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**A BRIEF OUTLINE OF ACCREDITATION AND EVALUATION ACTIVITIES  
IN NORWAY**

ODDVAR HAUGLAND,  
Director-General  
Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT)

**Dear Colleagues**

**INTRODUCTION**

In my presentation I will give some brief information about the system of higher education, and the system for quality assurance of higher education in Norway. In addition I will emphasis shortly on the recognition of evaluation results and how these results could impact on higher education system. Before I leave the floor, you have also heard something about the international cooperation in the field of quality evaluation and accreditation.

**DESCRIPTION OF THE NATIONAL SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

Norwegian higher education is regulated by two laws. The Universities and Colleges Act regulates state-owned institutions and their right to establish programmes and award national degrees. This law also regulates the quality assurance of higher education and forms the legal basis of NOKUT. The Private

Colleges Act regulates the right of private institutions to award national degrees and their access to public funding.

There is now a process going on to integrate these two laws into a joint law embracing both state-owned and private-owned institutions. The Storting is expected to make its decision on the new joint law at the end of February this year.

### *Quality reform in higher education*

*In 2000*, a committee on higher education in Norway proposed extensive changes. The main purpose was to improve the quality of higher education and research, and follow up the Bologna Process and Norway's obligations in that respect. The Reform covered all institutions of higher education and some of the most interesting elements in this respect are increased institutional autonomy, new funding formula for institutions according to documented result, new quality assurance system, new degree structure (bachelor, master, phd) and new forms of student guidance, evaluation and assessment.

### *Institutional structure*

The sector of higher education in Norway consists of 43 state-owned institutions; 6 universities (4 "old" universities and two new ones, from 1 January 2005), 5 specialized institutions at university level and 32 colleges. In addition there are 31 private-owned institutions. All together there are 74 higher educational institutions and the total student population is around 215 000 students. Nearly 60 % of the students are female. In addition there are roughly 25 000 Norwegian students abroad, mainly at universities in other European countries, especially the UK, as well as Australia, Canada and the US. All together we are 4.6 million inhabitants in Norway.

## ***NORWEGIAN AGENCY FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN EDUCATION (NOKUT)***

### *Introduction*

Up to 1998 Norway had no special agency assigned the task of systematic evaluation and accreditation of all higher education. In the period 1998-2001 the task was given to a Council which had only an advisory function; the Ministry retained all powers of issuing formal approval to programmes and institutions and in relation to the follow-up procedures from the evaluations. Subsequently it became clear that having an advisory body to the Ministry with several other tasks was not an optimal way to organize systematic quality assurance in higher education. The Storting decided to establish a new body, Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) in June 2001.

On 1 January 2003, the new quality assurance system on a national basis came into being, with emphasis on evaluations of systems for quality assurance and accreditation of institutions, courses and programmes

### **Legal basis of NOKUT**

The legal foundation for the quality assurance system in higher education is The Universities and Colleges Act chapter 3 Evaluation and Accreditation, with appurtenant regulations laid down by the Ministry of Education and Research. As expected from 1 August 2005 the two acts concerning the state-owned and the private-owned institutions, will be integrated into a joint act. This new joint act will then form the legal basis of NOKUT.

The main components are:

### *Purpose*

NOKUT shall by means of accreditation and evaluation control the quality of Norwegian institutions that provide higher education. This is a clear statement

that NOKUT primarily is a control body. But it is also laid down that NOKUT must facilitate the process of developing quality through evaluations. The evaluations shall also give constructive ideas and inspiration to the institutions in their work with developing educational quality.

### *Institutional responsibility for the quality on their provisions*

A basic element in the new quality assurance system is the requirement that the institutions are fully responsible for quality assurance of all aspects of their activities. Strictly speaking, there is nothing new in this responsibility as such, but the institutions will now be required to demonstrate how responsibility for quality is followed up with actual quality assurance.

### *Authority and independence*

NOKUT makes its decisions independently of the Ministry and the institutions. The Ministry may not instruct NOKUT in excess of what is authorized by statute or laid down by the Ministry in regulation and may not revise the Agency's accreditation judgments. If NOKUT, on the basis of the experts' report, finds that an institution's system for quality assurance is unsatisfactory, the Ministry shall withdraw the institution's authority to establish new programmes. And if NOKUT finds that an institution no longer fulfils the conditions for accreditation, NOKUT will withdraw the accreditation. The decision shall be sent to the institution concerned with a copy to the Ministry. The institution must then withdraw the programme immediately.

### *Experts*

The evaluations and accreditations shall be conducted by experts appointed by NOKUT, which also decides on the terms of reference and appoints a secretary

to assist the panel and monitor progress. Such experts shall have competence within at least one of the following fields:

*evaluation*

*quality assurance*

*the field to be evaluated*

At least 40 % of the experts in a panel should be female. Nearly all of the panels are expected to have a student representative and at least one expert from another country. In some panels, e.g. for institutional accreditation, there should also be a member from society in general. The number of experts in a panel depends on the actual evaluation and could vary from two to five experts. NOKUT uses various methods to ensure that the experts are updated for the evaluation process.

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.

### *Publicity*

All aspects connected to the evaluations and accreditations, such as appointment of experts, applications from the institutions, self-evaluation reports, the final report from the experts and NOKUT's decisions, are made public. NOKUT has the task, in an active way, to disseminate the results from the evaluations and accreditations to different groups of stakeholders.

### *Appeal Board*

NOKUT has an appeal board, comprising seven members, appointed by the Ministry of Education and Research, which deals with complaint from an

institution concerning the formal processes of dealing with the application. Complaints about the actual assessments made by expert panels are not accepted.

## **Membership**

NOKUT is a member in the following Networks/Organizations:

- *Nordic Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (NOQA)*
- *European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)*
- *European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA)*
- *The International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE)*

## **NOKUT has the following tasks:**

1. Evaluate and pass judgment on the institutions' internal quality assurance systems through quality audits, carried out in regular cycles. In addition to acting as a control mechanism, the audits are supposed to be conducted in a way that will enhance quality development. This task is a very important pillar of the national quality assurance system. Institutional audits represent the systematic, comprehensive mechanism for external scrutiny of the quality of higher education. Institutional audits will be conducted in all accredited institutions, irrespective of category, and there must not be more than six years between each time an institution is evaluated.
2. Accreditation of institutions

As from 1 January 2003 accreditation is mandatory and universal for all formally recognized higher education in Norway. It is important to notice

that accreditation is not limited to a specified period of time, but will be considered as valid until explicitly revoked, following an assessment with the objective to revise accreditation earlier granted.

Institutional accreditation gives universities and colleges certain rights to award national degrees or diplomas.

All state-owned institutions are put into three categories: universities, specialized institutions at university level and university colleges.

The universities have full autonomy to accredit any type of programme without involving NOKUT. The accreditation decisions shall be taken by the institutional board, based on the same standard requirements as NOKUT uses.

The specialized institutions at university level have basically the same right as the universities in the academic fields where they have been allowed to offer doctoral degree programmes. If they want to expand into new fields, they must present the new programme for accreditation.

University colleges have the right to offer any provision bachelor - level without any further process of accreditation. In the fields they are allowed to offer doctoral degree programmes, they have the same rights as universities. All new programmes beyond this have to be accredited by NOKUT.

Private institutions do not start out as accredited institutions. They have to apply for institutional accreditation in any of the three categories and then obtain the same rights as state institutions in the same category. Private institutions without an accreditation will have to apply for accreditation separately for every course or programme they wish to offer.

### 3. *Accreditation of programmes*

The term 'accreditation', seen in association with accreditation of programmes, covers both 'initial' accreditation, when an institution applies to establish a new programme which the institution does not have the authority to initiate itself, and accreditation 'control' which is a revision of accreditation earlier granted. All higher education programmes and courses – in state or private institutions- that were recognized under the previous guidelines were automatically given status as accredited per 1<sup>st</sup> January 2003.

Any new provision of a programme in accredited institutions exceeding the awarding rights that follow from institutional category must be accredited in accordance with the standards and criteria for the actual programme. All new or even previously recognized programmes provided in unaccredited institutions must undergo such a process in order to become accredited.

### 4. *Revision of accreditation already granted*

Any institution can have accreditations revoked or suspended – for the entire institution as such, or for individual programmes – following a negative assessment in this type of evaluation. NOKUT may independently conduct an evaluation of an institution or a programme with a view to revision of a previously granted accreditation. Such revision may result in withdrawal of the accreditation and the Ministry shall then withdraw the rights entailed by accreditation.

A revision of accreditation will include both a self-evaluation report from the institution according to certain standards and criteria, and a site visit by experts lasting two-three days. A revision of accreditation will, unlike

to an initial accreditation, also take into consideration the academic level of the programme and documented results.

5. *Other evaluations of importance for assessing the quality of higher education*

NOKUT may carry out other types of evaluations with the general purpose of investigating, assessing and developing the quality of higher education. The Ministry may instruct NOKUT to undertake such evaluations. In 2004 the Ministry has instructed NOKUT to carry out an evaluation on teacher education programmes. NOKUT can itself take initiatives to carry out such evaluations. This is a possibility NOKUT intends to use.

## **Standards, criteria and procedures**

### *General*

The Ministerial Regulation instructs NOKUT to make sure that national standards reflect relevant international standards that Norway has committed itself to observe. The accreditation standards and criteria do not yet make any formal reference to international standards of academic quality, like the Dublin descriptors. However, NOKUT intends to follow up any guidelines for standards or proceedings that are formally endorsed as part of the Bologna process.

NOKUT is now in a process of revising all the standards and criteria for accreditation and evaluation, according to the new joint act for universities and colleges, and to make improvements based on our experience of using them.

### *Institutional accreditation*

A precondition for institutional accreditation is that the institution possesses a satisfactory system for quality assurance. The Ministry has laid down in

regulations standards to be met applying to a college, a specialized institution at university level and a university. In addition NOKUT has laid down regulations providing detailed criteria for accreditation and worked out different procedures for the processes. The standards and criteria for accreditation are generic. They address the institutional levels only.

#### *Accreditation of programmes*

For the accreditation of individual programmes, both the standards and the more detailed assessment criteria are set by NOKUT, after consultations with the sector. These standards and criteria are generic descriptors for types of degree programmes, as defined by their level and credit volume (2-year programmes; bachelor programmes; master programmes; doctoral programmes). Specific national quality criteria for the different disciplines or subject areas have not yet been defined. Specific discipline requirements are left to the experts to formulate.

An 'initial' accreditation is not based on an ordinary self-evaluation report from the institution, since the institution does not have experience of running this new programme. An initial accreditation process will not usually include a site visit either.

#### *Evaluation of quality assurance systems*

The Ministry has laid down in regulation the standards for quality assurance system, which requires that the system satisfactorily documents work on quality assurance, is capable of revealing poor quality, is applied to all processes of importance for the quality of programmes, includes the routines for students' evaluation of teaching, follow-up of evaluation, documentation of the institution's development of the learning environment and routines for quality assurance of new programmes, and has routines that ensure continues improvement of the system.

NOKUT has worked out 10 criteria for evaluation of the systems.

### *Current results*

#### *Institutional accreditation*

NOKUT has completed the processing of four applications for institutional accreditation: two state-owned institutions applied for accreditation as university; a private college applied for accreditation as a specialized institution at university level and another private college as accredited college.

The processes started in 2003 and ended in 2004, 13-14 months later. The institutions had to pass two evaluation processes. First, the institutions' quality assurance systems had to be evaluated by an expert panel of four members. If a positive evaluation, then the other part of the process could start. The Board of NOKUT decided on the accreditations and all 4 institutions succeeded in being accredited in the desired categories.

The ultimate decision of allowing a move from one institutional category to another has to be taken by the Ministry. From 1<sup>st</sup> January 2005 Norway has increased the number of universities from 4 to 6. Several other university colleges have affirmed their intention to apply for university status, and have already obtained the right to award doctoral degrees in different fields.

At the moment three private colleges are in the last phase of the accreditation process, one to become a specialized institution at university level and two to become accredited colleges. In a few years Norway may experience a considerable change in the institutional structure of its higher education.

#### *Programme accreditation*

Since starting up in June 2003 NOKUT has conducted 64 programme accreditations on all levels. Nearly 20 % did not succeed in being accredited.

NOKUT is now in the process of carrying out a revision of accreditation of bachelor- and master degree programmes in the field of nursing at universities and colleges, both state- and private owned institutions, altogether 35 programmes. The revision will be completed in December this year.

#### *Evaluation of quality assurance systems*

Since 2003 NOKUT has evaluated the quality assurance systems of 17 institutions. Three of these institutions have not had their quality assurance systems approved, and they are allowed a time limit of six months to correct matters. If NOKUT after six months still finds that their systems are unsatisfactory, the Ministry shall withdraw the institution's authority to establish new programmes.

#### *Accreditation control*

Accreditation control is a very important part of the Norwegian quality assurance system. The wide authority to accredit new programmes at the institutions themselves, combined with the fact that the accreditation is not given for a fixed period, makes it necessary to find an 'optimal' level of accreditation control through revision of accreditation. It is necessary to have more experience to find the 'optimal' level of this control mechanism. We are still afraid that the annual budget could make it difficult to reach an optimal level of revisions of accreditation, despite the Ministry increased our budget for 2005 by 5 % especially to develop the capacity for revisions of accreditation.

#### ***RECOGNITION OF EVALUATION RESULTS BY THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND THEIR IMPACT ON HIGHER EDUCATION***

As mention earlier, NOKUT makes its decisions independently of the Ministry, which may not instruct NOKUT in excess of what is authorized by statute or

laid down by the Ministry in regulation, and may not revise NOKUT's accreditation judgments. But the Ministry shall of course be informed about the results from the evaluation and accreditation activities and has the possibility to use this information in developing higher education system and the way the system function.

It is obvious that such dramatic results as withdrawal of recognition or accreditation will have an impact on higher education. All decisions on evaluations and accreditations conducted by NOKUT will also include recommendations on how the institutions could enhance the quality on their programmes. My impression is that the institutions follow up these recommendations in a very serious way. So I am convinced that the evaluation and accreditation results contribute in developing the quality of higher education in the short run too, but especially in the long run.

## **NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN QUALITY EVALUATION AND ACCREDITATION**

Cooperation, domestic and international, is a necessity if we are to succeed in reaching our aims of enhancing quality in higher education. Especially in small countries like Norway, international contacts and cooperation are crucial for developing the quality of domestic higher education. In Norway we also have an ambition that our higher education should be on an international level.

Due to limited budgets, cooperation is also a question of priority. NOKUT gives a reasonably high priority to international cooperation, since there are very few other agencies/organisations we can cooperate with at home. Concerning international cooperation, NOKUT's priority list is at present:

- 1 Nordic and European Associations/Networks

2 Projects with more than two participants

3 Bilateral cooperation projects

4 International networks outside Europe

- *Nordic Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (NOQA)*

NOKUT plays an active role in the Nordic network of quality assurance agencies in higher education (NOQA). The members, Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, meet once a year and the leadership shifts every year. The activities are concentrated on NOQA has 5 members which are the quality assurance agencies in Finland, exchanging information and telling each other of our experiences, discussions on methodological questions and good practices. Every year the agencies cooperate on a joint project, which is always published. The title of the project for the year 2004/2005 is "A Comparative Analysis of Systematic Quality Work of Nordic Higher Education Institutions".

- *European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)*

This is a well-known and central association for cooperation between the quality assurance agencies in Europe

- *European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA)*

This is a collaboration project between 12 quality assurance agencies in 8 countries (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Spain and Switzerland) for the period up to 2007. The ultimate aim is to help realize the European Higher Education Area, by means of mutual recognition of accreditation decisions.

- NOKUT also participate in a network on development of institutional audits together with colleagues from quality assurance agencies in France, Switzerland, England and Sweden.

On the bilateral level NOKUT is participating in two highly interesting cooperation projects, one with the Spanish quality assurance agency (ANECA), and later on this year NOKUT will start a project together with the Higher Education Quality Committee in South Africa (HEQC).

- *The International Network of Quality Assurance in Higher Education (INQAAHE)*

This network has a number of interesting activities around the world. During the annual workshop it is possible to get information and discuss quality assurance issues and experiences with colleagues from other continents.

In addition to these more formal organized networks, associations and projects, we also attend workshops, conferences and seminars if we feel the topics are of great interest to us in NOKUT.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR LISTENING TO ME!