by bioCEED). The distinction between these two is not straightforward to define. There may be, for example, aspects of excellent teaching practice that have been developed within the context of a single discipline that can be applied without much adjustment to other disciplines, while others may require considerable additional modification before they may be considered relevant to other disciplines.

For discipline-specific examples, mechanisms should be employed to enable other institutions teaching that discipline to benefit from the identified areas of excellence. This might be thought of as the creation of additional enclaves in other locations and is likely to involve working with appropriate learned societies, pedagogic centres, or other cross institutional discipline-specific groupings to enable others to benefit from the identified ‘best practice’. Institutional rivalries and other factors may inhibit sharing of this sort, but the potential benefit of student outcomes must be considered a greater good.

This work is likely to be facilitated by individuals interested in the pedagogic development of their subject. Sometimes, these individuals are referred to as a *coalition of the willing*, but they need to be both encouraged to, and facilitated to, evaluate the potential change within their own institutional contexts. Success in one context may not transfer directly to other contexts without modification, and different institutions tend to like to put their own “spin” onto many things that they do (Harmsworth & Turpin 2000). However, this type of evaluation is an important factor in the formation of a new enclave and its potential conversion to a bridgehead.

Aspects of TE that may have a wider context – or may be appropriate beyond the confines of a single discipline - need to be disseminated both throughout the originating institution and beyond. Educational leadership (see Section 7) will play a key role in enabling this to happen. Centralised diktats on what should or should not be included in a curriculum seldom gain traction – particularly in research-intensive higher education

institutions – but mechanisms should be in place to ensure that good and excellent practices have the ability to become utilised in a wider variety of programmes of study (bridgeheads).

Periodic and Curriculum reviews have a role to play in this, but their relatively infrequent occurrence will usually preclude rapid changes being made using these routes. Educational leaders must therefore take a role in ensuring that teaching staff appreciate the value of continual course improvement, and enable and encourage course leaders to have the information they require to determine whether a particular innovation might work within their local context. To appreciate the value of continual improvement and to be able to act in that regard, teaching staff need to have time available. This is a leadership issue as well. Under these circumstances, the bridgehead may begin to form part of newly formed embedded practice.

### Creating an environment where risk-taking and evaluation is the norm

Perhaps the biggest barrier to the creation and wide dissemination of TE relates to the unwillingness of teaching staff and educational leaders to take risks. The limited time most teaching staff have available for making changes in their courses will most likely play a part in this. Teaching staff cannot be expected to get it right every time and the suppression of innovation that accompanies the expectation of rapid success stifles improvement. The contrasts between the risks taken during research experimentation and the relatively “safe” activities employed during teaching - often undertaken by the same staff - are stark. Within the educational sphere, there appears to be an unwillingness to do something that might fail. This might be related to a lack of confidence on behalf of the teachers (e.g. looking bad in front of a class of students, see Section 2), but such innovative practices can be encouraged if there is a no-blame culture within a department or institution that recognises and rewards the development of innovative practices and accepts that trying out and implementing such practises take time. Under these circumstances, the evaluation of the delivery of teaching activities needs to be rigorously undertaken after each session and mechanisms for

continual improvement employed. However, as with most research, it must be recognised that experiments often fail. This should not be considered a problem, provided that lessons are learned from what happened, and mechanisms are in place to improve in the future.

Departments, institutions and national agencies all have a role to play in creating a no-blame culture for educational innovation. It is certainly not the case that every educator needs to be a cutting-edge innovator, but the ability to reward innovation and not have an issue with (controlled) failure is an important aspect of encouraging people to try. This, coupled with robust mechanisms for dissemination, should result in the raising of standards more widely.

### Conclusion

The dissemination of excellent teaching practices both within and across disciplines and institutions requires a concerted and coordinated approach. It will not happen by accident or osmosis. The innovation process itself needs to be encouraged and supported so that teachers have the time to experiment, are not afraid to do so and can learn from their students and their own practice. They need to have the confidence to use imperfect data sets to evaluate what they do, and then be prepared to disseminate their findings widely. The mechanisms by which dissemination occurs need to be positive (often face-to-face) rather than passive (through publication or web-site), but all must be prepared to take on board new ideas and concepts and be prepared to adapt these to their local institutional contexts. This kind of preparedness does not simply happen either. Leadership and training to mould the culture within an organization/department/discipline can, however, ensure that successful outcomes are far more likely. Excellence in teaching, learning and student outcomes must be placed on an equal footing with excellence in research if higher education institutions are to thrive in their predominant missions. ●

## 6

## FROM BRIDGEHEAD TO EMBEDDED PRACTICE? THE ASPIRATIONS AND REALITIES OF THE MID- TERM EVALUATION OF THREE SFUs

Changing educational practices in a meaningful and lasting manner is extremely challenging. Given this, our aspirations should be about making small steps along the road to change rather than seeking to make overblown and unrealistic claims about affecting systematic change. In this section, we reflect on how successful the interim evaluation of three of the SFUs was in supporting the development of strategies that were explicitly designed to lead to sustained changes in educational practices. To do so, we draw on Saunders *et al.*'s (2005) work on theorising change in higher education.



### Conceptualising the SFU as an approach to change

In Section 5, we considered Saunders *et al.*'s (2005) work as a way of thinking about the SFU as a strategy for change in higher education and the conditions that are required to challenge organizational cultures and change in “embedded practices”, the ways in which organizations do things on a day-to-day basis.

Using this lens to understand the work of the SFU initiative, the application process and the awarding of SFU status can be seen as a way of transforming enclaves of high-quality teaching practices into bridgeheads for wider change. Within the SFU initiative, the notion of organization refers to the institutions in which the SFUs are located, the particular subject the Centre is focused on across Norway and that subject internationally.

Applicants for SFU status need to show how their current education is excellent compared to provision in the same discipline nationally and internationally. A key element of the SFU strategy is that, rather than responding to externally imposed criteria, applicants can choose the basis on which they make their case for educational excellence and the evidence that they use to support it. They are then asked to provide an account of how they will use their SFU status to develop and share this work in the future (see Section 1). This explicitly provides applicants with an opportunity to show how their existing enclave is excellent in its own terms and, through the development of their future plans, provides a platform for them to develop their enclave into a bridgehead.

For those successfully awarded SFU status, this platform has been reinforced by ongoing engagement between NOKUT and the SFUs collectively, which emphasises the ways in which they can learn from and support each other. There has been a strong emphasis on the SFUs sharing effective practices but also on recognising the ways in which these need to be adapted and adjusted to fit with different educational and disciplinary contexts

(see Andersen Helseth & Bråten 2018). The importance of a central co-ordinating, mediating and supporting agency in this process, should not be underestimated. The limited long-term impact of the Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) in the UK provides a stark warning about what happens when this important role is not fulfilled (Trowler *et al.* 2014).

### The interim evaluation as a bridging tool

Saunders *et al.* (2005) are clear that one of the most important elements of the movement from an enclave to a bridgehead and then onto changing embedded practices is the development of an explicit “theory of change”. This provides an account of how changes are expected to occur and is used to develop a strategy for change. One way to support this process is to enable those engaged in change to reflect on their experiences of change. Saunders *et al.* (2005) identify evaluations as one way of providing a resource for these reflections and thereby act as “bridging tools” for the planning and innovation. In this section, we consider how the interim evaluation can be characterised as a bridging tool.

The 2017 interim evaluation of three of the Centres had two broad functions (see also Section 4). The first function concerned making judgements. One of our key roles as an evaluation panel was to assess the impact and innovations of each Centre and make a recommendation as to whether they should receive a further round of funding. Our second function was developmental, and we sought to actively support the Centres in developing plans for their future work that would lead to sustained changes in educational practices in Norway and beyond. In this way, the role of the evaluation could be characterised as attempting to support each Centre to have a greater impact on embedded educational practices.

Our findings from the interim evaluation support this characterisation. There was clear evidence that each Centre had established a bridgehead. All three of the Centre had developed a number of successful programmes, projects, and initiatives and had convincing evidence of the contribution these had made to teaching practices and the learning of students (Ashwin

*et al.* 2017). There was also some evidence of the evaluation acting as a bridging tool and supporting the Centres to develop more effective strategies for future change. We found that over the course of the evaluation each of the Centres had developed more convincing visions of where they saw their future contribution to developing educational practices within their subject area.

There were three particular elements of the interim evaluation that show how we attempted to support the Centres in developing explicit theories of change for their work. The first element was that all three of the Centres seemed to find it difficult to provide a sense of how their different initiatives came together to form a coherent whole. This was particularly in relation to how the SFUs integrated their work within their own institution, their work with institutions across Norway and their work internationally. This is perhaps not surprising given the short amount of time the centres had been running at the point of the evaluation. For some it was also a deliberate strategy, for instance, to engage a large number of people through small projects creating interest and ownership of the centre widely in the collegium and across institutions. As a panel, we tried to support the Centres in developing a clearer vision of this coherent whole through our feedback on their self-evaluations, the site visits, and our feedback on their draft action plans.

A second element was that the three Centres seemed to find it difficult to think creatively about how to use evidence to support their work. There was a tendency to see evidence in terms of formal research or PhD theses rather than in terms of developing evidence that was appropriate for the kind of work they were doing. In particular, there was a tendency to measure the level of activity of the Centre rather than how successful these activities were in meeting the aims of the Centre. This is no doubt a difficult task and, again, in our work we tried to encourage each Centre to be more creative and to integrate the generation of evidence into their day-to-day practices rather than positioning it as something that needed to be formal and external to their everyday work.

The third element, discussed further in the section on dissemination (see Section 5), was the need for each Centre to develop more explicit models of the dissemination and sharing of their educational practices. In particular, we highlighted the need to be clear about how and why the Centre expected their dissemination activities to lead to changes in educational practices locally, nationally and internationally.

Together these three elements show how we attempted to support the Centres in developing explicit theories of change for their work. The first element was focused on being clear about how their practices formed a coherent whole; the second element was about how they could develop evidence that showed the effectiveness of these practices; and the third element was about how they then planned to share these practices and thus move from a bridgehead into having a greater sustained impact on everyday practices.

### Reflections on the success of the approach of the evaluation panel

Reflecting on the interim evaluation it seems that in some ways we were successful in meeting our developmental aims, but in others the progress made was less than we had hoped.

The success was reflected in the more convincing visions that the Centres had developed for their work and the opening up of discussion about the importance and difficulty of aiming to have a sustained impact on embedded educational practices. However, as a panel, we underestimated the way in which the first function of the evaluation (assessing whether we recommended the continued funding of each SFU) dominated the concerns of the SFU and seemed to limit their capacity to engage in more open-ended discussions about how to develop their work in the future (see also Section 4).

One example of the conflict between these two functions centred around the action plans that the Centres were asked to develop for the second round of funding. Given our focus on the development aspects of the evaluation, we gave the Centres the opportunity to submit drafts of their action plans

so that we could give them developmental feedback on how they might extend the impact of their work. The Centres found this process very stressful. It appeared that this was because they understood our feedback to indicate what they needed to do in order to gain further funding whereas we intended it to encourage them to think more strategically and ambitiously about what they might achieve.

We explore some ways of addressing this tension through the use of “critical friends”, in the Section 4. However, we recognise that these would not resolve this tension completely. This is because the high stakes nature of the evaluation meant that the Centres needed to engage in the process with a high level of commitment and also needed to ensure similar levels of commitment from their wider institutions. This provided a context in which to have focused conversations about how the Centres work might lead to changes in embedded practices. In this way, the judgement aspects of the evaluation were necessary for there to be something valuable at stake within our developmental conversation, even though the judgement function may have limited how open the Centres could be to the opportunities for development that were offered by the process.

### Conclusion

Overall, in this section, we have reflected on our role as an evaluation panel in supporting three Centres for Excellence in Education to develop strategies that are focused on producing sustained changes to educational practices in Norway. It seems that we were successful, at least to some extent, in acting as a bridging tool that supported the Centres to move from forming bridgeheads to having a greater impact on embedded practices. However, these reflections also highlight the challenging nature of supporting such change. It is not until we see how the work of the Centres develops in the future that we will be able to have a richer sense of the extent to which the interim evaluation helped the Centres in undertaking their difficult and important work. ●

## 7

## ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP – A BACKGROUND

Reference to academic leadership occurs often in discussion about pre-conditions for delivering a higher education institution's vision and values (Buller 2013; Gmelch & Buller 2015). Looking to the future (including the future of the Norwegian SFU initiative, an initiative focused on transformative change at the sector, institutional and local level) and the complexities of the ever-changing global context, there remain some key challenges for leaders in higher education. More than ever before, academic leaders at all levels are operating on a global stage, in a highly competitive market environment. This publication, with its focus on TE (including assessment of TE), students as partners, theories of change, and dissemination of practice, highlights the requirement for leadership at all levels. First and foremost, strategic leadership, combined with distributed leadership throughout the organization thereby facilitating an environment in which transformative change can take place and make its intended impact.



**In 2017 a survey of twenty-five** global transformative leaders in higher education (heads of highly successful institutions), asked what they perceived to be the key challenges of the next five to ten years. To a person, the three areas they highlighted were firstly, technological advances; secondly, education; and finally, HR policies and practice. In elaborating on the latter two, there was a heavy and united emphasis on leadership development for the future, most particularly academic leadership. Academic leadership was deemed to be a key factor in providing the competitive edge for their institutions i.e., having a highly competent, creative, effective cadre of academic leaders capable of inspiring and engaging staff and students.

Conceptions of leadership in higher education continues to evolve. There is no doubt that the notion, and understanding, of what “leadership in higher education” means and comprises, will continue to be debated in years to come. In the meantime, a number of key studies (Buller 2013; Marshall 2017; Marshall 2016) illustrate the necessity for academic leadership to be agile and flexible, with suitable capable leaders delivering continuous change in a more fluid and rapidly changing environment (both internal and external).

A particular trait of successful leaders is their “sense making”, and ability to see the higher purpose. This is derived from continuous navigation of the complex and turbulent external environment and translating this into internal policy and practice. This was a phenomenon that presented itself

in some of the visits to assess the viability of Centre for Excellence in Education (SFU) applicants, where Centre leaders clearly had difficulty in gaining strong alignment between the vision of the work-package leader (with the work package sitting within their area of responsibility), the vision for the overall Centre, and being clear on the Centre's higher purpose. Such a phenomenon is not unique to Norway.

What does appear to be an issue in many higher education institutions around the globe is that many roles occupied by academics and labelled "leadership" roles, are, in effect, undertaken as caretaker or stewardship roles. What is lacking within many institutions is clarity regarding what, exactly, a *true* leadership role would entail (*i.e.*, leading staff to rise to the challenge of delivering on the institution's vision, values and core strategic goals); secondly, a collective sense of why the various leadership roles need to be strategically aligned; and, thirdly, what exactly these different roles comprise.

Through engagement with NOKUT's SFU initiative, a good sense of how these different (leadership) roles were played out, and to what effect, was gleaned. Throughout virtually all visits with all of the Norwegian SFUs – both to award Centre status (and funding) and to conduct an interim evaluation of existing Centres, the "need" for academic, or "educational" leadership was often referred to by the expert panel. This section seeks to explore why the term 'educational leadership' was so often flagged up as an area to be addressed, particularly with respect to:

- Vision
- Purpose
- Collective engagement
- Supportive management infrastructures
- Integrated co-creation with students
- Institutional infrastructure
- Institutional alignment

Having absolute clarity regarding all the above was deemed to be crucial to not only support each Centre's proposed approach to TE, but to assure its delivery. What follows below is a reflective account on how notions of leadership – in theory or practice – played out in the expert panel's various site visits.

### Institutional leadership

In assessing the institutions' bids to be awarded SFU status, or to achieve continuation funding further to their existing award of SFU status, interviews with a range of stakeholders – always commencing in a sequence of hierarchical positioning - were conducted in all shortlisted institutions. Various levels of leadership were invited to participate, providing useful insights regarding their institution's commitment to, and alignment with, the Centre's approach to TE as a holistic enterprise. For those institutions seeking to extend their status as an SFU, earlier published SFU guidelines had already flagged up best practice as including a "strong commitment offered by not just the Vice-Rector and Faculty Dean, but also the staff at the local level". Therefore, the involvement of these senior personnel assisted the panel members to ascertain the extent to which the institution was approaching TE as a whole institutional approach, with the award of a Centre as a means of igniting a more creative, dynamic process to education, which ultimately would impact the educational philosophy of the whole university. Outstanding leaders highlighted how their institutional strategies included measures to provide an enabling environment which promoted co-creation with students, sought pedagogic shifts, offered a sensible amount of risk appetite (see Section 5), and sought meaningful dissemination (both internally and externally, see Sections 5 and 6). Early feedback noted: "vital to the success of the initiative ... [is] the support from senior management within the university".

These "welcome" introductions from the institutional leaders (Rectors or Pro-Rectors [for education]) provided a worthwhile "anchor assessment" for the expert panel, leading to follow up presentations from Centre leaders. Credible Centre leaders impressed the panel with their articulation of a

clear “vision, and understanding of what [was] needed to make the SFU a success”. Such leaders welcomed the introduction of the expert panel, citing the input from critical friends and assessors (ref. Section 4) as important to their journey to excellence. These early sessions with key personnel involved in leadership roles assisted the panel to gain a sense of the culture of both the university, and the local area in from which the Centre would be operating. Most particularly, early discussions allowed insights into the Centre’s educational philosophy, and theory of change (but see also Section 6). Centre leaders who were most impressive foregrounded the importance of “students as partners”, often citing “developing [students] as change agents: citizens able to respond to the complex challenges of the modern world” and offering this as the primary purpose of their Centre.

### Educational Leadership of and within the SFUs

When exploring the role of the Centre leaders, a real challenge for these individuals was the requirement for them to “step up to leadership” and develop coherence and cohesiveness amongst their team (both staff and students). Further to questioning their role as a Centre leader, it appeared that few had a full sense of the capabilities required to be a fully effective leader, despite having held, previously, the mantle of “leader” in different guises (*e.g.*, Head of Department). Many Centre leaders had considered their role one of oversight of the various work-packages proposed in their SFU action plan. However, when challenged, Centre leaders did understand the importance of presenting an ambitious vision, which would be led by them, with operationalization being undertaken and supported through a “well thought through management and governance structure”. Leaders were encouraged to view the various work-packages more holistically, through the focus on the overall Centre vision, *i.e.*, “ensuring the Centre was greater than the sum of its parts”, therefore requiring a carefully thought through management and administrative infrastructure.

Such discussion led to the exploration of notions of distributed leadership. All project action plans had targets for delivery (primarily outputs) presented in a series of work-packages, with work-package leaders. Moving

the work-package leaders to see themselves as part of the leadership and management of the project, with clear responsibilities and accountabilities to not only their work-package, but the coherent whole, was a challenge noted in the feedback regarding “silo thinking [which] was concerning”. Additionally, some of the feedback expressed concern that there was “no sense of collective ownership”. Much feedback refers to the need to “create a common understanding with the department, and ... [need to] clarify the roles of different [distributed leaders and] ... secure much wider ownership of the proposed activities”. Additionally, it was suggested that “some work-package leaders may benefit from particular support for taking on the new responsibilities of their work”. The clarion cry in the mid-term evaluation of three Centres was the need for leaders at the different levels to invite students to co-create, and, in a number of instances, lead, in the delivery of work-packages and, indeed, the whole project. All participants in the Centre were encouraged to view their project from an external, global perspective. Ultimately, Centre leaders understood that such a process has to be led by the Centre leader. Where such exemplary practice did take place, it was noted in the feedback: “Teaching staff expressed strong commitment to the ‘no silos’ ambition of the Centre... to develop collective practice. The project leader demonstrated excellent participatory leadership style ... which was reflective and focused”.

### Responsiveness to feedback on leadership

As with any feedback, the prospect of addressing feedback can feel like a personal affront. When challenging Centre leaders to “step up” to leadership, many pushed back with “that’s not what we’re about” or “we’re a community of practice” as reasons to justify continuing to work at a more operational as opposed to strategic level. In one instance, in the wrap up session with the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (PVC) for Education, the PVC suggested that the institution was investing in central resources to firstly, set up a “pedagogic academy” that would support, amongst a range of areas, the development of both existing educational leaders and next generation leaders, and secondly, would mainstream policy, to highlight those academic staff making a significant contribution to not only research, but to

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education. In other discussions, the notion of developing the leadership of others through the appointment of project “leads” (staff and/or students), was deemed to be a good means of distributing leadership and allowing others to develop in the process.

### **Where to next with Centre Leadership?**

Of those that have responded well to the challenge to step up to leadership, some noteworthy progress has been made as evidenced at a recent collective dissemination event held in Bergen, which included presentations by students. At the heart of this challenge, was the suggestion that Centre leaders should assume responsibility for relationship building – both within the Centre, extending across their institution, and then through external networks both within Norway and beyond. Where there was strong alignment with the PVC (Education), it was clear that this challenge and response would be reinforced, with support offered. The one lesson which it has already been noted has been learned by Centre leaders, is the necessity to provide a supportive infrastructure to develop others – staff and students alike. Without this, an institutional culture of excellence will be difficult to achieve. ●

## 8

# EPILOGUE: RESULTS AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE



**There is an increasing** number of international initiatives to develop quality and teaching excellence, the Norwegian SFU initiative being one of these. Many of these initiatives share the same aims of raising the esteem of teaching and learning and stimulating excellence. However, they take different forms (Bråten & Børsheim 2016). The interpretations of excellence and the way the initiatives are shaped are situationally and historically contingent (see for instance Skelton 2005; ENQA 2014).

The SFU initiative was born in the Norwegian policy context, as the first explicit initiative for driving excellence in higher education in 2010. Now, some years later, the political landscape seems rather different. The latest White Paper “Quality Culture” (Meld. St 16, [2016-2017]) outlines a range of instruments and initiatives to enhance quality in higher education. This includes more competitive measures through a new “national arena” of incentives. The SFU initiative is the nucleus in this new arena. Wider quality enhancement initiatives are encouraged and promoted as well, such as merit systems at institutional level and peer review and mentoring in education.

The Centres and the SFU initiative have played a major role in this development towards raising the esteem and giving higher priority to education (as seen in Carlsten & Aamodt 2013; Carlsten & Vabø 2016), which is also highlighted in the White Paper (Meld. St 16, [2016-2017]). In this concluding section, we want to summarize some of the results we see so far as well as some lessons learned through managing the initiative.

## Results in the SFU initiative

Although documenting results from this initiative is a complex task and

implies looking at many actors and levels, one way we as managers have tried to document impact is through commissioned external evaluations and commissioned research (Aamodt & Carlsten 2013; Carlsten & Vaabø 2015; Kottmann *et al.* 2016; Kottmann *et al.* forthcoming). We have also engaged critical friends (see Section 4) in different stages of our management and encouraged expert panels such as the 2017 interim evaluation panel (Ashwin *et al.* 2017) to look at the initiative as a whole and our management of it. Furthermore, we have encouraged the Centres to accept invitations from researchers and done so ourselves (see for instance Nerland & Prøitz 2018; Kottmann & Cremonini 2017; Kottmann 2017; Wolfensberger 2015). We have also stimulated research through scholarships to master students (see for instance Sjøbrend 2018; Holen forthcoming).

Feedback through commissioned and independent work, most of which has an international perspective, has been vital in developing the management of the initiative. This is a lesson learned for NOKUT. The evaluations and research confirm that the SFU initiative has contributed to enhancing the status of teaching and learning. The initiative has created a common language and arenas to discuss quality in higher education as well as increased the awareness around quality and how to measure and document excellence in teaching and learning. Below we will elaborate on some of the results that have been found.

### Education becoming a priority

Carlsten & Vabø (2015) found that the SFU initiative had contributed to enhancement at institutional level, as well as developing educational practices, thus contributing positively to the content and development of education and institutional frameworks. The SFU initiative has made it more legitimate to invest time and money in enhancing teaching and learning, and we can see an increase in attention given to development projects and professional development activities related to teaching and learning, as well as reward and recognition schemes of teaching qualifications and merits. The SFU initiative has contributed to anchoring these projects and innovations in the strategic development of the

institutions (that includes with the senior managers). The recent white paper (Meld. St. 16 [2016-2017]), as previously mentioned, confirms this by highlighting the SFUs in the written document and by emphasising the initiative's prominent place in the new arena for quality incentives.

### Creating a culture for quality enhancement

Even though the SFU initiative can be seen as exclusive and competitive, we have sought to emphasize another side to the initiative (see also Andersen Helseth & Bråten 2018). The SFU initiative has led the Centres and institutions to focus on creating a culture for quality enhancement. The initiative inspires excellence, and quality enhancement across the sector through rewarding and stimulating a small number of academic communities providing excellent education. The Centres have solid plans for how to be centres *for* excellence disseminating knowledge and cooperating with others. The initiative has stimulated collaboration within institutions and across institutions and have brought together institutions and academic communities that complement each other. It has also stimulated international cooperation (*e.g.* Carlsten & Vabø 2015).

With the initiative being both top-down and bottom-up as, for example, the projects, centres and documentation are defined locally, institutions highlight that the initiative is well adapted to institutional and disciplinary differences and contexts (Carlsten & Vabø 2015; Førland & Bråten 2018; Andersen Helseth & Bråten 2018). In this way, the initiative has been able to adapt to specific quality challenges and cater to different needs found across various disciplines and institutions.

### Conclusion

The SFU initiative is a prestigious initiative. Institutions spend time preparing their applications and invest time and money in developing the bid. There is tough competition for achieving the status and only a small proportion are successful. Being awarded a centre gives acclaim, legitimacy,

leverage, and money. The interim evaluations of the appointed centres have also put the bar high for keeping the status for the second period.

The external evaluations and research, as well as the results from the interim evaluations, point to positive results for higher education institutions (those with formal affiliations with SFUs and those without), educators and students in the first phase of the initiative.

In addition, managing the initiative has been a learning process for NOKUT. As we are now handing over the management to DIKU, we find this to be a good point for summarizing some of these lessons learned.

### Some of the lessons learned

Setting up, managing and developing a new initiative with ambitious goals is not easy in itself. Up until 2010, NOKUT's work was primarily as a quality *assurance* agency, and there was uncertainty as to whether NOKUT was the appropriate agency for managing a quality *enhancement* initiative such as the SFU (see for instance Universities Norway 2009). We therefore had a steep learning curve and something to prove.

Managing the SFU initiative has been a tremendous learning experience for individual NOKUT staff, units within the organization and the organization as a whole. Summarizing it all seems like an almost equally daunting task. We have therefore chosen to use the topics and sections of this publication as a starting point to highlight some of the lessons that we take with us as NOKUT continues to work for quality enhancement through other means than managing the SFU initiative.

### Teaching excellence

Section 1 introduced the SFU initiative. In Section 2, the concept of teaching excellence (TE) was discussed and we have also discussed our interpretation in previous publications (Andersen Helseth & Bråten 2018; Andersen Helseth *et al.* 2017; Bråten & Børsheim 2016).

TE was a new concept for NOKUT and to a large extent for Norwegian

higher education more generally when the SFU initiative was introduced. Not in the sense that there were no high quality practices being carried out at universities and university colleges, but in terms of being explicit about aspects that characterize quality in education and about how to identify, document and stimulate excellence. This is an ongoing learning process for all involved, including NOKUT.

The criteria for awarding SFU status 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. There are no fixed parameters that the bidders for SFU status have to meet, rather there are questions to be answered, given in the guidance document (NOKUT 2016a). The institutions and programmes themselves define their focus and demonstrate their excellence. The documentation can be related to the mission and vision of the institutions applying, their teaching philosophy, the discipline and other contexts (Skelton 2005). Based on excellence in existing provision, the institutions and academic environments themselves define the centre plan and with that, the enhancement projects that they want to take on (Andersen Helseth & Bråten 2018). The latest government white paper underlines how the SFUs are to be defined locally (Meld. St. 16 [2016-2017], p. 84). As described in Section 2, a supportive institutional culture and context is a necessary starting point for local enhancement projects to flourish. The value of being open and responsive to local needs and ideas, and the importance of quality cultures, are two key ideas that will inform NOKUT's future work.

Although, the SFU criteria are devised to be open, there are some aspects that are highlighted in the criteria and which we have emphasized in our management of the initiative. Examples include "students as partners", see Section 3 and below, and R&D-based education. These aspects have a solid foundation in research in terms of contributing to educational quality, and choosing them thus speak to a scholarly approach.

We have also tried to stimulate such a scholarly approach in the sector. An important aspect in both Section 2 and 5 in particular, was how taking

risks is a part of TE. Experiencing so-called “glorious failures” is part of taking risks and trying out new things. What is important is, of course, to learn from what failed. As part of the SFUs’ dissemination mandate, it is important that others are also able to take part in this learning, both of things that work and things that do not. In order to facilitate this, we have emphasized what can be called “the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)” (Boyer 1990). This is a form of pedagogical research, but one where academics in other disciplines seek to examine and understand teaching and learning in their own classrooms through their own observations and analysis (Gale 2007, p. 36). Teachers should take well-informed choices about learning methods based on knowledge (Meld. St 16, [2016-2017]). Such scholarly inquiry can be seen as vital to teaching excellence (Gale 2007; see also Andersen Helseth & Bråten 2018). SoTL is now gaining momentum in Norway both for practitioners and policy-makers (for instance as evidenced by the SFU bioCEED hosting the 2018 International Society for Scholarship of Learning and Teaching conference, attracting a large national audience<sup>8</sup>, and by Meld. St 16 [2016-2017]). The Centres and the SFU initiative have played a part in this. NOKUT has learned a lot about working with a scholarly but practice oriented approach ourselves and encouraging the sector to do so as well. This is something to build on in our future work.

### Students as partners – an example of a multifaceted dissemination strategy

Sections 3 and 5 (and others) reflected on two important aspects of the SFU initiative; students as partners and dissemination. The importance of both of these aspects in relation to educational quality, teaching excellence and achieving enhancement at large through a national initiative, is well documented. This includes evaluations of excellence initiatives that preceded the SFU initiative, and that enabled us to learn from their successes and shortcomings (see for instance for Raaheim and Karjalainen 2012; SQW 2011; Saunders *et al.* 2008). Dissemination has therefore

8. <https://www.issotl.com/issotl-2018-conference>.

been seen as key to achieving the goal of enhancing quality at large through appointing and financing a small number of excellent educational communities.

With students as partners having a firm basis in research (Trowler 2010; see also Section 3) we have through the course of our management of the initiative sought to consistently bring the Centres’ and the wider sector’s attention to this topic. In order to do this, we have used a set of different means and approaches. Together they constitute a dissemination strategy aimed at ultimately achieving dissemination for action (Harmsworth & Turpin 2000) – something we might consider appropriate for other topics and goals in the future.

Students as partners is a topic that has been highlighted by a number of presenters in different fora that we have set up, both for the Centres exclusively and for the wider sector. For instance, network gatherings for the Centres have included workshops with well renowned international experts on the topic. We also gathered students from the Centres for them to share experiences, discuss challenges and learn more about student partnerships through workshops with sparqs (student partnerships in quality Scotland) and representatives from the national union in Norway.

Students as partners was furthermore the topic of an issue of the SFU magazine which NOKUT and the Centres have issued twice every year since 2015<sup>9</sup>. This again brought the Centres’ attention to the topic, making them go through their portfolio of projects with this in mind and disseminate experiences and results. Perhaps this pushed them to disseminate at an earlier stage than they would normally do (which might facilitate dissemination for awareness and action [Harmsworth & Turpin 2000]). To further stimulate developments in this regard, we also gave the Centres seed money to projects for students and staff and supported master’s students in writing about the topic. Through other NOKUT events and the NOKUT podcast, attention has also been directed at the topic and

9. <https://www.nokut.no/sentre-for-fremragende-utdanning/sfu-magasinet/>.

the Centres have been able to showcase results and ways of incorporating students as partners.

As seen in Section 3, however, as well as in the final recommendations from the panel to NOKUT (Ashwin *et al.* 2017), the topic of students as partners still needs attention. This goes for the SFU initiative itself, but is also relevant for the wider sector. NOKUT has learned a lot about both the theoretical basis of students as partners and the different practical ways the Centres have incorporated this in their work, which we will seek to draw upon in future work. The necessity for continuous work and using a number of instruments to draw attention to and stimulate enhancement in a (well-documented) area is also a lesson to take on.

### Partners and critical friends

Section 4 reflected on the dual purpose of the 2017 interim evaluation – both to make a recommendation concerning further funding and contributing to developing the Centres. We reflected upon the process partly in relation to the concept and collegial approach of “critical friends” (Handal 2016; Prchal and Messas 2017). As managers, we have emphasised following up the Centres closely, but as informally as possible, with a focus on building personal relationships of trust and support, and hence taking on the role of “critical friends.”

We have interacted with the Centres by attending their main events to learn more about their work, being observers on their boards, having dialogue meetings, trying to make formal reporting and evaluations as enhancement-driven as possible, and creating networks between the different centres and ourselves in the spirit of a “community of practice” (see for instance Wenger 1998).

The close relationship between NOKUT and the Centres has generated positive results for all parties. Being close to the Centres has been a fruitful way for NOKUT to learn from excellent academic communities and researchers. Furthermore, the Centres have acted as partners for development influencing NOKUT and national policies – making it a top-

down and bottom-up relationship (Førland & Bråten 2018).

Feedback we have received from the Centres and external evaluations emphasizes the importance of this approach. It is also commended by Ashwin *et al.* (2017, p. 29):

*The panel were impressed with the success of the SFU initiative to date. This success is based on the excellent work of the Centres but it is also based on NOKUT’s excellent relationship with the Centres. There was a strong sense of trust between NOKUT and the Centres, which seemed to be based on NOKUT’s expertise in quality assurance and enhancement and their collegial approach to working with the Centres. Without this trust, it is unlikely that the initiative would have been nearly so effective.*

Collaborating with educational communities in this way is not a common feature for most quality assurance agencies and was also fairly new to NOKUT at the time, at least collaboration to this extent. Over time, however, and based partly on the experience from the SFU initiative, NOKUT has placed more emphasis on collaboration and external activities, building trust, good relationships and networks with the sector. This will not end with NOKUT’s management of the SFU initiative, but is something that we have learnt a lot from and which we will take on in our future work.

In Section 4 we asked, however: “(...) may it be so that we too have become friends, from whom criticism is not expected?” There is an important message here for NOKUT of getting the right balance between being “close” and keeping an appropriate distance. Keeping the right balance is an issue in individual NOKUT activities, but also for NOKUT as a whole, being both about assurance and enhancement. However, these close relationships bring us closer to actual practice and to research, which is a good knowledge base for developing NOKUT’s policies and activities so that they respond to the needs of higher education institutions.

## Theory of change

Section 6, in particular, addressed the necessity of an explicit theory of change for the Centres and the initiative as a whole. This was also highlighted in Ashwin *et al.* (2017, pp. 28-29):

*“First, it is clear that the Initiative would benefit from having a more explicit theory of change that helps to inform its approach and decision making. This would involve developing a clearer sense of how the SFU is expected to lead to changes in educational practices in higher education in Norway and internationally. This would enable NOKUT to have a clearer sense of the success of the SFU initiative (...) it would also be helpful if the SFU initiative found ways of supporting the Centres to move beyond their institutions in Norway. Two of the Centres had excellent institutional and international links but appeared to find it much harder to develop strategic cross-institutional links within Norway.”*

The SFU initiative has always been about stimulating change, as the purpose is to increase the quality of education in the sector at large through funding a small number of Centres, but we would be the first to support the feedback from Ashwin *et al.* (2017). The ways of stimulating this change, why they were chosen and what we intended for them to achieve could have been more explicitly expressed both internally and externally, and it could have been done at an earlier stage. In the latter years, we have sought to be more explicit in papers and presentations, see for instance Andersen Helseth & Bråten (2018), Andersen Helseth *et al.* (2017) and Bråten & Børsheim (2016), but there is still some way to go.

Through managing the initiative, especially through the feedback of international experts, we have learnt a lot about articulating the change intended (including daring to say that change is the goal) and the steps towards achieving it. These are important lessons learned for NOKUT as an organization in its present and future activities.

## Academic leadership

Section 7, building on the preceding sections, highlighted the role of academic leadership. Ashwin *et al.* (2017, p. 29) also pointed to the role of leadership in the Centres:

*“(...) the previous points all highlight the challenge of developing educational leadership. This is a challenging area to work in but the long-term success of the SFU initiative will be shaped by its ability to support the development of educational leaders who have a clear strategic vision, which is inclusive of institutions across Norway and involves students as active partners. An integral part of this is the need to further develop project management capacity in the Centres of Excellence.”*

Strategic leadership coupled with distributed leadership throughout the organization is necessary for creating an environment where change can take place. There is an obvious link here to facilitating change outside of the SFU initiative, as described above. This is already an important issue for NOKUT, for instance as highlighted in our policy document “Quality areas for study programmes” (NOKUT 2016b), and something that we will continue to be concerned with. Through the SFU initiative, we have not only become even more aware of its importance, but we have also encountered examples of both great academic leadership at different levels and of how difficult this is. We will definitely draw on this learning in our future work.

## Concluding remarks

In this epilogue, we have tried to reflect upon some results and some lessons learned. Were it not for the hard work of the Centres and their willingness to be partners with us as managers, the results and lessons mentioned above would never have been achieved.

The Centres as well as the academic communities striving for an SFU status are all characterised by courage and generosity. They approach the unknown, engage in processes where they are unsure of the results, yet they are open to invite other people in, be it NOKUT, senior managers, other

academics or students. When applying for centre status they document excellence and show practices and aspects of teaching and learning that they are proud of. At the same time, however, they expose themselves and their weaknesses. In the SFU initiative, where there is a high degree of transparency with, for instance, bids and feedback (including grading from the expert panel), this must be quite daunting. All the applicants and Centres, with their will to change, improve and learn, should be commended for inviting us all in to share their learning experience. It is with tremendous gratitude for what we have experienced that we hand over the management of the initiative.

This gratitude should also be extended to the experts and critical friends that we have had the pleasure of working with through the SFU initiative. Hence, we want to end this epilogue and the whole publication by highlighting the role of experts. Feedback from critical friends, and the international perspective they bring (which is a function of their experience and competence more than simply their nationality), has been invaluable in developing the management of the initiative and supporting the Centres' development. In this collaboration, NOKUT has been able to draw upon yearlong experience of using experts in accreditation and supervision activities. Through the SFU initiative we have, however, to a larger extent than before, invited experts to be our critical friends by giving us feedback on how we set up our activities. Receiving criticism has not always been easy, but has given us valuable opportunities to learn how those "at the other side of the table", those that are subjects of NOKUT assessment processes, experience them.

Last, but not least, a special thank you should be addressed to our co-writers in this publication; Christine Alveberg, Paul Ashwin, Celia Duffy, Stephanie Marshall, Trine Oftedal, and Richard J. Reece. You have all acted as critical friends to the SFU initiative at different stages as well as taken part in assessment and evaluation processes. Our joint writing up of these reflections is a testimony to our fruitful collaboration and hopefully interesting reading for others with an interest in the SFU initiative.

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