

QUALITY ASSURANCE OF NORWEGIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

The higher education sector in Norway

The majority of Norwegian higher education institutions are owned by the state: four universities, six specialised institutions at university level, two academies of fine art and 26 regional university colleges. More than ninety per cent of the student population in Norway attend state institutions.

A few specialised institutions at university level are private. The private sector is otherwise made up of a number of fairly small institutions. The main academic fields of private higher education are business and management, ICT studies, theology, nursing and health care and teacher education.

Legal and regulatory framework; the ‘quality reform’ (2002)

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.
- *The Private Colleges Act* regulates private institutions’ right to award national degrees and their access to public funding. Benchmark for the recognition of private higher education has hitherto been corresponding provision in institutions under the Universities and Colleges Act.

Both laws were recently amended (2002) in connection with the Government’s ‘quality reform’ of higher education’. The amendments represent the first stage in a process with the aim of merging the two laws into one and thus create greater equality between state and private institutions.

The reform process also:

- changed the degree structure in accordance with the recommendations of the Bologna Declaration
- increased institutional autonomy
- imposed a stricter obligation for institutions to follow up students actively
- introduced a system of formal accreditation for all higher education
- imposed stricter demands in the field of quality assurance.

Quality assurance at the institutional level: internal quality assurance systems

Each institution is responsible for the quality of its own educational provision. 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. After the reform, a prerequisite for status as an accredited institution will be the existence of an *internal system of quality assurance* that complies with nationally set criteria. The institutions are expected to have such systems in place by 1 January 2004.

Quality assurance at the national level: NOKUT

The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) will take care of quality assurance at the national level. The agency, replacing the former Network Norway Council, became operative on 1 January 2003. Unlike its predecessor, NOKUT is not a part of the government structure and acts independently inside a given framework of law and a Ministerial Regulation. Its main tasks are to:

- make all accreditation decisions concerning higher education that go beyond the institutions' self-accrediting powers. These decisions cannot be modified by any other authority.
- evaluate and pass judgement on the institutions' internal quality assurance through quality audits, carried out in regular cycles and including all accredited institutions. In addition to act as a control mechanism, the audits are supposed to be conducted in a way that is conducive to quality enhancement.
- carry out evaluations with the purpose of revising specific accreditation. Any institution can have accreditations revoked or suspended - for the entire institutions as such, or for individual programmes - following a negative assessment in this type of evaluation.
- carry out other types of evaluations with the general purpose of investigating, assessing and developing the quality of higher education in Norway. The Ministry may instruct NOKUT to undertake such evaluations.
- issue general recognition – or credit count towards national degrees - to higher education from other countries, or to any other education that is not regulated by the Universities and Colleges Act or the Private Colleges Act. This is a power it shares with accredited institutions.

Accreditation

As from 1 January 2002 accreditation is mandatory and universal for all formally recognised higher education in Norway. Accreditation is not limited to a specified period of time but will be considered as valid until explicitly revoked, following an assessment. The new accreditation formula combines institutional and programme/course accreditation:

- *Institutional accreditation* gives universities and colleges certain rights to award national degrees or diplomas.
 - When the law amendments became operative on 1 January 2002, all state-owned institutions were automatically given status as *accredited institutions* with certain degree-awarding rights. These rights vary with institutional category, of which there are three:
 - *University*: (Full awarding rights at all levels, including doctoral programmes)
 - *Special-field university*: (Full awarding rights at all levels within given special field)
 - *College*: (Full awarding rights at the bachelor degree level)
 - No private institutions were automatically given status as accredited, but may obtain it through a process of institutional accreditation, for which a national set of standards has been given. Applications can be made for any of the three categories

and by May 2003 two private institutions have applied, one to become a full university and the other to become a special-field university.

- By the same standards, state institutions may seek accreditation in a different ('higher') category, following a process of institutional accreditation. By May 2003 one such application has been registered, where a special-field university seeks status as full university. Three university colleges have declared their intention to apply for university status
- *Programme accreditation* may be obtained for specific courses or programmes that the institution is not institutionally accredited to provide.
 - All higher education programmes and courses – in state or private institutions - that were recognised under the previous guidelines by 1 Jan. 2003 were automatically given status as accredited.
 - New provision in accredited institutions that goes beyond the awarding rights that follow from institutional category must be accredited after a process and in accordance with national sets of standards (e.g. master degree programmes in institutions of the college category).
 - All new (or not previously recognised) provision in unaccredited institutions must undergo such a process in order to become accredited.

Accreditation control

Accreditation control is carried out through a combination of institutional audits and specific programme or subject assessments, referred to as 'revision':

- *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. The frame of reference for these evaluations is made up of the national criteria that have been set for internal quality assurance systems, which among other things demand that these systems must be able to detect inferior quality, and that quality assurance must be adequately documented. Failure to provide internal quality assurance in accordance with the criteria will have as a consequence that the institution cannot any more offer new provision. But the audits cannot in themselves lead to the loss of accreditation.
- *Revision* of accreditation will take the form of a specific (programme, course, discipline, or even institutional) assessment, directed at an identified unit of education. Revisions will be triggered by indications from the audits, but also by other indications, and they may be carried out as random tests. A negative result will lead to the loss of accreditation, and consequently to the loss of public funding.

Standards and criteria for accreditation

a) Institutional accreditation:

General standards for institutional accreditation in any of the three categories are set by Ministerial Regulation. The Regulation authorises NOKUT to develop a further

concretisation of these standards in the form of more detailed assessment *criteria*. The criteria, which have been developed after consultations with the sector, concern (i.a.) internal quality assurance, academic competence levels, research activities, the number and levels of existing programmes, internationalisation, infrastructure and institutional organisation and management.

b) *Programme accreditation:*

For the accreditation of individual programmes, both the standards and the more detailed assessment criteria are set by NOKUT, again after consultations with the sector. These standards 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 been defined. It should be noted, though, that a few programmes aimed at professions (notably teacher education) are regulated in more detail by national curriculum guidelines.

Standards and criteria for internal quality assurance

A brief and general *standard* for the institutions' internal quality assurance systems is set by Ministerial Regulation, indicating what these systems should include and achieve. This standard, in turn, has been further developed by NOKUT through a set of *assessment criteria* that will be applied in the institutional audits. Institutional audits are not formally accreditation procedures and the assessment criteria are not the same as absolute standards.

The proposed criteria are developed from two basic considerations: that quality assurance systems should aim at both control and enhancement and that the criteria should focus on *system quality* rather than on any specific quality assurance methods or measures.

The criteria focus on (i.a.) the following features:

- That the QA system is linked to institutional steering and management and made an integral part of the institution's strategic work.
- That quality work is organised in routines and measures that ensure broad participation throughout the institution, with defined distribution of responsibility and authority.
- That documentation from all study units (including franchised provision) is sufficient, and that it always includes the students' assessment of the programmes they attend.
- That documentation is analysed, summed up and reported.
- That quality assurance and quality work is accounted for in annual reports to the institution's board.

All standards and criteria for accreditation and the evaluation of quality assurance systems are presented *in extenso* on NOKUT's website: www.nokut.no.