

A brief description of the quality assurance system in Norway

Quality assurance in Norwegian higher education is a dual responsibility. All HEIs are responsible for the quality of their own educational provisions, and it is NOKUT's responsibility to ensure that all institutions follow the legal requirements and provide education of high quality.

There are two main entrances to quality assurance in Norwegian higher education. The first relates to accreditation of educational provisions and the other relates to audits, supervisions and revision of accreditation.

Accreditation

Accreditation is mandatory and universal for all formally recognised higher education in Norway. Accreditation is not limited to a specified period but is considered valid until explicitly revoked following a revision.

The accreditation formula combines institutional and programme accreditation. Institutional accreditation gives universities and colleges certain rights to award national degrees or diplomas. There are four categories of institutions:

- University: authority to self-accredit programmes at all levels, including doctoral programmes
- Specialised university institution: authority to self-accredit programmes at all levels within their doctoral fields
- University college: authority to self-accredit programmes at bachelor's level, but university colleges that have NOKUT accredited Ph.D. programmes can also accredit master's programmes within their doctoral fields
- University colleges without institutional accreditation: for these university colleges, NOKUT must accredit all educational provisions

The system allows institutions to seek institutional accreditation in a different ('higher') category, following a process of institutional accreditation. Thus, a university college may apply to NOKUT for accreditation as a specialised university institution or a university.

In addition to institutional accreditation, NOKUT is responsible for accrediting all programmes that institutions cannot accredit themselves. Thus, new provisions in accredited institutions that go beyond the self-accreditation authority that follows from the institutional category must be accredited by NOKUT.

Control and revocation of accreditation

Because NOKUT's accreditations are not bound by time, it is important to have reliable control mechanisms to ensure that institutions and study programmes comply with the legal framework. To ensure this, NOKUT uses a combination of institutional quality assurance audits, supervision and revision of accreditation of programmes and institutions.

Institutional quality assurance audits represent the systematic, comprehensive mechanism for external scrutiny of the quality of higher education. Each institution must go through an audit of its internal quality assurance system and the institution's systematic quality work. An institution with self-accreditation rights that fails to conduct internal quality assurance in accordance with the criteria loses its rights to self-accredit new educational provisions, until the institution passes another audit. An institution that must apply NOKUT to accredit new educational provisions loses its right to

apply to NOKUT for new accreditations, until the institution passes another audit. An audit cannot itself lead to the loss of institutional accreditation.

Revisions of programmes and institutions can be triggered by indications from NOKUT's audits and supervisory activities, but also by other indications, and they may be carried out as random tests. Revisions of accreditation, both programme accreditation and institutional accreditation, can lead to the loss of accreditation and consequently to the loss of public funding.

The legal framework surrounding Norwegian higher education is fundamentally characterised by autonomous stakeholders. Since institution and programme accreditations are not limited to a specified period, NOKUT uses its extensive capacities to supervise study programmes and institutions to ensure that all educational provisions maintain a high quality. Maintaining the right balance between trust and verification is a key concern in the Norwegian model and all of NOKUT's operations are designed with this balance in mind.

Quality Assurance Guidelines

NOKUT's Academic supervisions regulations, supplementary ministerial regulations, and certain central procedural requirements regulate the requirements for NOKUT's quality assurance activities.

NOKUT has developed detailed guidelines on its quality assurance procedures for higher education institutions. These include guidelines for the institutional quality assurance audit and for the various types of institutional and programme accreditation. The same criteria also apply for supervisions and revisions. The guidelines provide detailed information on the requirements in the regulations. They include information on the criteria, precedents, details on documentation requirements, the relation to other regulations, and provide information on the various steps in NOKUT's procedures.

Recent development within institutional quality assurance audits

The Academic supervision regulations that set out requirements for the institutions' systematic quality assurance practices were revised in 2017. Previously based on comprehensive evaluations, the audits are now based on legal requirements. In order to pass, the institutions must fulfil each requirement. NOKUT and the external experts also advise the institutions on how to further develop their quality assurance practices. It is NOKUT's intention that supervisory activities should inspire the institutions to re-think existing practices and to try out new ideas, so that quality assurance activities can stimulate quality enhancement.

An important change made for the current audits (2018-2024) is that the institutions are organised in groups, according to their characteristics. Institutions that have recently merged, institutions with several campuses, institutions with the same authorizations, or institutions offering education within the same professions or disciplines, are examples of how NOKUT has chosen to set up "audit heats". In each audit heat, there are 4-6 institutions. Both during and after the audits, the institutions are encouraged to talk to each other about their quality assurance work, about documentation, sharing of good practices, and so on. NOKUT believes that such activities have the potential to bring forth mutual inspiration within quality assurance work. In order to foster collaboration and sharing, NOKUT arranges an information meeting for each audit heat 4-5 months before the deadline for submitting the documentation. The intention is that this activity should serve as an important basis for further networking and contact between the institutions.