

CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION OF UNIVERSITIES' AND UNIVERSITY COLLEGES' QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEMS FOR EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Issued by the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) 5 May 2003 pursuant to the Regulations concerning accreditation, evaluation and recognition issued by the Ministry of Education and Research pursuant to the Act relating to universities and university colleges and the Act relating to state grants to private institutions of higher education.

Background

The developments of recent years have created a need for more systematic quality assurance of Norwegian higher education. The reasons for this include the institutions' increased autonomy, international guidelines, the sharp rise in the number of students, new teaching methods, a changing environment for study and stricter general requirements imposed by society with regard to transparency and documentation. Evaluations and other surveys have shown that institutions work in a targeted way on quality issues, but also that work on quality is often somewhat lacking in system and coherence, documentation, follow-up of decisions and administrative foundation.

The need to strengthen work on quality has long been recognized both by the political authorities and by the institutions themselves. This has now been implemented in the Act relating to Universities and Colleges, where section 2 (8) requires that institutions shall have satisfactory internal systems for quality assurance.

The Ministry's requirements regarding quality assurance systems

In the Regulations of 2 January 2003, the Ministry of Education and Research lays down the following requirements regarding the institutions' quality assurance systems:

1.
Institutions subject to the Act relating to Universities and Colleges and private colleges accredited pursuant to section 10a of the Act relating to state grants to private institutions of higher education shall have systems that satisfactorily document work on quality assurance and are able to reveal poor quality.
2.
It is intended that the quality assurance system shall embrace all processes of significance for the quality of studies, from the provision of information to potential applicants to the completion of courses. These include routines for the evaluation of teaching by students, self-evaluation and follow-up of evaluations by the institutions, documentation of the institution's work on the learning environment and routines for quality assurance of new course provisions.
3.
The institutions shall have routines that ensure continuous improvement of the system.
4.
In consultation with the sector, the body establishes criteria in relation to which the quality assurance system is to be evaluated.

In the same regulations, the Ministry assigns to NOKUT the responsibility for evaluation of all institutions in cycles of not more than six years.

Quality and quality assurance systems

No clear and simple definition is provided for the term “quality of studies”. The criteria vary according to objectives and disciplines, and assessments apply to conditions that can often not be quantified. Moreover, quality changes with the development of disciplines, educational activities and environments, while different interested parties place varying emphasis on different aspects of it. However, three factors have a central place: quality as viewed by the students, quality in terms of the fulfilment of recognized academic objectives and quality in terms of the broad social relevance of courses.

The evaluation criteria do not relate directly to the quality of the courses, but concern the quality assurance system itself and the quality work carried out by the institutions. They therefore focus on major characteristics of a satisfactory system without specifying course plans or methods. Emphasis is placed on ensuring that the system is well integrated and firmly rooted in the administration, that it provides the necessary information, that the information is analysed and disseminated to the appropriate levels of responsibility and administration and that routines exist for the implementation of knowledge in actions with a view to improvement and development. Like the other management instruments of the institutions, the quality assurance system must be evaluated internally and developed in compliance with needs.

A good quality assurance system is both a management instrument for the institution and a practical tool for regular improvement of day-to-day activities. The system should therefore be founded on routines closely associated with the learning processes themselves and with the learning environment, and which motivate staff and students and involve them in the work. Work on quality should not be reduced to purely consisting of routines for inspection and control.

The system is the property of the institutions and it is the institution itself that decides, in relation to its size and academic profile, how the system shall be designed. The same applies to the documentation produced by the system. The institution itself decides what data and other information it needs in order to be able to identify variations in quality and select relevant quality improvement measures. It is not intended that institutions shall report registered quality indications or assessments to NOKUT, but these must be made available in connection with external evaluations.

Purpose

The purpose of a quality assurance system is to ensure that educational activities are of high quality and are developing toward further improvements. The system must be capable of revealing cases of deficient quality and otherwise of detecting good and bad quality. It must provide the institution with a basis for self-assessment and change.

Work on and in relation to the quality assurance system should help to develop a strong culture of quality in the institution. The system must clarify the internal tasks and responsibilities and, within an overall course plan where all parties involved, both staff and students, take part in communal efforts to attain high quality.

NOKUT's responsibility involves ensuring that the quality assurance functions satisfactorily and stimulates improvement. In its evaluations, NOKUT is to cooperate with the institutions on achieving joint objectives. The evaluations shall equally be of support to the institutions by providing guidance and recommendations for further work on development of a quality assurance system and the quality of studies.

CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION OF QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEMS

The quality assurance system shall involve the whole institution and shall apply to the areas of activity that are related to quality of studies and the total learning environment for all course provisions for which the institution is responsible, both internal and external. In evaluating the quality assurance system, emphasis will be placed on the following aspects of the system:

1. clarification of how work on quality of studies is included as an element of the institution's strategic work
2. the objectives defined for the institution's work on quality
3. work on quality is to be rooted in the management at all levels of the organization
4. organization of work on quality in routines and measures that ensure broad participation with defined distribution of responsibility and authority for the various stages of the work
5. retrieval and processing of data and information derived from evaluations necessary for the provision of satisfactory assessments of the quality of all study units, and accumulated at the top level of the institution
6. analysis of the information and assessment of goal achievement in work on quality
7. use of the results of work on quality as a basis for decisions and measures with a view to securing and further developing quality of studies
8. clarification of how work on quality contributes to resource management and priorities at the institution (human resources, infrastructure, service)
9. active participation by students in work on quality and the focus on the total learning environment
10. an annual report on work on quality to the board of the institution, giving a coherent overall assessment of quality of studies at the institution and an overview of course plans and measures for work on quality.