

Background materials for the Seminar “Internal quality assurance at higher education institutions – requirements and good practices -

Bern, 2 December 2005

Quality Assurance at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences (UMB) - K. Hove, F. Benedict, A. Svinddal -

Why quality assurance?

Institutions of higher education in SEE that are currently undergoing reform as part of the Bologna process, must be prepared to develop a quality assurance (QA) system for their educational offerings.

An approved and well-implemented quality assurance system can open many doors; lack of such a system will close them. An effective and officially approved quality assurance system

- guarantees that the institution’s degree programmes and courses conform to established quality standards
- provides a basis for credits and qualifications being recognized and transferable throughout the European Higher Education Area
- documents how the institution works continually to improve educational quality and
- provides the transparency necessary for close institutional cooperation in the form of exchange agreements, joint degrees and the like.

Most institutions already have some quality assurance (QA) procedures in place that provide a good starting point for a quality system. However, quality work may have been conducted in a fragmented, incomplete fashion. What is needed is a clear set of quality standards and quality assurance procedures covering the most important educational functions of the university. These need to be *organised as a unified system* in which responsibilities and roles are also clarified and specified.

In each country, a *national quality assurance agency* may be present which establishes national guidelines and criteria for approval of higher education institutions’ quality assurance systems. Six national quality assurance agencies co-operate in the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). ENQA is working to develop common guidelines for quality assurance in higher education that can be applied throughout Europe¹.

Higher education institutions should keep themselves informed of developments at both the multinational and national levels when constructing their quality assurance systems. The signals given by multinational organs such as ENQA are likely to become even more important in the future. ENQA is supposed to co-ordinate and standardize the work of the national quality assurance agencies, including developing a common set of criteria and standards for the quality assurance systems.

¹ See, for example, ENQA Occasional Paper 7, 2005: “Quality Convergence Study: a contribution to the debates on quality and convergence in the European Higher Education Area,” available on the web at www.enqa.net .

It is important to realize at the outset that developing a QA system is a major undertaking which will require human resources and may take several years. The ultimate effect of an effective QA system is to stimulate organisational development and quality improvement through changes in the way the organisation thinks and works – changes in organisational culture. A so-called *quality culture* is developed. This means that students, teachers, administrators, actors from society and external evaluators engage in a critical and open dialog about the quality of courses, programmes and the total learning environment. Providing high quality offerings becomes a major concern and objective of the organisation.

When evaluations and assessments reveal that educational quality is not up to the expected standards, quality culture means that the institution responds by taking concerted action to eliminate the problem, rather than trying to cover up or rationalize. An institution with a strong quality culture is genuinely concerned with student welfare and actively seeks feedback and involvement from its students. Good communication and co-operation with relevant actors in society are also a way of ensuring that the academic offerings qualify students to fill an important role in society after graduation.

The quality assurance procedures should not be seen primarily as a set of controls to point a finger at inadequacies and guarantee a *minimum level* of quality. Evaluations and quality improvement work should rather be viewed positively, as *tools for optimizing or maximizing quality within the existing frame of resources*. The system should be used to reveal strengths as well as weaknesses, to exploit the potential for excellence as well as examining threats.

Quality assurance therefore means much more than establishing procedures that will meet a set of national or international requirements. It is in the institution's own interest to develop a quality system that generates information and analyses about quality strengths and weaknesses. This information provides an objective platform for priority-setting and strategic management. An institution can reach its long-term goals more effectively by embracing critical feedback and orienting its work toward change and quality improvement.

Experiences from Norway's agency for quality assurance, NOKUT

All higher education institutions in Norway are required by law to have an approved system of quality assurance in order to be accredited. The law specifies that all aspects of educational quality are to be covered and makes additional specifications too detailed to go into here.

The Norwegian national agency for quality assurance, NOKUT, is charged with auditing and approving each institution's quality assurance system according to the following 10 criteria (somewhat shortened):

1. Quality work is an integral part of the institution's strategic work
2. The institution has clear objectives for its work on quality.
3. The quality work is linked to steering and management at all levels of the organization.
4. Quality work is organised in routines and measures that ensure broad participation, with defined assignment of responsibility and authority for the various stages of the work.

5. The institution retrieves and processes data and evaluation information necessary to assess the quality of all study units and this information is accumulated at higher levels, including the top level of the institution.
6. The system includes procedures for analysis of the information and assessment of goal achievement.
7. The institution uses the results of work on quality as a basis for decisions and actions, with a view to ensuring and further developing academic quality.
8. Quality work contributes to resource management and priorities at the institution (human resources, infrastructure, service).
9. The system ensures that there is a focus on the total learning environment and that students are active participants in the work on academic quality and total learning environment.
10. An annual report on quality to the board of the institution gives a coherent overall assessment of educational quality at the institution and an overview of plans and measures for further work on quality.

The NOKUT criteria are challenging and strict in the sense that they require:

- That the quality system is integrated into the overall management regime and strategic planning.
- That routines for quality work are clearly described and responsibility is assigned.
- That assessments of educational quality are based on reliable information and analysis.
- That evaluations form “closed learning cycles” in which information and assessment are followed by decisions, actions and priorities for quality improvement.
- That quality and quality work are documented and integrated into reporting systems
- That students and other stakeholders participate in evaluations and quality work.

While NOKUT the guidelines are challenging and lay down specific *principles* for quality assurance systems, they give room for each institution to design and tailor the system to its own needs, management and institutional culture.

Experiences from UMB's quality assurance work

The Norwegian University of Life Sciences (UMB) was one of the first Norwegian higher education institutions to have its quality assurance system approved, early in 2004, as a prerequisite for applying for accreditation as a university. Even though the system is approved, it is still quite incomplete and under development. Experiences at UMB illustrate how an institution can approach quality assurance and some of the challenges met while developing the system.

Of course, it was important for UMB to follow the NOKUT guidelines and be sure that all of the required features were present in our QA system. Based on UMB's experiences we support the 10 NOKUT guidelines as a clear and useful set of guiding principles, at least in the Norwegian setting.

Each institution will have its own approach to implementing national and international guidelines for quality assurance. The approach at UMB was to define the structure of the system and then begin to define and implement a few of the most important quality assurance activities. The following points illustrate important features or principles of UMB's approach. Some of these points may also be of interest to other institutions as they develop their quality assurance systems and a quality culture.

1. Involvement of leadership at all levels

Quality assurance is a sensitive issue as it involves evaluation of how people do their jobs and whether and how they could be more effective. For the system to have legitimacy in the organisation, the top leadership of the university must therefore clearly communicate and stand up for the importance of having such a system, being open and self-critical and continually working to improve quality. The heads of faculties, departments, etc. must also be enlisted. They will, in turn, need to engage those who are actually responsible for delivering services (teachers, librarians, administrators, technicians, maintenance people, etc.). While standards should be set at a central level, the “grass roots” must be involved in describing how various tasks are carried out and for developing routines for evaluation and improvement work.

Coupling strong leadership of the process with wide involvement of those actually doing the work of delivering services to students will help ensure that the quality system will actually be used and produce results.

2. Systematic participation by students

In Norwegian universities, students are strongly represented by law in all decision-making bodies. In addition, at UMB students are always included as partners in committees, tasks forces, strategy development groups, evaluations, etc. Student representatives also meet regularly with the university leadership to discuss student affairs.

Active participation by students ensures direct input about their experiences as students. It also ensures that the quality work is followed up all the way to its end point of finding effective solutions. UMB has very positive experience with involving students as full partners in all development work, and strongly recommends that this approach be adopted.

3. Clear definition of the scope and areas to be included in the system

UMB defined 14 “Quality areas” and a number of key elements under each area that were to be quality-assured. The focus was on the student’s experiences from prospective student to graduate.

4. Description of quality assurance activities

Each evaluation activity was defined and responsibilities and procedures specified in a standard form. Each evaluation activity had to be part of a “closed loop”- that is, the routines need to specify how information gathered and analysis is to be *followed up by improvement measures, documentation and reporting.*

It was important to understand the difference between describing how a task is carried out (a work routine) and a routine for quality assurance of that same task². The quality assurance routine is a process that documents quality, detects quality that doesn’t meet set standards and ensures that correctional measures are taken.

² An example of a work routine would be a description of “how new foreign students are met” in the first week at the university. Quality assurance of this same function would involve defining standards for the services offered and periodic evaluation by the students as to whether the standards were met (whether their needs were met, whether the information was clear and sufficient, etc.). To make a “closed loop,” the quality assurance activity always includes a follow-up phase clarifying how the evaluations are followed up with improvement measures, who is responsible and how the work is to be reported.

5. Effective use of information technology

The QA system involves many documents and routines as well as links and background information. It was useful to make a web-presentation that gave a systematic overview of the system and had search function and archives. If the system is to be well-received in the organisation it should be user-friendly, with all documents and procedures readily available to the users.

6. Indicator set and annual report on quality

The annual quality report is produced in November and covers all of the 14 quality areas in the quality assurance system. A summary of challenges/problem areas to be addressed is given. The annual quality report is presented to the university board.

For each quality area the report includes:

- key quality indicators from evaluations and databases
- analysis of the status of educational quality
- overview of improvement measures implemented during the year
- the status of the quality assurance system and its implementation.

7. Integration in the university's plan cycle

Quality improvement will often involve rather major measures to improve teaching or academic competence among the teachers, the physical facilities, psychosocial learning environment, student guidance and support services, etc. It is therefore of central importance that the overview of challenges/problem areas presented in the annual quality report be followed up by improvement measures at various levels of management, not least in the university's annual plan and budget.

8. Student course evaluations

The first systematic evaluation activity in UMBs quality assurance system was a student course evaluation. The student government lobbied strongly for this system and it has been implemented since 2002. All students evaluate all courses taken using an electronic questionnaire with about 30 questions plus space for comments. Students and faculty have developed the questionnaire together and it is administered from the central administration. While the numerical data are public, the written responses are treated confidentially. The academic departments are required to analyse and follow up the results of the student course evaluations.

By following the results of these evaluations over 3 years we can see that some areas which were previously poorly rated by students have now improved, for example use of information technology in teaching and rooms for group work. The improvement in these and other areas is due to the institution's response to student dissatisfaction at the central level and especially at the academic department level. We know that the departments have implemented many different kinds of measures to improve teaching and reward good teaching as a result of the course evaluations. Many of the evaluation results are very positive, and this is a great morale booster and important recognition for the many dedicated and good teachers on UMBs staff.

9. External programme evaluations

A second main evaluation activity has been external evaluation of UMBs degree programmes. The university board has approved a framework in which all degree programmes are to be evaluated on a 5-year cycle. Following a self-evaluation, external evaluation committees with at least 1 international member come to campus and conduct their own interviews and investigations. Their report provides a basis for programme revision and improvement.

UMB has evaluated 4 master programmes so far and is evaluating 10 more bachelor and master programmes in 2005. Experience so far has been very positive. Bringing highly qualified external experts in to discuss and comment on our programmes is a very effective way of stimulating new ideas about content and teaching methods. As with the course evaluations, the academic departments are required to address the comments of the external evaluation committee and make an action plan for improvement.

10. Other evaluations

Numerous other evaluations have also been conducted with productive results, for example:

- Student guidance
- Marketing and information
- Introduction for new students
- Intensive block teaching period
- Student co-operative services
- Alumni employment
- Student standard of living

UMB's experience is that such evaluations give valuable information and lead to quality improvement. However, such questionnaires sent out to students should be co-ordinated and limited. Students may get tired of answering questionnaires, especially if the same questions are asked twice by two different people. Students are normally involved in formulating the questionnaires.

11. Committee for the total learning environment

UMB established a committee for the total learning environment in 2003 as a response to requirements in the new Norwegian higher education act. This committee handles issues regarding the psychosocial learning environment, improvement of the physical learning facilities, and other student affairs not directly related to the teaching programmes. The committee is consulted in affairs related to new or restored buildings, adaptation of facilities for access for the handicapped, etc. Experience so far with this new body is that it has been able to put focus on the students' total learning environment more forcefully than was previously possible. There are many important issues in this area, and the committee has really just begun its work.

In summary

The quality assurance system of the Norwegian University of Life Sciences has only been operating for 1 year and many parts of the system need to be further developed. However, it is already possible to find improvement in several educational quality indicators. If an institution such as UMB can identify its own strengths and weaknesses, prioritize and create changes that will give the students a better learning experience, it is on the road to success. A well-developed quality assurance system can be a guarantee that the institution will reach its development objectives.