NOKUT — Quality Areas for Study Programs

Through a model centred on students' learning trajectories, NOKUT wants to highlight some issues that are crucial for creating study programs where students play an active role in their own learning. Based on this student-focused approach, NOKUT applies a broad understanding of the process leading up to the achieved learning outcomes and focuses on the following quality areas: knowledge base, learning trajectory, entrance competence, learning outcomes, educational competence, interaction with society and labour market, learning environment and program design.

The model is not only intended as a common framework for NOKUT regulations, evaluation criteria, quality indicators etc., but also used as a means to increase stakeholders' attention to the quintessential "ground-level" in higher education and to encourage institutions to focus their quality work on students' learning trajectories. The flexibility and the ambiguity of the model is deliberately chosen in order not to define quality in education once and for all. Rather, the model identifies processes and problem fields that in NOKUT's opinion are decisive for the quality of study programs.

NOKUT describes a student's life at an institution of higher learning, from admission to diploma, as the student's **learning trajectory**. In good learning trajectories, students are conscious of their own process of learning, and develop sound strategies for learning. This term puts emphasis on how students learn within an academic and social community. Over the course of a program, students become part of an academic environment where they learn in interaction with teaching staff, fellow students, support services, the professional field, professional organizations, and society in general. The institution draws up a plan for the students' learning in its program and course descriptions, and when the students begin their studies, the process of integrating them into an academic culture and a learning community begins. Students learn to master concepts and discover methods of tackling academic challenges. Throughout their learning trajectory, their academic abilities and attitudes face challenges, and these challenges promote their academic and personal development. As well as taking part in learning activities arranged by teaching staff, students learn in other arenas, such as study groups, student politics, practical training periods and exchanges, and project work.

Good learning trajectories:
- are created collaboratively by students, academic staff, support services, the professional field, professional organizations, and the wider society
- make students conscious of their own learning, and of good learning strategies
- take place in an inclusive and motivating learning environment with a feedback culture that works well

A **learning environment** is the sum of all factors that affect students' physical and mental well-being and their ability to learn. A learning environment is composed of physical, organizational and psychosocial factors. NOKUT uses the term 'learning environment' to describe how these factors affect not only student welfare, but also how they affect learning, student involvement, student democracy, and student ownership of learning. Physical surroundings affect learning. A good learning environment facilitates and provides training in forms of teaching and assessment beyond the traditional lecture/classroom model. Changing the physical environment and teaching methods can often make it easier to introduce aspects of R&D in learning. In this way, the physical premises can help transform the content of a program. Even early-stage teaching can become more project- and collaboration-oriented, with a work flow more similar to what students will encounter in R&D projects, as well as in their future work. A good learning environment involves practical application of teaching and assessment methods other than traditional lectures/classroom-based teaching, like flipped classrooms, problem-based learning, team teaching, courses in debate, drama or role-play, learning workshops and learning by doing.

A good learning environment entails:
- use of knowledge gained through research and development work on teaching and learning
- practical arrangements for the use of new teaching and assessment methods
- student involvement, student democracy and student ownership of learning
- continually improving the physical, psychosocial and organizational conditions that students live and work under

Study programs should be relevant in the sense of **providing the competence society needs** now and in the future, and in the sense of allowing students to gain knowledge and skills they will need in their future learning and working lives. Conversely, higher education institutions, academic staff and students can stimulate societal innovation by spreading knowledge of the most recent developments in relevant academic fields. Forums for interacting with the professional field can contribute to making study programs more relevant and flexible. Where appropriate, these forums should have influence over both program portfolios and the content of individual study programs. Each academic community needs to consider how and how far such contact can help improve its study programs. Collaboration with society and working life might involve, for instance, the use of teachers from outside the university, periods of practical training, specific course components addressing topics in the professional field, or MA and BA theses conducted in collaboration with the professional field.

Useful interaction with society and working life entails:
- suitable forums for contact with society and working life
- systematic work to ensure that individual study programs and the program portfolio as a whole are relevant to society and working life
- the active use of feedback from former students and alumni networks in the preparation of study programs
- creating conditions for students to learn through contact with society and working life, and for society and working life to benefit from student contact

The prior knowledge that the student brings to the start of the program, as well as other qualities like motivation, experience and ability, are what we call the student's **initial competence**. Initial competence is not just a measure of the student's general level of competence when starting a higher education program. It also has to do with how far this competence is appropriate to the program in question, and with the student's motivation for choosing this education. A good study program will make active efforts to recruit a diverse student body, composed of students with the right initial competence who are highly motivated to undertake the program.

A successful study start also requires good admissions procedures and clear information before the study program begins, and requires both a social and an academic welcome process. A good study start helps students develop motivation and good learning strategies.

The best possible start to a learning trajectory entails:
- recruitment and admission procedures that attract students with the right initial competence
- that both potential applicants and new students get up-to-date and relevant information about the study program
- a focus on a good study start as the beginning of the student's personal learning trajectory
- a focus on developing students' ability to learn and on establishing good learning strategies.

Learning outcome descriptions need to give a clear picture of the competence the institution wants students to have on graduation. A good learning outcome description is one that students, employers and educational institutions home and abroad can easily recognize and understand. In writing learning outcome descriptions, the program's academic community works with former students and external sources to make sure that the descriptions work outside academia. If learning outcomes are to work well, the academic community needs to be invested in and have ownership of the learning outcome descriptions.

A conscious use of learning outcomes entails:
- focusing on all the quality areas, and seeing them in connection with each other
- developing learning outcome descriptions in collaboration with relevant external sources, and making sure these descriptions make sense in an international context
- ensuring that the academic community contributes to and feels ownership of the learning outcomes
- teaching, learning and assessment methods that help students achieve the learning outcomes
- assessment methods that determine whether students have achieved the learning outcomes

LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

INTERACTION WITH SOCIETY AND LABOUR MARKET

INITIAL COMPETENCE

LEARNING OUTCOMES

LEARNING TRAJECTORY

KNOWLEDGE BASE

PROGRAMME DESIGN

EDUCATIONAL COMPETENCE

A good **program design** unites many of the factors that contribute to good learning and to students' achieving learning outcomes. Designing a program is a complex task that requires good educational management, as well as input from students, academic and administrative staff, support services, professional organizations, and the wider society. For a program design to be successful, it needs a clear division of responsibility for everyone involved, and a sound basis in pedagogy and subject didactics.

Facilitating others' learning is a demanding task that requires both academic and didactic competence, and depends on good educational leadership. **Educational competence** also means being able to adapt aspects of an academic field to create a course of study that has a relevant profile and is pitched at the right level. For educators, a good basic level of educational competence is a starting point for further development and qualification, and subject and program leaders have a responsibility to ensure that this happens.

A well-designed study program contains good and relevant learning outcome descriptions that are at the right level of the national qualifications framework, and that are adapted to the distinctive nature of the discipline. The learning outcome descriptions correspond to the teaching and assessment methods used. A well-designed study program contributes to improve student learning, creates close links between R&D and teaching, and contributes to effective administration. Periodic assessment of study programs means that the programs, and other factors that play into students' learning trajectories, continually improve. Such assessments help to ensure that the program and the students' learning correspond to the needs of both the student and society.

A good program design:
- has learning outcomes that correspond to the teaching and assessment forms used, in such a way that students can achieve the learning outcomes
- is evaluated regularly, with the evaluation results used for continual improvement
- has learning outcomes that are relevant to society and the professional field

The quality of teaching has great importance for the quality of students' learning. A good teacher is able to use student interaction to motivate and inspire students to learn. When students take part in shaping the teaching and learning methods used, they are likely to feel more in charge of their own learning trajectory. Teachers also depend on their colleagues and academic community to discuss and help evaluate their teaching.

With a good level of educational competence, an educator can:
- translate aspects of an academic field into a course of study that has a relevant profile and is pitched at the right level
- make use of appropriate teaching and assessment methods that emphasise student learning
- conduct R&D work on teaching and learning
- use their knowledge about teaching and learning to create a good learning environment and good study plans

By a **knowledge base** we mean the foundation of knowledge that each subject discipline rests on. A student-centred academic community will make a deliberate effort to include its students in a living scholarly culture that focuses on R&D work. A good knowledge base gives students the capacity to change, develop and innovate. Subject-based student exchange arrangements, and periods of practice work home and abroad, can give students broader perspectives on their field of study, as well as opportunities to specialize. A sufficiently large and robust academic community can give students access to different aspects of the field's knowledge base, and introduce them to the different perspectives and methods the field uses. A strong academic community provides its students with updated curriculums and state-of-the-art teaching and assessment methods. It makes students aware of how their subject discipline has developed, how it can respond to societal needs, and how it relates to other disciplines. Students learn how new knowledge is created and established. This lays the groundwork for them to make further innovations in the field.

Creating a good knowledge base requires:
- academic communities that steadily maintain and develop the educational institution's knowledge base, drawing on the newest research and development work
- academic communities that do research on teaching and learning
- students who are actively included in the institution's knowledge development