

Seminar on:

Methodological Common Instruments for Assessment and Accreditation in the European Framework

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*Instruments for accreditation - a short presentation of
instruments on a national level and some remarks on establishing
common instruments in the European Framework*

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Introduction

In the first part of my contribution I will shortly present the methodological instruments for accreditation we use in my agency, such as external assessment by experts, standards, criteria and points of reference. Since we have built up an accreditation system in just one and a half years, I will not boast like A WORLD CHAMPION in this area.

In the second part I will make some remarks on what I feel is needed to take into account in a process of establishing common instruments for accreditation in a European framework.

Methodological instruments for accreditation in Norwegian quality assurance
GENERAL

In addition to the accreditation of institutions, programmes and revision of accreditation already granted, the Norwegian system for quality assurance in higher education also comprises evaluation procedures to assess the institutions' systems of quality assurance and carry out other types of evaluations with the general purpose of investigating, assessing and developing the quality of higher education.

As from 1 January 2003 accreditation is mandatory for all higher education that may qualify for national degrees. All state institutions of higher education and all higher education courses and programmes that were recognised by the end of 2002 automatically received status as "accredited" from the beginning of 2003.

Accreditation in Norway is regulated by the Universities and the Colleges Act (U&C Act).

This Act defines accreditation like this:

Accreditation means a professional assessment as to whether an institution of higher education - or education that the institution provides - fulfils a given set of standards.

Accreditation shall be based on an evaluation that is undertaken by external experts appointed by the agency (NOKUT). Accreditation is a prerequisite for offering educational programmes within the authority of the present Act.

The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) is a public agency under the Ministry of Education and Research. Its independence is secured in the U&C Act. Here it is stated that the Ministry cannot interfere with the agency's operations, except through a Ministerial Regulation that defines the size, scope and authority of the agency. Nor can the agency's assessments and decisions be overruled by the Ministry, or by any other authority. Higher education institutions are not formal stakeholders in NOKUT, and the Agency is not accountable to any authority or institution for its decisions.

The accreditation system is a combination of institutional and programme accreditation. Institutions are accredited in three different categories: "college", "specialised institution at university level" and "university". An institution's right to offer (new programmes of) higher education without specific programme accreditation is defined by the category it belongs to. Any institution (including private ones) may seek institutional accreditation in any of the three categories and will then be evaluated against a set of standards.

Under the present regulations, there is no fixed term of accreditation. Accreditations are considered valid until an assessment finds otherwise. However, NOKUT will conduct assessments at regular intervals which will entail a revision of accreditation already granted.

STANDARDS AND CRITERIA

The standards and criteria for accreditation are generic. They address the institutional and degree levels only, not the individual disciplines, so specific discipline requirements are left to the experts to formulate.

Standards concerning institutional accreditation are laid down in a Ministerial Regulation. There are standards for "college", "specialised institution at university level" and "university". Further criteria for institutions and standards and criteria for programmes have been developed by NOKUT. The Regulation instructs NOKUT to sound out the opinion of the sector in the process of setting standards and further criteria for accreditation.

There are standards and criteria for all the three main levels of degrees: bachelor, master and PHD - and for shorter (2 year) degrees. Some professional education programmes are regulated by national curriculum guidelines, serving as additional "standards". A revision of accreditation will, in contrast to the initial accreditation, also take into consideration the academic level of the programme and documented results. The revision will include both an ordinary self-evaluation report from the institution and a site visit of the expert committee.

Standards and criteria for degrees and higher education institutions make clear references to international development in general and the Bologna process in particular. The introduction of the 3+2+3 degree scheme reflects this. Through its participation in ENQA and other international networks, NOKUT aims to keep abreast of international trends and procedures, always seeking to emulate the best practice. The Ministerial Regulation instructs NOKUT to make sure that national standards reflect relevant international standards that Norway has a commitment to observe. The Norwegian accreditation standards and criteria do not yet make any formal reference to (tentative) international standards of academic quality, like the Dublin descriptors. However, NOKUT is intent on following up any guidelines for standards or proceedings that are formally endorsed as part of the Bologna process.

Quality of research is not specifically looked for or assessed. But participation in larger programmes, research cooperation, research output and the relevance of research activity to programmes under review are considered.

Infrastructure is an important element in accreditation standards. It covers a whole range of aspects, like rooms for teaching and instruction, equipment, library, available computers, IT infrastructure, available places to study at the institution, information and other services, welfare arrangements, etc.

Domain requirements and expected qualifications are not formally set down in standards but will be assessed all the same, as general demands are "translated" into specific domains.

International bench-marking is not explicitly mentioned in the standards, but for master and doctoral degree programs the discipline must document active international cooperation.

The opinion of society at large is not included among standards or criteria, but it will be expected that this is taken care of by the institution's internal quality assurance system. However, relevance to society and national career needs is a criterion.

EXPERTS COMMITTEES

The evaluations and accreditations are conducted by experts appointed by NOKUT, which also decides on the terms of reference and appoints a secretary to assist the committee and monitor progress.

Nearly all the committees have a student representative and at least one expert from another country, usually from one of the other Nordic countries.

General requirements:

- Experts must have competence within at least one of the following areas:
 - Evaluations
 - Quality assurance
 - Discipline/domain in question - or other relevant domain
- Experts cannot have professional positions or tasks at the evaluated institution or programme - or any other connection that may threaten impartiality. Those appointed have to sign a declaration on this. The institution is also given the right to comment upon the composition of the committee.
- Expert committees will normally consist of 2 - 5 members, with a gender distribution that is in accordance with the law. At least 40 % of the experts in a committee should be female, if possible.

Programmes:

- In programme accreditation (both "initial" accreditation and later accreditation revision) we will find a dominant element of

programme/discipline competence amongst the experts on the committees. To the extent that specific demands are relevant, these will be based on the experts' understanding of quality in this particular discipline.

- For doctoral programmes the level of professor is required to exercise judgement; for master degree programmes associate professor; for bachelor degree programmes assistant professor.
- Except for bachelor level, at least one committee member must come from abroad.

Institutions:

- For universities and specialised institutions at university level, all committee members drawn from academic institutions must be professors or have equivalent competence.
- At least one member must have experience/competence in institutional management.
- At least one member should come from abroad.
- There will be one student member, with experience from institutional board or other elected office.

There must be representation from working life outside academia.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

NOKUT has worked out a template for different expert committees, which clarifies what task the committee has, what should be the basis for the assessment and some necessary details concerning the report. The report from the experts should contain their recommendations to the institution regarding how to further enhance the quality of the institution or programme. This is very important for motivating the institution to further development of the quality beyond the threshold standards.

REGULAR ASSESSMENT OF STANDARDS, CRITERIA, EXPERT COMMITTEES AND TERMS OF REFERENCE

NOKUT will carry out an internal assessment of the instruments for accreditation every year with emphasis on how these instruments function according to the purpose and objectives and with a view to adjustment. We believe that this regular assessment will ensure that the instruments are updated.

Common instruments for accreditation-some pertinent points

GENERAL

I do not intend to present a well prepared proposal for the process, structure and contents of common instruments for accreditation in The European Higher Education Area. I have only an ambition to raise some issues, which I think are important to take into consideration in the forthcoming developing process.

In this process it is necessary to build on reports from projects and workshops, policy papers and reviews of existing use of instruments for accreditation and evaluation in European higher education, produced by European associations, organisations and networks such as ENQA, ECA, EUA, EURASHE, and ESIB, and also the statement of Ministers in the Communiqué from the Berlin meeting in 2003. Especially the review worked out by ECA in 2004 "Similarities and differences in accreditation" which is a summary of a questionnaire answered by the members of ECA, could be very useful. ECA (European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education) is a cooperation project between 12 quality assurance agencies in eight countries. It has the ultimate aim to achieve mutual recognition of accreditation decisions among the participating agencies before the end of 2007. For ECA, establishing common standards, criteria and indicators in the European framework is of vital importance to reach the ultimate aim.

Such a process can be organized in different ways. Since there already exists a project organisation in for accreditation, with high competence on and long experience in accreditation, working with similar tasks, it is surely rational that ECA should have a central role in developing common instruments for accreditation.

I am now going to comment on several points, which I hope could be taken into consideration in the forthcoming process. These points are:

- Code of Good Practice for promoting mutual trust
- Diversity
- Innovation in methodology
- Generic/detailed common instruments
- Student involvement
- Institutional autonomy, responsibility and further development
- Securing updated common instruments

CODE OF GOOD PRACTICE FOR PROMOTING MUTUAL TRUST

Many associations and networks, included ECA have adopted A Code of Good Practice or Requirements for Membership which the members have to follow.

Such documents, prepared through a process where the members actively can take part, and which comprise standards and reference points with regard to the accreditation agency, the accreditation procedures, and the accreditation standards, could be of great help to promote mutual trust. In my opinion, it is very important to develop a conducive atmosphere based on a broad approach as a platform for mutual trust between the agencies, so that they can recognize each other's accreditation decisions even when their accreditation procedures, standards and criteria appear a little bit different. .

DIVERSITY

Diversity is of great importance for quality assurance agencies in general and for accreditation agencies in particular if we are to encourage innovation and development of higher education and quality, at an institutional level as well as on national and international levels. To obtain an innovative development in the long run according to the objectives, it is necessary to maintain or even strengthen diversity on all levels. Reduced diversity can lead to reduced innovation and development. The international cooperation- and harmonization processes, which are going on in the sector of higher education throughout the world, are of course very important, but they create some worry that the institutions and also the quality assurance agencies could be too similar.

With the possible standardization of higher education we may face a dilemma between the need to establish a certain standard of quality as a response to deregulation and growing internationalization, and the need to preserve the diversity of higher education.

Since accreditation procedures usually lead to a decision on whether an institution or a programme meets a certain standard, and all accredited institutions or programmes should meet the same standard, it is reasonable to imagine that this could lead to the institutions becoming too standardized. But there are many other factors in society having an impact on diversity, which lead to the opposite result. In a recent review of the impact of external quality monitoring in higher education, it is argued that the differences between various methods and procedures may be less significant than often believed, especially since many quality assurance systems seem to find a balance between accountability and improvement (Stensaker, B. (2003) *Trance, Transparency, Transformation: The impact of external quality monitoring in higher education. Quality in Higher Education 9(2),pp. 305-317*)

In the process of developing common instruments for accreditation in the European framework, it is important to be aware of possibilities for maintaining diversity. Perhaps the most effective tool to achieve this is to take a broad

approach with emphasis on more generic standards, criteria and other common instruments.

INNOVATION IN METHODOLOGY

Innovation is important in all areas, especially in the area of methodology.

In my opinion, quality assurance of higher education, in spite of its massive growth over the last decade, has shown little methodological development. In epistemological terms, the 'truths' that come out of evaluations, as these are currently and typically conducted, still leave much to be desired as precise statements about quality. This is no criticism, but a general impression regarding the state of the art. If quality assurance is going to take on board the massive role that the Bologna process ascribes to it, methodological innovation should be encouraged.

Any attempt to prescribe a standard of European quality assurance must aim at finding broad criteria to secure legitimacy, robustness, professionalism and transparency. What it must not do, is to freeze down certain much-used procedures and methodologies as a standard and benchmark of good quality assurance practice. There is a need to develop more sophisticated means of finding 'truth' about higher education quality, which cannot be done without the opportunity to experiment with a plurality of methods.

GENERIC/DETAILED COMMON INSTRUMENTS

The national systems for quality assurance are developed according to national objectives, society system, size and structure of higher educational sector, traditions, historical and economic development and so on. It is an advantage if we, also in the future, can still have some differences between the accreditation agencies.

Should we succeed in maintaining the diversity between the European accreditation agencies, we should put emphasis on designing more generic common instruments. This will give the national agencies the possibility to satisfy the demands of the common instruments while still keeping their uniqueness and the relations to the national level.

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

It is probable that there are large differences from country to country in the way students are involved in the accreditation activities of the national agencies. In 2003 the Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education (Denmark,

Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) carried out a project with the aim to share information and experiences on student involvement in quality assessment of higher education in the Nordic countries. Despite the differences in approach, the Nordic experience of involving students in quality assurance has generally speaking been very positive and it may strengthen the students' role as experts with special competence. We should take this into consideration in the process of developing common instruments.

INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY, RESPONSIBILITY AND FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

In European countries the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each academic institution itself. This role forms the basis for the accountability of the academic system within the national quality framework. It is important that the common instruments for accreditation fully respect such institutional autonomy and responsibility.

To promote further development beyond the threshold standards, the report from the expert committees could contain their recommendations to the institution regarding how to further enhance the quality of the institution or programme. But there could also be a lot of other means which can motivate the institution to further develop the quality.

SECURING UPDATED COMMON INSTRUMENTS FOR ACCREDITATION

It is necessary to establish a procedure on regular adjustment of the common instruments for accreditation, according to the developments and changes in higher education on the national and international level.