

The Quality Assurance System for Higher Education in Norway - with Particular Reference to the Library Services

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INTRODUCTION

Since the Pan-European Bologna Declaration of 1999, which introduced a qualitative improving programme for higher education in Europe, governments in many countries have initiated significant university reforms. In Norway the reforms were introduced fully in the academic year 2003-2004. This paper identifies the reforms and tries to relate them to the ideologies of new public management, globalization and efficiency.

The concept of quality in education will be discussed, especially relating to a new independent government body, the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (Nasjonalt organ for kvalitet i utdanningen, or NOKUT), established by Parliament in 2002; the organization commenced its activities in January 2003. Through the evaluation of quality assurance systems for universities and colleges, and the accreditation of subject-related evaluation to assess whether or not an institute of higher education and/or the studies offered by the institute fulfil a given set of standards, NOKUT has the right to determine whether an institute should be categorized as an accredited college, specialized university or university - or whether it has to suspend or cease its activities.

The main purpose of this paper is to discuss what role library services play in NOKUT's quality assurance and accreditation systems - and not least, what role they could play. What kind of quality do the libraries offer, how can we determine whether the quality is as good as or better than before, and how can we be sure that we are improving the right services in the library? What role should libraries play in the universities' quality improvement programmes?

Is it possible to measure improvements in quality and the effect of different forms of enterprise in the library? In this lecture I shall discuss possibilities for improving library services in higher education and research, taking as my starting-point the incentive and quality assurance systems that have been introduced to the university and college system in Norway over the past few years. Quality assurance systems have been adopted in teaching and research. The question is whether these methods are transferable to library services, or whether other systems exist for the verifiable measurement of improvements here.

The starting-point here is that library services at universities and colleges essentially exist to improve the quality of studying and research results. Fundamentally, this means that the quality of the library services has to be evaluated using results that do not have a direct cause and effect relationship with what can be measured; at the same time, what can be measured also has definitive causes other than the quality of the library services.

QUALITY REFORM AND NOKUT

From the academic year 2003-2004 onwards, education policy reform has been introduced in Norway in a widespread fashion to meet the demands for quality in higher education, including the international standardization of courses of study and grading structures, better tutoring for all students and more student-active forms of teaching, involving the writing of assignments throughout the academic year. One enduring school of thought is that the international standardization of higher education will enhance mobility and thus inspirations across national borders. With such a perspective, however, it is also easy to perceive higher education as a commodity in the free, international market, to which the national and institutional systems must adapt themselves. Combined with the incentives of unit price funding of research publications with a high impact factor and economic pay-off for exams taken, universities and colleges are finding themselves in an internal competitive relationship with one another as part of a national economic zero-sum game. An increased volume of production is becoming an important means for an individual institution to win the game. Quality reform, in other words, entails clear elements of new public management measures, such as exposure to competition, internal pricing, unit price funding, incentives and cost/benefit analysis, as well as globalization ideology.

In addition to incentive and production factors, the quality control of education programmes and education institutions will take place through the independent government body NOKUT. Through the evaluation of quality assurance systems for universities and colleges, and the accreditation of subject-related evaluation to assess whether or not an institute of higher education and/or the studies offered by the institute fulfil a given set of standards, NOKUT has the right to determine whether an institute should be categorized as an accredited college, specialized university or university - or whether it has to suspend or cease its activities.

The medicine prescribed is a mixture of competition, control and X-raying, and an accompanying documentation bureaucracy. This is hitting academia just as hard as every other activity with a major element of public funding. In fact, it may be hitting even harder here, because at the same time it is challenging the education world's self-perception as a hard-working and low-paid phalanx in the service of the public good, driven by their academic interest. And since this is in fact - broadly speaking - true, the loss of faith is even harder to swallow.

Overall, the Anglo-American world has led the field in words and deeds: here, at an early stage, there was talk of large-scale operation, as well as autonomy and competition, and while the USA had its accreditation, in the UK quality assurance was introduced long before "kvalitetssikring" started to trip off the tongue in academic circles in Norway. But now Norway has all that as well - in accordance with the pan-European Bologna Declaration, even though Norway is not a member of the European Union.

According to prevailing management thinking, there is a clear connection between expanded institutional autonomy, increased use of economic incentives, stronger internal management and the new forms of quality assurance. An external free status creates new demands for both external regulation and increased discipline within the institutions. The growing rhetoric of quality has its place in this picture, not least as a legitimization of the reforms.

WEAKNESSES IN THE QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

The quality audit is a basic, cyclical element in the Norwegian system of external quality assurance. It refers to a legal demand that all accredited institutions of higher education must have an internal quality assurance system for educational activities that meets certain quality criteria. The institutions must have their quality assurance system and the quality of their work evaluated at least every six years.

NOKUT's quality assurance system builds on an auditing system: in other words, the quality of education is not measured directly, but by evaluating the actual system used for the quality assurance of the education. There can be a weakness in this method, in that it is indirect and thus presupposes conformity between the quality of the education and the work of the quality assurance system. The underlying expression of quality may be motivated - or appear - to advance the effectiveness, state control over and management of institutes of higher education. The quality standards that NOKUT has set for both the evaluation of quality assurance systems and the accreditation of institutions and programmes of study may, for example, not be able to identify the actual quality of the teaching offered, or identify the quality and relevance of the examination assignments given to the students.

Internal and external evaluations and measures of control thus have little real meaning with regard to the actual content of the studies and teaching activities. Ensuring, for example, that teaching is based on up to date research, or that the evaluation is relevant with regard to the academic content, is not something that can be encompassed by the audit quality assurance system for which NOKUT is responsible.

QUALITY ASSURANCE OF LIBRARY SERVICES

NOKUT's quality assurance system is specifically designed to reveal indications of variance. As applied to library services the system could, for example, reveal a poor service for users of the library, or register gaps in the collection or in the supply of required information. NOKUT's guidelines for the quality assurance of library services appear old-fashioned. For example, it is laid down in the criteria for accreditation as a university that the institute must have a satisfactory academic library in the form of suitable locations with workplaces, modern technology and competent staff, as well as having easily accessible relevant digital and analogue collections and/or services for students and academic staff. There is little, if any focus on new services, for example digital institutional open-access publications, information literacy teaching or learning centres.

If it is to be possible to measure and evaluate quality in connection with library services, it is first necessary to identify which aspects are included in the concept of quality. In modern library administration, the concept of quality is closely linked to service and service production. Product-based quality (based on specification criteria), user-based quality (which is dependent on the library users' subjective experience of their needs being met) and value-based quality (which is related to cost-benefit assessments of resource input in service production, according to which library products are being provided) are universally felt to be important for measuring the quality of library services. Other quality types, such as absolute quality - irrespective of time- and space-related considerations - and standard-oriented quality, are product-related specification demands.

The Ministry's incentive criteria for the number of study points awarded and the number of publications written may easily be applied to product-based library quality relating to objective, measurable quantities such as, for example, the number of visitors to the library, the number of books in the collection and the number of loans. If, for example, one builds on ISO standards as incentive criteria in libraries, this could result in it becoming more important to score on ISO criteria concerning the length of shelving, or the number of users per square metre, or the number of staff in the library with academic competence as a percentage of the total number of staff, or the number of online journals in relation to paper-based journals, rather than offering a good service. Such criteria would seem to hinder quality development in the form of the reorganization of new services. Furthermore, the problem with the quality of library services is greatest from the point of view that library services are not an aim in themselves, or at any rate not in relation to formal standard criteria, but a means to improve the quality of study for students and, ideally, the overall quality of research. Standard-oriented quality may have its place, however, if it is linked to service statements concerning library services such as, for example, regulated waiting times for books held in the library store, a response guarantee within a specified time regarding external loans, and so on.

The most important criteria for the quality of library services must be to be able to measure user satisfaction in order to be able to identify the potential for improvement. It is also expected that something should be known about the quality of actual user behaviour, as well as being able to identify how the quality of this behaviour might be improved. In conjunction with quality improvement it is necessary to use value-based quality criteria, to the extent that the costs of quality improvement in this area must be assessed from the resource costs associated with this improvement. It does not necessarily follow that it will be appropriate to prioritize an improvement in quality in areas where good quality already exists. It may be a best cost benefit calculation to raise the quality in areas that have either been absent or a low priority within the quality report on the library. In addition, it is important that the university or college should have a quality assurance system to ensure that the library is drawn in with regard to establishing new subjects or changes in existing study plans, as well as ensuring the development of new service offers that contribute to the improvement of the quality of study and research.

A quality assurance system is dependent on measuring the right type of quality if it is to be of any interest as an instrument of improvement. If NOKUT's quality assurance system is used principally to measure product-based or standard-oriented quality, it is of little help if quality improvement can only be evaluated within user-based or absolute quality-based forms of quality assurance.

In today's information world, it is not enough merely to know something: you also have to be able to account for how you know it. As a consequence, the majority of university and college libraries have introduced information literacy training. This new subject generally consists of four components:

1. tuition in strategies for information searches in both analogue and digital media,
2. quality assurance information through training in source review,
3. training in reference systems and techniques for academic writing,
4. training in ethical aspects of the use of others' research results and publications

If information literacy is to be developed as an academic discipline in its own right, it will be necessary to evaluate it on the same premise as other academic disciplines. In this respect, no audit quality assurance system is of any particular use. Academic quality has always been the problem in relation to quality measurement, in that a considerable amount - probably the most important component - can only be understood and evaluated from intuition, knowledge, experience and professionalism and this quality can only be recognized from above. A concrete challenge, which at present has only provisory solutions, is how, within academic publishing, we can develop a satisfactory reference system for internet resources. This is currently a major problem throughout the academic world. Within the

framework of information literacy, we have a particular responsibility to seek solutions. My guess is that solutions must build on types of thinking other than the traditional ones we know with reference to paper-based publications.

Developing learning centres is one of the answers to teaching environments being better prepared for students' own activities. Project work and problem-based learning (PBL) presuppose that an arena is to be found which has good access to information resources, both paper-based and digital. Similarly, learning centres must make arrangements for group work. There is, however, little reason to focus on learning centres if the forms of teaching continue to be general lectures on subjects, based on syllabus lists and course books, and a style of examination based on the recall of factual knowledge, such as multiple choice tests.

The challenge is to construct a quality assurance system that not only evaluates examination styles and the quality of library services in their own right, but which also shows how these match one another, and how the quality of the teaching environment as a whole is dependent on these different components complementing one another. Value-based quality indicators that measure cost benefits will have a certain relevance in measuring the worth of investing in library services in relation to examination styles; ditto, user-based quality indicators.

Allocating funds according to the number of publications, based on impact factors, is complex. One aspect involved is that an incentive system building on the rating of publications will lead to undesirable price increases in publications. This is particularly true of journals. Another aspect of publication is its accessibility to the greatest number of people. Academic publication presupposes that as many people as possible can make use of the results and at the same time that as many people as possible will be able to carry out an assessment of them. No form of publication provides better access to academic publications than digital open-access publications. If the open-access system is to achieve widespread acceptance in Norway, however, we are dependent on publishing incentives being turned around, from being merely impact factor-related to providing funding according to the publication's accessibility to the greatest number of people. An article in an expensive journal to which only a few libraries have the means to subscribe would therefore provide little incentive means (rather than the considerable amount it currently earns), whereas a quality-assured, peer-reviewed open-access publication would provide large-scale incentive funding for its potential accessibility to the whole world (rather than the small amount that it currently earns). A quality assurance system that influences a swing in the right direction towards such a publication system should be welcomed.

If the libraries of higher education and research institutions are to fulfil their role, there is no doubt that in order for the quality assurance system to contribute to improvements it needs to reveal two significant characteristics of library services. In the first place, library services need to be developed on the users' premises. This requires the development of professional user surveys focusing on users' needs and user satisfaction. In this context it is also necessary to develop user competence. Nothing is more difficult than satisfying highly competent users. It may be just as important to raise the quality of user behaviour as to raise the quality of the services themselves. Secondly, the library sector is in a process of major development. This presupposes that the quality assurance system has to reveal the need for continual change in the library's assignments and function. Focusing too strongly on product-based or standard-oriented quality indicators would be the kiss of death. This could easily lead to the shutting-down of services and products in order to avoid getting a low score on indicators that will automatically award a bad rate of funding if products and services are changed.

We, as leaders, face a major challenge in ensuring that work relating to quality is strongly anchored in library management. The trend in libraries, as in academia in general, has traditionally defended the principle of academic-administrative management. In reality, however, it may often be difficult to keep an eye on specifically academic aspects of management. It generally consists of mostly strategic and administrative management, without specifically academic means. Depending on what the institutes does with it, the new quality assurance system could become another instrument of stronger administrative management. But the development of an academically justifiable quality assurance system in the library could also offer the unique possibility of providing the concept of academic leadership with increased meaning.

WEB SITES REFERRED TO IN THE TEXT

Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999. http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/bologna_declaration.pdf

NOKUT - Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education. <http://www.nokut.no/sw335.asp>