QUALITY AUDIT IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES

Report prepared for the Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education (NOQA)

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June 2007

NOQA
Nordic Quality Assurance

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Design: The Swedish National Agency's Information Department, Stockholm, June 2007

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Introduction

For well over a decade now, the national quality assurance agencies in the five Nordic countries, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, have met annually to exchange information and experiences. A formalised network, the Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education (NOQA), was established in 2003. One of the major tasks is to pursue, each year, a joint project of common concern on an aspect of quality assurance of higher education, resulting in a report published on the NOQA website[1]. This year we have taken a look at quality audit in the Nordic countries in order to compare and analyse the role of audit in the national quality assurance systems, methodologies and findings and effects, where this has been possible.

The project has been led by the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (HSV) and carried out by a working group consisting of:

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The project started in October 2006 and has generated five country reports on audit processes. They have served as input for the project and provided the basic information for this report. Some of them are available on the websites of the individual agencies. The project group has met on five occasions to discuss the project and successive versions of the report. Comments from the annual network meeting in Stockholm in May 2007 have also been taken into account for this final version.

Stockholm June 2007

Staffan Wahlén

1. www.noqa.net

Summary

Quality audit of higher education institutions may be defined as a process for checking that procedures are in place to in higher education institutions to assure and improve quality, integrity or standards of provision and outcomes.

The role of audit in the Nordic national quality assurance systems has varied over the years. In Sweden it has been reintroduced, and is now one of four or five different methods, estimated to account for about one-third of the total evaluation budget. In Norway and Finland it is now playing a major role in conjunction with an accreditation system, and may be seen as the chief method of quality assurance. Denmark has introduced the method quite recently. Iceland is now establishing a system of accreditation which includes audit.

The use of audit for the purpose of control as in Iceland, Norway, and to a slightly lesser extent in Finland and Sweden resembles the development in several other countries in Europe. Like in Denmark, where audit is more enhancement-oriented, it very distinctly devolves the responsibility for quality to the institutions, but makes it mandatory for institutions to have a functioning quality assurance system and sanctions may even be imposed if it is not acceptable.

In all five Nordic countries it is the quality assurance system as such and its implementation that are the object of evaluation, i.e. objectives, documentation, evaluation and general acceptance and participation in quality work, although the Sweden now also stresses the documentation of output, outcomes and impact of systematic quality work.

Audit is only one of several different evaluation methods. The many approaches may be seen as a burden on both higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies. However, the different methods also supplement each other in various ways. In Norway auditors may discover either weaknesses or strengths that may warrant further investigation and result in revision of accreditation. Similar developments may be seen in the other countries.

The general audit methodology in the Nordic countries is based on the principles of the European Standards and Guidelines and there are no major differences among the countries. A self-evaluation conducted by the institution is followed by a site visit of external experts who prepare a report for the agency in question. In Norway and Finland the self-evaluation process and report are replaced by existing material (annual reports etc.) on institutional quality work. In some of the countries, the agency makes a decision on the basis of the report, which may result in accreditation or a re-audit after a certain amount of time. Judgements are based on pre-defined criteria relating to quality work.

Expert panels consist of academics with experience of leadership in higher education and sometimes also subject area specialists. International presence on panels is important. All countries have Nordic experts and some also recruit experts from other countries. The stakeholder and student perspectives are emphasised through their presence on panels and as interviewees.

The five countries are at different stages of development of institutional quality work and of audit as a method of evaluation. In Denmark quality work has not yet become a tool for continuous improvement and auditors emphasise the role of managements to lead further development. In Finland there is agreement that the audit process has helped to improve quality assurance of basic operations. In Norway, too, the exercise has been found useful for further development, but auditors have found deficiencies in the follow-up of internal evaluations and feedback to students. Broad participation in quality work is another area for improvement. Sweden reports that leadership and organisation of quality work have developed, as well as policy and strategy formulation and follow-up, but that the quality cycle (planning – implementing – follow-up – evaluating – new planning) as a strategic instrument was undeveloped in many cases.

Finally it is remarked that external quality assurance is important but that the costs and the efforts involved for institutions and quality assurance agencies must be reasonable and that the main responsibility for the quality of provision must always stay with the provider. Audit is one method that takes these two demands into account.

Background

Among the many things initiated as a result of the Bologna process is the European harmonisation of quality assurance in higher education. One of the main principles of this process is that higher education institutions are self-regulating, autonomous units, accountable for the quality of their own provision of teaching and research. In this context, both internal and external quality assurance has been seen as important elements in the development of the European Higher Education Area. Thus, as part of the Bologna process the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), in cooperation with the European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) and the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB) was commissioned, at the 2003 meeting of European Ministers of Education in Berlin, to develop standards and guidelines for quality assurance of both institutions and quality assurance agencies. Such a document[2] was published in 2005 and approved by the ministers at their meeting in Bergen in the same year. It is a living document, likely to be revised over the next few years[3], but it nevertheless established a number of important points upon which both institutions and agencies agree.

Some of these points refer to the responsibility of institutions both for quality and for quality assurance and that external evaluation should take this into account. As a consequence it is natural that quality assurance agencies should see institutional audit as a method of quality assurance. A growing number have introduced or reintroduced quality audit, among them all the five Nordic countries.

What is quality audit?

Quality audit in the context of higher education may be defined as a process for checking that procedures are in place to assure and improve quality, integrity or standards of provision and outcomes[4]. It may apply to all levels of higher education institutions, from subjects, departments and faculties to institutions. In the context of this report, we use the term to refer to evaluation of institutional systems of quality assurance and enhancement.

Generally, the Nordic quality assurance agencies concur with the above definition, as far as the objective of evaluation is concerned. They all agree that *systems* should be in place in institutions for the assurance and development of quality.

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2. ENQA (2005).
3. An attempt to interpret and problematise the Standards and Guidelines was a Nordic project resulting in a report: ENQA (2007).
4. Definition from Harvey (2005).

The Nordic agencies do not impose a particular quality system but the one in place should be fit for purpose and be both efficient and effective. However, a quality system should meet certain requirements: For example, it should be capable of revealing poor quality; it should contain routines for setting goals, for evaluation at various levels and follow-up of results of evaluations; it should contain routines for establishing new provision and continuous assurance and improvement of existing provision. The purpose of audits is then to provide an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of such systems and provide recommendations for improvement.

Each country has, however, its own angle, which reflects its particular emphasis and purpose. For example, there is a difference between the Danish approach stressing enhancement, and those of Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden (from 2007) putting more emphasis on control and in Norway also to accreditation of subjects and programmes and in Iceland to accreditation of fields of study.

Finally, the Nordic agencies also assume that institutional quality work should ideally follow the "quality cycle", i.e. is a continuous circular process beginning with stating objectives and plans, followed by implementation, analysis and revision, leading to the establishment of new objectives and plans, etc.

The Agencies and their tasks

This chapter presents the Nordic agencies participating in the project and the role played by audit in their quality assurance systems. In all the systems quality audit is one of several quality assurance methods used alongside, or in conjunction with, programme and subject assessment and other forms of evaluation. It may also inform, in various ways, the accreditation of subjects, programmes, faculties and institutions

EVA

The Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA)[5] is an independent institution established by the government. Since 2000 it has had the task to evaluate the whole educational system in Denmark, not only higher education. In the area of higher education EVA also conducts accreditation of programmes, e.g. vocational bachelor, and institutions, e.g. university colleges.

Another core function of EVA is to develop methods and tools for quality assurance and development and to disseminate knowledge and information on the subject. Finally, EVA conducts a range of income generating activities, such as benchmarking, accreditation, evaluation and development projects for institutions and authorities.

After a long experience of mainly programme and subject assessment, starting in 1992, EVA introduced auditing in 2003, along with continued assessment of programmes and subjects, and between 2003 and 2005 conducted four audit projects mainly based on a fitness-for purpose approach. In 2006 a new audit concept based on pre-defined criteria was developed. An agreement was reached between EVA and the Danish universities that all universities should be audited within a given period. However, the conditions for EVA's activities in the university area changed in 2007, and after recent reforms the Institute no longer holds the mandate nor receives the funding to initiate projects in the university area. Current audit processes have, therefore, been interrupted. Thus, from now on, EVA will offer to conduct audits at the universities' own expense. However, in the area of university colleges, where EVA's position has not changed, and the Institute is presently developing a concept for institutional audit for these institutions.

5. www.eva.dk

FINHEEC

The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC)[6], established in 1996, is an independent expert body of the Ministry of Education assisting universities, polytechnics, and the Ministry in matters relating to evaluation. FINHEEC evaluations fall into four categories: 1) institutional evaluations (e.g. the audits); 2) programme evaluations; 3) evaluations relating to national higher education policy objectives and other thematic evaluations; and 4) evaluation and registration (accreditation) of professional courses offered by higher education institutions.

In addition to these, the Ministry of Education commissions evaluations before designating Centres of Excellence in Education. FINHEEC also provides fee-charging services, for example evaluations of institutions that are not operating under the Ministry of Education.

In its operations, FINHEEC has always emphasised the principle of enhancement-led evaluation. This means that the evaluations produce information about higher education and its quality which can be used in institutional development. This information is also used by the Ministry of Education, for example, in performance-steering and decision-making.

Since 2004 FINHEEC has been developing an audit procedure focusing on the quality assurance systems of higher education institutions. The aim is that in 2011 all the quality assurance systems of the Finnish institutions will have been audited.

Iceland[7]

Quality assurance of higher education in Iceland is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. A special unit within the Ministry has been responsible for the evaluation of institutions. The Ministry recruits national and international experts to conduct audits of departments or institutions.

In 2006, a new law has come into effect, introducing accreditation of all fields of study in higher education institutions. Initial accreditation of HEI's will be followed up by external evaluations, which include a quality audit.

Thus, after an initial accreditation exercise, institutions can apply for an accreditation of PhD programmes in fields of study that have already been granted accreditation for undergraduate and masters programmes. From 2008 onwards departments, whole institutions or even whole disciplines at Icelandic higher education institutions will be audited in cycles in accordance with a three-year plan, set by the Minister of Education. The objective of the audit that will follow the accreditation is twofold. First, its goal is to make sure that

6. www.finheec.fi
7. www.mrn.stjr.is

the basis for accreditation is still in place, and second, the audit has an aspect of enhancement.

NOKUT

The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT)[8] is an independent public agency, established by law in 2003, with the task of carrying out external quality assurance of Norwegian higher education and tertiary vocational education by means of accreditation and evaluation. As the Norwegian ENIC-NARIC centre[9] NOKUT also considers applications for general recognition of foreign higher education qualifications.

Besides audit, NOKUT' s evaluation responsibilities include accreditation of institutions, accreditation of course provision, revision of previously granted accreditation and other evaluations to investigate the quality of Norwegian higher education including assessment of the quality of various disciplines or programmes. The last-mentioned activity may be carried out at the behest of the Ministry of Education. Audit, defined as evaluation of the institutions' systems for quality assurance, is central in that it affects all institutions providing higher education. Finally, NOKUT administers the Ministry of Education's prize avarded annually for outstanding quality work in higher education.

HSV

The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (HSV)[10] is a government agency established in 1995, entrusted with evaluation of higher education, higher education statistics, legal supervision, information to students and prospective students, research and policy advice and recognition of foreign qualifications.

The role of institutional quality audit in reviews carried out by HSV has varied over the years, since the introduction of national quality assurance in 1995. It was then the main form, but simultaneously, assessment of subjects and programmes of special interest took place as well as accreditation of professional programmes and masters programmes. From 2001, after two cycles, audits were replaced as the major form of national quality assurance by an extensive six-year programme of subject and programme assessment covering all provision leading up to a degree including Ph.D.

From 2007, there will be a new audit cycle, which will run parallel to a simplified subject and programme cycle. Accreditation of new professional programmes at all higher education institutions and of the new Bologna Master's

8. www.nokut.no
9. The ENIC Network (European Network of Information Centres) and the NARIC Network (National Academic Recognition Information Centres) deal with question of recognition of academic studies and degrees.
10. www.hsv.se

degree at university colleges will also take place, and a prize for excellence in higher education will be introduced. A pilot audit of a university college (Södertörn University College) is now in its final stages and will contribute to further methodological refinement.

Criteria, principles and formal consequences of audit[11]

The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ENQA 2005, henceforth referred to as *the European Standards and Guidelines*) state that "any formal decisions made as a result of an external quality assurance activity should be based on explicit published criteria that are applied consistently".

The use of the word *criterion* varies in the descriptions of the different Nordic countries. In Denmark and Norway it is used mainly in the sense of "reference points that invite reflection, discussion and commentary"[12], but which should be met, at least at a basic level, for the quality system to be acceptable. These reference points are termed "auditing targets" in Finland and "aspects" in Sweden. The term criterion in the latter two countries is reserved for expressing a particular *level* of performance that should be met. In this report the term criterion is used as in Denmark and Norway. It is expected that internal quality systems should live up to what is expressed by the criteria.

All the Nordic agencies are working towards bringing or have already brought their audit concepts into agreement with the European Standards and Guidelines. They are thus, explicitly or implicitly, incorporated into the agencies' audit criteria and targets.

The focus of audits and the criteria in Norway is on the system, its objectives, its acceptance among students and staff and the way in which it helps to develop a quality culture in the entire institution. It is understood that the system should include the collection of data and other information from internal evaluations, which should be analysed and used for decisions on internal resource allocation and prioritisations. The internal process of self-evaluation must include an annual report on quality to the institution's board.

Some of the Danish, Finnish and Swedish criteria are more specific and refer to particular elements of quality systems. For example, HSV's aspects include a series of quality factors which the other systems do not mention specifically, among them internationalisation, gender equality and social and ethnic diversity and among FINHEEC's targets and EVA's criteria we find staff development[13].

In Iceland the objectives of the quality assurance of both teaching and research in the higher education institutions are to ensure that the requirements for accreditation of the institutions are met, to ensure that the qualifica-

11. For lists of criteria used by the Nordic countries, see Appendix 1.
12. See ENQA (2006)
13. In the European Standards and Guidelines, part I, assurance of teacher quality is referred to as one of the important standards.

tion framework for higher education and the respective degrees is fulfilled, to improve the quality of teaching and research and to ensure the competitiveness of the institutions at international level.

How are criteria used?

In Denmark the criteria do not express minimum acceptable standards. Rather, they are statements about a mature and well-developed system for quality assurance and development. Each criterion should be reported on in the self-evaluation report. And in the final audit report the panel will give its assessment of how the university meets each criterion. However, the assessment and the audit report will focus on how and to what extent the university's quality work fulfils the demands of the criteria, and not only on the more simplistic "if".

The overarching objective of quality audit in Norway, as interpreted on the basis of the criteria, is to assure and enhance the quality of studies at the higher education institutions. The regulations of the Norwegian act on higher education define what should be included in the HEI's quality assurance systems. It is expected that institutional quality systems should be able to identify good and poor quality, and thus provide a basis for positive change. The evaluation of the institutional quality assurance systems includes both the system's structure, the documentation it produces and the assessments of educational quality conducted by the institution itself.

In accordance with its regulations NOKUT refers in its audits to 10 criteria, prepared in consultation with the higher education sector. However, the documentation submitted to NOKUT and the panel is not meant to answer explicitly these given criteria. Instead it must give a realistic picture of the institution's current work on quality and its quality assurance system. However, the reports always analyse the institutional quality assurance systems according to the criteria. The panel is required to provide clear advice on whether the quality assurance system as a whole should be approved or not, with regard to NOKUT's criteria and the regulations of the Act relating to universities and colleges.

In Iceland the focus is on the compliance with the higher education act both with regard to internal quality systems and, among other things, administration and organisation, organisation of teaching and research, staff qualification requirements, admission requirements and students' rights and obligations. Further, expert panels are to report on expertise and competence in a particular field of study, cooperation and support of the university in the field of research, teaching staff and experts in any particular field. Also they will comment on special attention to fields of research and the status of fields of study and subdivisions in national and international comparison.

The criteria in both the former and the coming Swedish models largely resemble those in the other countries, but the new system also attempts to link quality plans and activities to results of a quality work in the sense of improved performance and long-term effects (e.g. employer satisfaction and

employment rates). Thus, the audit model requires institutions to conduct investigations and surveys and monitor progress in terms of output, outcome and impact to be able to demonstrate progress in terms of enhanced quality. This is a notoriously problematic area, needing further development. A direct cause – effect relationship between improved quality work and student performance is hard to prove.

Finland and Sweden are quite explicit in determining different levels of performance. In the Finnish model four levels are described for each criterion: absent, emerging, developing and advanced, and criteria are developed for each of them. The new Swedish system distinguishes three levels: initiated, under development and developed, assuming, on the basis of the two previous audit cycles, that the implementation of each aspect has been at least initiated. In neither of the two countries are the different criteria intended as 'grades' to be awarded for each aspect or target, but rather as indicators to facilitate the experts' discussion.

Formal consequences

In Nordic audits, the control/assurance element and the enhancement objective are both present. It is not a question of either – or, but a matter of degree. These perspectives are partly reflected in the formulation of the criteria applied, partly also in the formal consequences, if any, of the audit, or the use to which it is put.

There seems to be a shift of emphasis, however, which points in the direction of assurance. This is reflected in the formal consequences of audit results. Norway and Iceland apply formal sanctions on those institutions whose quality assurance systems are not up to standard.

Quality audits in Norway result in a judgement of the extent to which the system as a whole is satisfactory and indicate areas of development. If NOKUT finds fundamental deficiencies in the quality assurance system, the institution is granted a time limit of six months to rectify matters. NOKUT will then conduct a new audit. If the institutional quality assurance system fails approval again, the institution will lose its right to start or to apply for approval of *new* provision. After one year the institution may ask for a new audit. The audit panel may also advise NOKUT to initiate revision of accreditation already granted. Also, the Board of NOKUT may initiate such revision on the basis of the audit report itself.

In both Sweden and Finland, an incomplete or unsatisfactory quality assurance system will result in a re-audit, in Finland after two years, in Sweden after one year. Decisions on these matters are taken by FINHEEC in Finland on a 'pass – fail' basis, and, from 2007, by the Chancellor of the Swedish Universities (the Head of HSV) in Sweden, who will express either 'full confidence',

'confidence' or 'limited confidence'[14] in the quality assurance programme and its implementation. Re-audits will concentrate on the improvement measures proposed by the experts. In neither of the countries have re-audits taken place yet.

Although there are no formal consequences in Denmark, and only limited consequences in Finland and Sweden, a negative outcome of an audit is expected to have an impact on the reputation of an institution, and thus to affect indirectly e.g. external funding and student intake.

Remarks

All countries use predefined criteria reflecting the national quality assurance system in place and reflecting what is required of institutional quality work. They make these requirements clear and transparent to institutions as well as to experts. There is, however, a risk involved in applying the criteria too rigidly on the part of both institutions in their quality work and experts in their judgements, and thus to limit creativity and development in quality work. There is a clear awareness of this danger, which is discussed further in the final chapter Strengths, challenges and developments.

14. The exact wording of these decisions is still provisional.

Methodology

The experts

Academics

External assessment of research and teaching in higher education has a strong tradition of peer review. The aim of quality audit is, however, different, and the term peer is not quite adequate. The "peers" needed for evaluation do not participate on the basis of subject or discipline expertise, but rather on the basis of knowledge and an understanding of quality assurance (of higher education). An audit panel needs to include academics, but academic leaders and/or academics with a substantial quality assurance record rather than subject specialists since the focus is on quality work and not on the contents and teaching of subjects or programmes and because leadership is an important ingredient in successful quality assurance development.

The approach of the Nordic countries with regard to the selection of experts varies. Commonly, at least one panel member is recruited from academic management at institutional or faculty level, i.e. a rector or a dean.

In Iceland relevant academic expertise is a criterion for the selection of experts. This is partly due to the fact that audits in Iceland are conducted at field of study level. This is also true in Denmark in cases where audits are carried out at faculty level.

NOKUT requires that one panel member should have qualifications at the level of professor, but has not made relevant professional knowledge an explicit criterion. Occasionally, when the institution to be evaluated is a specialised university college it has been concerned with this matter, and NOKUT tries to recruit audit experts from different academic fields. FINHEEC ensures that the academic experts represent different higher education sectors (universities and polytechnics) and different staff groups (management and administration, teaching and research and support services).

Competence from the field of quality assurance or evaluation in higher education is regarded as important. In the Nordic countries at least one member of an audit panel usually has such competences. These persons have different backgrounds, such as researchers within the field of quality assurance, quality assurance managers from institutions etc.

International comparison is important. This requires experts from abroad. In Iceland, all quality evaluations are done in English with experts recruited from foreign countries. This is to get an international perspective and to ensure that a wide pool of experts is available for the task. In Finland and Denmark, institutions may choose between a domestic and an international audit group. Also, in Denmark and Norway there is a tradition of having at least one expert from one of the other Nordic countries. For practical (mainly

language) reasons this is also the case in Sweden, although attempts are made to find experts from other countries who have a working knowledge of a Scandinavian language.

Stakeholder, student and other perspectives

One reason for conducting external evaluation is the need for stakeholders, i.e. government, employers, students and the general tax-payer to be informed about the quality of higher education and on whether their money is well spent. This is why it is natural that they should be represented on panels, but also because they provide alternative, external perspectives on activities.

In all countries except Norway, the external stakeholder perspective has been emphasised, and it has been customary for one expert to come from outside the academic world. He or she may be a representative of employers in business and industry or of the community at large (civil service or local government).

Students are represented on audit panels. Those appointed have usually served on boards or committees of higher education institutions or other decision-making bodies. In Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden where there are national student unions, the student experts are nominated by these organisations, but appointed by the agencies.

Finally, it should be added that the Nordic countries have a strong tradition of gender equality and it is taken for granted that panels aim at having an equal representation of men and women.

Selection and appointment of audit experts

In Sweden, Finland[15] and, from 2006 in Norway, institutions may propose names of panel members, although it is the prerogative of the agencies to appoint any person who meets the requirements. In all countries the institutions under evaluation will be allowed to comment on the expert panel to ensure that there is no conflict of interests.

Traditionally panels conducting various external evaluations of higher education are appointed separately for every specific evaluation. The audit model has, however, raised the question of whether the same experts should conduct more than one evaluation. NOKUT has the most far-reaching practise amongst the Nordic countries in this respect. A group of auditors is appointed annually, and they normally stay with the task for three to four years. FINHEEC, appoints some of the experts for two or more audits.

The first audits conducted by EVA took their starting-point in the individual university, its characteristics and challenges and the audit panels' combined profiles varied accordingly. However, as the Danish audits now follow

15. FINHEEC has a register of the potential audit experts that have been proposed by the higher education institutions. However, the institution cannot propose the experts for its own audit panel.

predefined criteria, the experts' skills will differ to a lesser degree. Hence each expert may conduct several audits.

In the first two cycles of Swedish audits the experts were appointed separately for each evaluation, but several of them were, in fact, recruited several times. However, when starting the new cycle of audits, HSV will regard experts in a certain year as one group regardless of the number of institutions audited, and some of them will participate in two audits in one year in order to make comparison between institutions possible.

The role of project managers

In all countries, project managers are responsible, in some cases with the help of a project group, for the planning and organisation of the audit, including the recruitment of experts. With the exception of Iceland, project managers belong to the staff of the agencies.

The experts, who are formally appointed by the boards (or in Iceland the Ministry), are responsible for reports and commonly play a major role in their creation. But normally it is the project managers that function as secretaries. In Denmark, project managers are assisted in this task by students on temporary assignments, who take notes during the site visits and thus release the project manager from purely administrative chores, making it possible for him/her to assume a more active role.

With time, project managers acquire considerable knowledge and experience of quality assurance and unofficially they may adopt, at least partially, the role of expert. This is a development that needs to be further discussed, and which will have an impact both on how reviews are prepared and implemented.

Preparing the experts for the task

Experts are prepared for their task in several ways. They need to be informed about the context of evaluation, the specific audit methodology, their role as auditors and ethical concerns. Internationally recruited team members and stakeholders will also often require a briefing on the higher education system and the relevant legislation in the country.

Generally speaking, introduction sessions are fairly brief, and in Norway, where auditors are asked to be available for several years, there is little need for a thorough grinding. However, initially NOKUT arranged two seminars for its staff and the auditors, and continues to provide one seminar each year, in which they are updated on any new developments and experiences from audits conducted. Any newly recruited experts will be briefed more in detail.

EVA arranges a one-day panel meeting at which EVA's project group acquaints panel members with the audit method and its objectives as well as the roles and responsibilities of the panel and EVA, Special attention is paid to the site visit and the interview techniques to be used. The Danish higher edu-

cation system and the relevant legislation are introduced to guide the foreign panel members.

FINHEEC arranges training seminars over a day and a half, focusing on among other things: the responsibilities of the audit panel, the objectives, methods and criteria of audits, and the experiences of former auditors, auditing techniques and questions, analysis of audit materials and reporting and, finally, a discussion of the audit criteria based on team work.

In Sweden, a one-day seminar has been organised, concentrating on previous audit experiences and material (self-evaluation reports, audit reports) to illustrate methods and approach. A similar process is foreseen for the coming six-year cycle.

In Iceland, the members of the review team do not get any training due to the fact that Iceland only assigns foreign experts with a wide range of training in other countries.

The experts' roles and mandates

The chairs of the panels have special obligations besides chairing meetings. These include the preparation of the site visit, in some cases a pre-meeting with the management of the institution, and in most countries overseeing the process of writing the audit report. However, the audit experts are all responsible for the outcome, and naturally they are fully responsible for the conclusions and advice included in the reports.

The experts carry out their tasks within national models of external quality assurance and their work is regulated by mandates given by the agencies. Hence, the Nordic countries vary in respect of the expectations and the range of (academic) freedom of the audit experts.

In all countries the audit model defines the information and documentation the audit panels get from the institutions to be evaluated. However, the panels may request additional information when needed. There are predefined procedures with regard to the groups an audit panel must meet, but the panel may decide to meet with other groups or units as well. Typically, the agency and the audit panel work together to prepare the site visit.

In Finland the audit panels take an active part in the writing of the audit reports. The panel members divide the criteria of the audit among them and gather observations and evidence during the site visit. After the site visit the panel members write drafts for the report text based on their respective criteria at the visit and also their proposals for conclusions. These texts are the basis of the FINHEEC project manager's first draft of the audit report. The other Nordic countries provide the audit panel with a secretary (the project manager, or, in Iceland, a specially recruited project secretary) who writes drafts for the report on the basis of the audit panels' discussions and notes. In all countries the audit panels submit comments on draft versions before the report is finalised.

Feedback on processes and results is seen as important and for this reason feedback conferences are commonly arranged at which experts *and* representatives of institutions participate.

Thus, FINHEEC arranges a publication conference at the institution after the board has made its final decision with regard to the audit. The chair of the audit panel presents the results, and the representatives of FINHEEC (chair, secretary general and project manager/s) also take part and present the findings. NOKUT has annual conferences with the tertiary education sector, to which the audit experts are invited. The audit experts are frequently asked to contribute to seminars at the conference.

Self-evaluation

The self-evaluation concept

Self-evaluation and the preparation of a self-evaluation report are common procedures in academic evaluation, in some of the countries required by law. They give the unit under review the chance of looking at their quality systems and assessing what works and what could be improved. They also provide a sound basis for the work of the expert teams.

Self-evaluation is part of the Danish, Icelandic and Swedish audit process. In Finland and Norway, however, it is replaced by providing existing material from the institutions' own quality systems. One reason for this is that the mandatory quality assurance systems should produce annual reports on the quality of provision and the institutions' work on quality. Also using the documents that have been produced in the course of regular processes is considered to give a more realistic picture than a self-evaluation report made specifically for the audit. It puts less of a burden on universities and colleges under review, while at the same time requiring them to build up and develop regular systems which generate relevant material on the quality of their provision.

The period for self-evaluation (or similar initiatives, hereafter all referred to as self-evaluation) is from 3 to 4 months. At deadline the institution must submit the report and other material to the agency which then forwards it to the panel members. In Norway, the panel and NOKUT normally also get intra-web access to the institution's quality assurance system and data. Examples of quality reports from different organisational levels are required in order for the panel to be able to follow the audit trail from the institutional level to the faculty, the department and even to an individual study programme or a specific thematic course, in order to clarify the analysis of strengths and challenges and the measures taken to meet them.

The deadline for submission is from four (Finland) to twelve (Iceland) weeks before the site visit. The length of the Icelandic time span is due to the fact that the self-evaluation has to be translated into English.

Guidance to the higher education institutions

All the Nordic quality assurance organisations provide some kind of guidance or guidelines to the institutions in connection with the self-evaluation.

FINHEEC provides a comprehensive audit manual explaining quality assurance and the auditing concept and process and presenting the criteria for assessment. EVA provides institutions with a slightly less comprehensive document on the same subjects. This document is sent to the institution under review and shortly after presented at a launch seminar at the university with the participation of the top management of the university and EVA and with as many participants from the university as possible. The seminar is expected to call attention to the self-evaluation process in particular and to the importance of quality work in general and is also an opportunity to give information and clarification with regard to the audit project and thus meet or anticipate possible criticism.

In Iceland the institutions will be provided with guidelines from the Ministry of Education regarding the content and form of their self-evaluation report.

Representatives of agencies meet with the institutions early on in the process, and in Sweden and Finland the chair of the panel participates as well. The purpose is both to clarify the task and agree on special considerations.

The self-evaluation reports vary in length from 25 – 30 (Sweden) to 80 – 100 pages (Denmark). Iceland requires that they should include a summary of the main findings. In addition to the report proper all countries allow for appendices, and often more is submitted than is needed. It may be added that when self-evaluation proper is not required, it is more difficult to anticipate and limit the amount of documentation to be submitted.

In all countries the audit panel or the agency may ask the HEI for additional information before the site visit.

The contents of the self-evaluation report

Whether institutions are expected to submit self-evaluation reports proper or other already existing material, the information required by the agencies is quite similar. It should be both descriptive and analytical and provide evidence of how quality work is implemented and linked to institutional strategy. Ideally, it should give an account of the results quality work produces in various dimensions, address challenges that have been identified and suggest ways forward. Criteria for assessment are to be found in Appendix 1.

EVA asks the university to prepare a self-evaluation report written as an independent text. It should provide information on quality work for all aspects related to the education area (and research if included). It should contain adequate descriptions and nuanced reflections on the quality work as it is organised and planned, but just as important, how it is carried out in practice. The main points from central documents may be outlined in the report where relevant, and the full documents should be enclosed for substantiation.

FINHEEC asks for material that provides a sufficient information base for the auditors to assess the comprehensiveness, performance, transparency and effectiveness of the quality assurance system. The audit material must also outline the institution's organisation, describe the structure of the quality assurance system and its links with the management system and provide evidence of the performance of the system. Institutions are asked to write a short self-evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of their quality assurance system as a part of their audit material.

The institution is also expected to submit material to substantiate the performance of its quality assurance system, by providing evidence concerning each of the ten auditing targets. The material should indicate clearly which evidence relates to which target.

NOKUT expects the information and documentation generated by the institution's quality assurance system to have been analysed in an annual report to the institution's board. This information and the institution's use of it in its decision-making procedures form central elements in the audit panel's analysis. NOKUT asks for documentation which includes a detailed description of the quality assurance system, internal reports on quality, key-figures on educational quality used by the institution and important steering documents. Also, the documentation must show how the institution's work on educational quality is organised to ensure broad participation from students and staff and how it relates to the institution' strategy.

In Sweden, HSV has up until now asked for self-evaluation reports providing an account and analysis of processes designed to assure and improve the quality of all provision by the institution in relation to a number of aspects. These aspects were assumed to characterise good quality work in all institutions.

The coming audits will be more stringent with regard to aspects and criteria for assessment (in accordance with the European standards and guidelines for quality work). They will also ask for documentation of results in the form of output, outcome and impact. Furthermore, other material, such as key performance indicators and relevant extracts from other assessments and investigations will be placed at the disposal of the experts. The departments or other units selected for interviews will be asked to submit existing material to substantiate their quality work and its relationship to the quality process of the institutions as a whole, but not to submit self-evaluation reports.

The Icelandic self-evaluation reports are expected to contain a reasoned assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the study programmes, based upon precise data where applicable. Guidelines from the Ministry of Education include definitions of the statistical data required. Most of the items listed in the checklist are self-explanatory. But it should be stated that the quality of the study programme should always be evaluated in view of the overall policy of the relevant higher education institution, and the manner in which this policy is implemented in the policy of the relevant institution or faculty.

The organisation of study, study materials and courses should reflect and serve these objectives.

For each item of the self-evaluation report, a description and analysis of strengths and weaknesses are required, together with observations on how the institution/faculty intends to resolve the problems/faults pointed out. It should be pointed out that statements made in the self-evaluation do not have to be proved; it is sufficient to give examples and explain. More detailed data may be placed in appendices.

Site visit

Aim/purpose

The aims of the site visit resemble one another. It is a question of providing a clear and detailed picture of the institutional quality work and/or quality assurance system by supplementing the information and analysis given in the self-evaluations and/or other documentation. The site visit is intended to be as an interactive event contributing to the development of the quality assurance system and, if possible to find examples of good practice to disseminate to other universities and colleges.

Implementation

The site visits include dialogues between the panel and various groups in the institutions under review. The feedback from the evaluated institutions often points out that these meetings and dialogues are constructive and useful.

In all the Nordic countries the duration of the site visit is 2–5 days. It is normally quite a hectic event, which consists of a number of meetings and extensive interviews (Appendix 2). The total number of the persons interviewed at one single site visit may be as large as 200. The number of persons varies with the length of the visit and the size and complexity of the institution or faculty. Before the visit the higher education institution will receive instructions from the agency how to put together the different groups to be interviewed, how many persons the panel wants to meet in each group and any other elements that the site visit schedule should include. The visits usually begin and end with a meeting with the representatives of the leadership and management of the institution. Also the representatives (e.g. the teaching and administrative staff) of various units within the higher education institution and its departments are interviewed. Some of the most important meetings are with students. Often, though not in all the countries, panels also meet external stakeholders, e.g. business and working life representatives, if applicable, and external members of the institutional boards and graduates in order to collect views on the relevance of the institution's work on quality.

Time permitting, various facilities such as lecture theatres, laboratories and libraries may also be visited.

At the end of the visit the Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian and Swedish panels usually present their preliminary impressions to the leadership of the institution. The Danish panels don't give any assessments before their report, i.e. until they have gathered and analysed all the information and documentation. The project managers from all the Nordic agencies (and in Denmark also the student worker) take part in the site visits and take notes at the meetings as secretaries of the panel.

Institutions choose their representatives for the site visit meetings on the basis of the instructions, the audit visit programme and any other criteria established by the agency and the audit panel. However, the panel also reserves the right to meet any other persons or groups. Student interviewees are both student union representatives and "ordinary" students.

In Finland, Norway and Sweden, if need be, the auditors may break up into smaller groups in order to be able to get as full a picture of the institution as possible. The disadvantage of such an approach is that not all experts get the same picture of the institution, which may make it problematic to draw the correct conclusions.

It is important that all members of the expert team take an active part. The Danish reliance on students for note taking makes it possible for the project manager also to participate in the discussions. Student panel members may have a particular task to speak up on questions of student affairs, but their role is not restricted to that theme.

Audit questions

Practices for producing the audit questions for the site visit vary.

The self-evaluation report or other documentation from the university forms the basis for the site visit and the questions posed at the site visit. EVA's project group prepares a draft question guide which is adapted and approved by the panel in advance. In Finland, Norway and Sweden the panels formulate the audit questions for each audit.

In Finland the audit questions are prepared on the basis of auditing targets and criteria. The panel members divide the writing responsibilities before the site visit and they also produce questions on their own audit targets before the visit. The list of questions will be completed by the project manager from FINHEEC and checked by the panel before the site visit.

The report

In all the Nordic countries the quality audit like all national evaluations always results in a public report. In Iceland, the report largely follows the outline and the structure of the self-evaluation report. It is also common practice that the report should follow a relatively uniform structure and relate to criteria set up by the agency in each of the Nordic countries.

The structure of the report usually involves a description of the audit process, a description of the institution and its quality assurance system and its implementation and finally the result of the audit. The enhancement aspect requires recommendations on how the quality system should be improved. The report should, therefore, focus and elaborate both on how and to what extent the quality work is acceptable, and on what improvement is desirable or needed.

Although the reports are made public in the Nordic countries, often with a press release and press coverage, at least from the local media, it is common practice, and in Denmark required by law, for the higher education institution in question to get a chance to examine a draft of the report to check for factual errors and misunderstandings. Neither in Finland, Iceland, Norway nor Sweden does this draft include the panel's final conclusion.

The published reports in Finland, Norway and, from 2007, in Sweden include a decision taken by relevant agency as to the acceptability of the quality system and its implementation. In Finnish reports, there are both the proposal of the experts and the decision of FINHEEC with regard to the acceptability of the quality assurance system. These two may differ. In Norway and Iceland, also the audit panel's report to the agency (Ministry) must contain a decision on whether the institution's quality system is approved. In almost all cases the Agency (Ministry) will follow the panel's decision. Finally, Norwegian reports include a formal statement on the report by the evaluated institution.

Language

One of the advantages of evaluation is to be exposed to not only internal but also external views on one's activities. This is a reason why, for example, the Standards and Guidelines insist on the importance of stakeholder and international presence on evaluation panels.

International participation in quality reviews often imposes certain requirements on the implementation of various phases of the evaluation. For example, foreign experts need to be briefed thoroughly not only regarding evaluation methods but also about the (higher) education system in the country. The question of language will also have to be taken into account at various stages of the process. In the vast majority of cases the choice is between the native language(s) and English. This has been solved in the Nordic countries in different ways.

In Norway and Sweden evaluations, including audits, are carried out in the native language. In Finland[16] and Denmark the situation varies. Institutions are free to choose language, i.e. whether they want the audit to be conducted in English or in the native languages. Icelandic audits are carried out exclusively

16. In Finland Finnish-speaking higher education institutions mostly use Finnish and Swedish-speaking institutions have so far chosen Swedish.

in English due to the fact that the Icelandic academic community is small but also because an international perspective is regarded as necessary.

The choice of language has repercussions for all the stages of the audit. If English is chosen, the institutions will have to submit self-evaluations in English and other relevant material will have to be translated.

For the agencies the use of English is probably less of a burden. It means that information material, including relevant parts of higher education regulations, will have to be available in English. Also the final report will be in English. For all those involved in interviews English will be the language of discussions.

Conducting audits in a foreign language may lead to misunderstandings and loss of information. The vocabulary used may not be familiar to those involved, including students and external stakeholders who read the report. On the other hand, views from the outside world are essential for benchmarking, and the Nordic experience is, on the whole, positive in those cases where English has been used.

Remarks

The audit methodologies do not vary substantially. The European Standards and Guidelines have had a clear influence on the way audits are conducted.

Experts are selected on similar grounds, the main exception being Iceland, where audits are linked closely to evaluation of fields of study. Iceland is also the only one of the countries where international (also non-Nordic) panel members are a standard feature, whereas the other countries mostly rely on the participation of Nordic experts.

The main difference concerns the self-evaluation process and report, which are requirements in three of the countries, whereas Finland and Norway rely on existing material. The pros and cons of these procedures are discussed in the final chapter.

Findings and effects

This chapter discusses three areas: How have institutions perceived the legal demands for quality work? How have audits been received by auditors and institutions? And what have been the effects of audits? The accounts vary, but are based on gathering of data, except for Iceland, where there is yet limited experience of the audit model in the new quality assurance system. One general and very obvious conclusion is that the implementation and general acceptance of systematic quality work in higher education institutions takes time.

The five countries are at different stages of development of both quality work as a development strategy in institutions and the development of audit as a method of evaluation. Denmark has recently taken up the method. The same goes for Iceland. Audits have demonstrated that in Denmark institutions have not yet fully developed systematic quality work as a tool for continuous improvement. Further, auditors stress the role of managements to lead the development of quality work and clarify the advantages.

In Finland feedback collected from both auditors and institutions after ten audits, shows a positive picture, at least of the administration and implementation of the audits. Thus, there is general contentment on the part of the institutions with regard to information, audit material, the audit visit, criteria, and the reports. There is agreement that the process has helped to improve quality assurance of basic operations. Audit teams appreciated the model including the division of work within the team and use of the criteria and the shared responsibilities for writing. There were, however, certain reservations about the size of the material submitted by the institutions. A conclusion drawn also in Finland is that the role of management is crucial to the acceptance and success of institutional quality assurance.

In Norway an analysis of institutional statements on audit reports indicates that almost all audited institutions find the exercise useful for further development. Only three out of 35 institutions raise a discussion on the principles of the audit or the validity of the methodology. Institutions have developed quality assurance systems. Studies on the reports show, however, that there is room for improvement. For example, annual reports on educational quality do not form a sufficient basis for decision-making; there are deficiencies in the follow-up of evaluations, including student questionnaires (particularly course evaluations) and there is insufficient feedback to students. It is also difficult to achieve broad participation on the part of students and teachers. It is the impression, however, that students know how to use the quality assurance system with the help of their representatives or those responsible for quality assurance at the institutions, whenever necessary.

A study of the impact of the first two cycles of audits in Sweden shows that they have probably given rise to developments in leadership and organisation

of internal quality work. The same goes, to a slightly lesser extent, for e.g. student influence, policy and strategy evaluation and follow-up. It is worth noting, however, that the implementation of the quality cycle (setting objectives – implementing – evaluating – setting new objectives) had been achieved in only a minority of the institutions.

Denmark

The completed audits have shown that universities are generally making numerous and serious QA efforts, but that there continue to be challenges. It seems the main common challenges concern ensuring coherence and a systematic approach to quality work, as well as seeing the possibilities in using it to the university's own advantage.

The audits show that quality work often seems abstract and isolated compared to academic core activities. Among the scientific staff it is often regarded as something that takes valuable time from real (read: academic) work. In general there are strong ambitions to offer high-quality provision, but not everyone thinks that quality work is the way to do this. Thus, it is an important task for the universities to discuss and identify how the academic milieus and the individual teacher and researcher can benefit from it.

Furthermore, the audits have revealed that quality work is often established to meet external demands, as opposed to supporting internal objectives (of the university, faculty, department or individual employee). This results in experiences of quality work as irrelevant. In other cases, when it is based on individual ideas and efforts, it is much more likely to be perceived as relevant, but will then often take place without or outside a strategic framework, and will remain well-intentioned, but a more or less isolated project/arrangement.

The audits also point out that it may be a difficult task to collect the relevant knowledge and documentation – and not more than that – and to let this be available and accessible to the relevant decision makers as well as practitioners of the university when they need it. There seems to be a positive development underway in this field, where registration of information is conducted according to the needs of the users and external demands at the same time.

All things considered, the universities do not benefit fully from the resources that are being spent on quality work. And when those involved in it do not see the clear relevance and positive meaning/results of the efforts, this may easily result in lack of support for the quality work. The audit panels have stressed that it is very much a job for the management to head the process of developing an institution's quality work in order to signal its importance. And if it becomes more clear, what the advantages are, and who are responsible for carrying it out and following up, it is expected to enhance the universities' activities and results – instead of being regarded as a drain of resources from academic activities already under pressure.

Finland

The Finnish audit model will be under development up to 2007. From 2005 to 2007, each auditor and participating higher education institution will be requested to give feedback on the audit methods and criteria. The FINHEEC will use the feedback and the discussions with international partners in further developing its model for auditing quality assurance systems. As a rule, the audits are conducted at six-year intervals.

By the end of 2006 FINHEEC had carried out ten quality assurance audits. In December 2006 FINHEEC collected feedback from both higher education institutions and auditors concerning the audits. The following findings are based on the responses given by six higher education institutions and 22 auditors.

Feedback from audited higher education institutions

Preliminary information

According to all the responses, the information and instructions provided by FINHEEC were clear. The negotiations on audit contracts and the preliminary visits to higher education institutions (chair and secretary) were considered informative. They were thought to have especially great benefit in informing the whole staff about the upcoming audit.

Significance of the auditing process

All the higher education institutions thought that the auditing process was useful overall and improved their basic operations. The process clarified management and made the whole staff work together. Two institutions stated that they had immediately proceeded to initiate development recommended by the auditors. One institution which had undergone an international audit noted that it had needed and used a lot of translation services and that there had been some problems with the different meanings given to certain terms in the discussions, which were conducted in English

Auditors' responses

Most auditors felt that they had received sufficient preliminary information about the audit. On the whole, the content, extent and level of auditor training were considered good. The most useful content had been the concrete matters: audit targets and the criteria to be used; experiences from pilot auditing; audit techniques; and matters relating to the formulation of questions to be discussed during the site visit. The auditors appreciated the opportunity to hear the views of experts who had taken part in previous audits. It was also considered good practice to train more than one panel at the same time, because of the chance to share views and experiences.

As regards the preparation of the audit visit, the audit panels saw it vital to agree on the division of work between them and to study the audit material

in advance. The preparation of questions to be posed during the visit was a time-consuming phase. Some of the respondents expressed the wish that FINHEEC would provide a selection of questions in support of this work. Meetings arranged before the visit were considered crucial and it was suggested that sufficient time be reserved for meetings before and during the visit.

The structure of the site visit days and the choice of the targets to be visited were in general considered appropriate. Some respondents thought that the split of the panel into two groups was a good solution, helping to gain an overall picture of the functioning of the quality assurance system. Some thought the large number of persons interviewed was a problem and suggested a maximum limit to it.

Some auditors felt that the audit material was fairly large and suggested that a maximum number of pages be set. The audit panels hoped that FINHEEC would stress to the auditees that the audit material should give a good overall picture of their quality assurance systems. The auditors appreciated having been given all the material they had requested to see during audit visits.

The set of auditing criteria were generally deemed to function fairly well and to make for comparable audits. The set of criteria also facilitated the writing of the report. However, the auditors saw that the audit targets and audit criteria could do with some pruning and removal of certain overlaps. According to some respondents, the challenge is to get different audit panels to use the same scale in applying the criteria.

The auditors gave positive feedback about the jointly agreed skeleton structure of the report. The division of responsibilities in the writing and the joint scrutiny of the report were generally seen to be major strengths. Many respondents thought that drafting the descriptive part of the report before the audit visit was good practice and helped to gain more from the visit.

As a development proposal concerning the whole auditing process, auditors suggested that the aims of the audit should be more strongly stressed to the higher education institutions in advance. Further, the respective roles of the audit panel and FINHEEC and the decision-making chains should be made clearer to the auditors. All respondents pointed out the crucial role of the FINHEEC project managers for the success of the whole auditing process. All the feedback on their demanding work was to be commended. On the other hand, the auditors noted that it would be in the interest of the whole organisation (FINHEEC) if the secretariat's employment relation with FINHEEC were on a more permanent basis and if there were more personnel (secretariat) available for auditing.

Development recommendations to the higher education institutions

In the final audit report, based on the stated audit criteria and principles, the audit group appraises the fitness for purpose and performance of the quality assurance system, issuing recommendations for its improvement and high-

lighting best practices. At the end of the report, FINHEEC gives its decision based on the audit findings.

In the light of the audit reports, *the strengths of the audited quality assurance systems* are long-term work in quality assurance and comprehensive documentation of the system and its constituent parts, the whole higher education institution's commitment to developing the quality assurance system, and the interlinkage of the institution's operational management and quality assurance system.

In their *development proposals*, the auditors have highlighted the role of management in the development of quality assurance and the use of the information it produces, the extension of quality assurance to all the operations of the higher education institution, and the commitment of the higher education institution community as a whole, including students, to the quality assurance system.

In its operations, FINHEEC has always emphasised the principle of enhancement-led evaluation. This means that the evaluations produce information about higher education and its quality which can be used in institutional development. This information is also used by the Ministry of Education, for example, in performance-steering and decision-making.

Iceland

External evaluations during the last 12 years have shown that the higher education institutions in Iceland often seem not to have been able to change their internal quality work in accordance with the enhancement-led evaluations the institutions had been a part of. The ongoing change of laws and regulations, resulting in the 2006 Higher Education Act can partly be seen as a reaction to that result.

As Iceland has just started her cycles of accreditation with quality audits as a part of the follow-up process, it is too soon to draw any great conclusions of the process and such an act could in many ways be misleading. However, it is worth mentioning that the ongoing accreditation procedure seems to have indicated a new and better notion of the importance of internal quality work within the higher education institutions.

Norway

35 institutions had had their quality assurance systems audited by NOKUT by the end of 2006. 31 of them were approved. Of the remaining four, three had been re-audited with a positive outcome. The audits generally indicate that implementing the quality assurance systems has required a longer time period than expected. At the end of 2006, many institutions had not implemented them fully. Hence, the audit panels and the Board of NOKUT are

often faced with the problem of finding a balance of what is a sufficient degree of implementation.

Recommended areas for further development in the audit reports

The requirement to prepare annual institutional reports on quality work is met, on the whole. Often they are based on quality reports from several levels within the institution. However, they are often also criticised for not providing analytical accounts of educational quality and proposals for action to be taken. This is partly due to the fact that systems have only recently been, or are not yet fully, implemented. Hence, the available data has been insufficient or the time-span has been too short.

Quality assurance systems are often complex. Describing them in a comprehensible manner, which makes it possible also for those who are not central participants in quality work is not an easy task. And yet it is important that students and external interest groups should be able to have an understanding of the institutions' quality work.

The audit panels frequently have remarks on the institutions' way of ensuring broad participation in Quality work. Sometimes the student representatives or the teachers are not involved in analysing the information gathered from the quality assurance systems to a sufficient degree.

The quality assurance systems often do not include student activities in practice training periods to a sufficient extent. Quite often the systems seem to cover ordinary study programmes better than the various short time courses that are financed outside the basic state grant. Also, the feedback from part time students attending web-based provision and feedback from Ph.D students is often insufficiently covered in the quality assurance systems.

Students' evaluation of teaching and learning is an important part of all the QA- systems. The panels often have remarks on the questionnaires in use. Student participation in evaluation during a term seems to be well taken care of but many institutions lack sufficient arrangements for systematic feedback to the students afterwards.

Follow-up of quality work is mentioned as a development area. In many cases planned improvement activities have not been implemented. Reports indicate, however, that several institutions have positive experiences of peer guidance, educational development and various routines for follow-up of activities that may be helpful in various situations.

Feedback from institutions

In a project on expert knowledge, NOKUT has analysed the formal statements institutions have given after the audit. Out of the 35 statements, only 3 raise a discussion on the principles of the audit and its methodological validity. Two institutions analyse how educational quality is made an integral part of the institution's strategic work (one of the evaluation criteria). The audit panels

may transgress their mandate by evaluating the strategy of the institution in the light of educational policy. In Norway, this is the duty of the institution itself, and the Ministry discusses such topics in its steering dialogues with the state-owned institutions. Also, with regard to this aspect, there is a fine line between aspects of an audit and aspects of institutional accreditation.

Sweden[17]

As indicated in the description of the Swedish audit models, the criteria on which the judgements in the reports of the first two rounds of audits in Sweden were base on the following aspects:

- Strategy for implementation of quality assurance processes
- Academic leadership
- Participation by all the staff in quality enhancement and assurance
- Integration of quality work in all activities at the institutions
- Evaluation and follow-up activities
- Internationalisation
- External professional relations
- Gender equality

The audits later came to identify a structure of quality work based on the attainment of four levels, each of them presupposing the previous one:

- Establishing aims of Quality work
- Planning and implementing activities to meet the aims
- Evaluating results of implementation
- Taking measures to improve and integrate Quality work on the basis of evaluations.

In a study of the first round of audits based on a reading of 36 reports, Stensaker (1999) uses the various recommendations as a means of identifying perceived weaknesses in institutional quality assurance with regard to the above aspects. It turned out that most of the recommendations concerned leadership and organisation of Quality work (21 per cent) and then in descending order; policy and strategy (14 per cent), universal participation in Quality work (12 per cent), evaluation and follow-up (12 per cent), staff development (12 per cent), cooperation with stakeholders, internationalisation (4 per cent) and gender equality (3 per cent).[18]

The impact of audits (or rather of the internal Quality work of the institutions) may be seen in a similar investigation four years later. The interpretation assumes that a recommendation is seen as a negative view of the aspect and that positive impact can be measured in terms of a relative decrease of recom-

17. Summary of part of Wahlén 2004.

18. It should be noted that some of these did not appear in the original list of aspects but were added by the auditors.

mendations. It showed that the percentage of recommendation with regard to leadership had gone down to 14. A similar development could be seen with regard to the percentage of stakeholders, which was down from nine to six per cent. On the other hand, a negative development was seen in participation in Quality work (up from 12 to 19 per cent).

A closer reading of reports indicates that auditors had seen positive developments in a number of institutions, Thus they saw improvements in leadership and organisation in 24 of the 36 institutions, in student influence in 15 institutions, policy and strategy in 14 institutions, cooperation with stakeholders in 13, and evaluation and follow-up in 13, educational development in 12 and internationalisation in 12 institutions.

With regard to living up to the quality cycle (planning – implementing – follow-up – evaluating – new planning) the investigation concludes that after two rounds of audits, only about one-third of institutions had developed systematic processes for following up and evaluating activities. It thus takes considerable time to achieve a complete change in this direction through quality audits.

Strengths, challenges and developments

General observations

The development of systematic quality work in higher education institutions takes time. This may be deduced specifically from the experiences in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Functioning quality work is not always at hand in all institutions even after many years. And it still does not have the full acceptance of the academic community. One reason for this may be that the systems that have been developed have not been capable of making life easier for the teaching staff. Instead, quality work is still seen as a burden on top of everything else required of a university teacher, at a time of dwindling resources and lack of time for research.

Secondly, and more importantly, the link between systematic quality work and improved quality of provision and outcome, output and impact is unclear. There is little, if any, incontrovertible evidence that it leads to higher quality. We do know that it involves routines that may contribute to, among other things, better management, leadership and decision-making, better knowledge of the opinions and performance of students and staff, better relations with internal and external, including international, stakeholders and partners and, last but not least knowledge of the quality of provision. But the link is still not obvious and thus the validity of the model may be challenged.

Yet, the experience of the Nordic countries of demands for quality work and for national audit of the institutions' efforts is, on the whole, positive. In an international context, it helps institutions to live up to the European Standards and Guidelines, which will facilitate international exchange and collaboration.

It is reported that site visits in audits inspire discussions on the quality of teaching, research and management and quality work within the whole institution to be evaluated. The audit panel's report will always include recommendations on further development of an institution's efforts to improve educational quality. Audits also contribute to transparency of institutions' quality operations through demands for systematic documentation and their insistence that the staff should work in the direction of joint quality goals. Most importantly, perhaps, these demands also help institutional leadership at various levels to set priorities and thus to make efficient use of the institution's resources. Hence, the model holds the potential of inspiring the quality culture of the institutions of higher education, and is appreciated by many institutions for this reason.

One area that has been addressed is the costs of quality work and, in particular, quality audit. This is a discussion that often arises in the context of external quality assurance. One answer is that it is important for students, prospective students, stakeholders and those who fund higher education to

know the quality of what is provided and whether money is well spent, not least in international comparison. Thus, external assurance is important, but it ought to be at a reasonable level and costs in terms of money and efforts must be reasonable in view of the total costs of higher education. Audit calls attention to and puts the responsibility for quality where it belongs, i.e. at the higher education institutions, and allows them to demonstrate that they have the tools to assure and enhance their provision. For both quality assurance agencies and institutions it is probably the least costly form of external interference in comparison with subject and programme evaluation.

Observations on elements of the methodology

The self-evaluation

As has been described in the section on self-evaluation, not all the Nordic countries require self-evaluation. It may be argued that there is no substantial difference between requiring a self-evaluation process and report and requiring existing material. The material demanded by the agencies in Norway and Finland is such documents as describe quality assurance procedures and demonstrate their impact. It is required that on the basis of a quality programme, activities should be in place (evaluations, taking account of performance indicators, procedures based on interpretations of information derived from the results of quality work, etc.). This is meant to make such procedures and processes a normal part of everyday academic life, and to put less of a burden on institutions.

On the other hand, the self-evaluation process required in Denmark, Iceland and Sweden is intended to activate the institution as a whole and at best contribute to the improvement of processes and results. It is a process required once every five or six years depending on the length of the evaluation cycle. It is a major effort by the whole institution and may thus have a lasting effect on quality work. If the institution has a well functioning quality assurance system, it is a matter of putting what already exists together in a report, which is part of a regular process. In those Nordic countries where self-evaluations are not mandatory an annual report on quality work is demanded, which in many ways resembles what is required in a self-evaluation. It may, therefore, be argued that the differences between the two models are not overwhelming, provided that systems are in place.

The criteria

The use of predefined criteria for decisions based on external evaluation is required by the European Standards and Guidelines. They are a condition for institutions to know on what grounds they will be assessed, and for expert panels to know on what they are going to base their judgements. At the same time, a narrow interpretation of criteria by institutions and expert panels may lead to unwanted standardisation of quality work. Hence, it is preferable that

criteria should rather be generic and, to a certain extent, open to interpretations both in the self-evaluations and in the work of the expert panels. This is, however, a matter of balance and discretion, since if the interpretation varies too much, there is a risk that institutions are not evaluated on the same bases and that panels transgress their mandate.

The site visits

The objective of site visits is for the panels to be able to see what the relationship is between assumptions they have made when reading the self-evaluation reports or the annual quality reports and what they may learn when discussing with different categories of staff at the institution under review. However, the problem of drawing correct inferences is that no matter how many staff members they meet, they are only a limited part of the whole staff.

One way of overcoming this problem has been discussed by EVA, who have considered supplementing the self-evaluation report with a questionnaire survey among staff and students. The purpose of such a survey would be to learn about the opinions and practices from more people and thus get a more qualified basis for assessing the information of the self-evaluation report and in the end the comprehensiveness and effectiveness of the quality system.

In Norway, some auditors have brought up the idea of two separate rounds of site visits to the institution under evaluation. The first round focusing on overall means and strategies and mostly including meetings with leadership, and the next site visit going into the actual details of the institutions work on educational quality. Naturally this kind of change is a question of resources and effectiveness.

Final thoughts

A trend that has been discussed in this report is a development from a largely enhancement oriented approach towards a more accreditation-like model. This is very clear in Iceland, Norway and to a slightly lesser extent in Finland and Sweden. It is a trend found also in other countries, and seems to indicate a conviction that putting pressure on higher education institutions to develop their own quality assurance systems which reveal poor quality and contribute to enhancement is effective.

Yet, other methods are used simultaneously: thus, in Sweden there is also programme and subject evaluation of all provision leading to a degree (although with a lighter touch than earlier). In Iceland all fields of study must also be accredited. In Norway re-accreditation of programmes may take place on the basis of indications of poor quality. In Finland other forms of evaluation also take place, and in Denmark, audit does not cover all of the higher education system and accreditation is still the predominant external quality assurance method.

Thus audit is not felt to assure quality on its own. And this seems to be a general European stance, except in the United Kingdom. But it must also be taken into consideration that the emphasis put on different evaluation methods changes on the assumption that using the same model over and over again does not contribute to improvement in the long run. And this is recognised in the Nordic countries where, in the last 10 to 15 years there have been many changes in the external quality assurance systems, all in the interest of improving quality and of providing information to all those with an interest in higher education.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Criteria for audit in the Nordic countries

EVA

Headlines for the criteria:

- Strategy and procedures for quality work
- Coverage and organization of quality work
- Quality objectives
- Information system and data collection
- The use of information and data
- Involvement of internal stakeholders
- Involvement of external stakeholders
- Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards
- Assessment of students
- Quality work for teaching staff
- Learning resources and student support
- Public information

FINHEEC

- Objectives, structure and internal coherence of the quality assurance system
- Documentation, including formulation of quality assurance policy and definition of procedures, actors and responsibilities
- Comprehensiveness of quality assurance
- Participation of staff, students and external stakeholders in quality assurance
- Interface between the quality assurance system and management/steering
- Relevance of, and access to, quality assurance information
- Relevance of, and access to, quality assurance information for external stakeholders
- Efficiency of quality assurance procedures and structures
- Use of information produced by the quality assurance system
- Monitoring, evaluation and continuous development of the quality assurance system

NOKUT

- How work on educational quality is made an integral part of the institution's strategic work
- How the objectives for the institution's work on quality are defined

- How work on quality is linked to steering and management at all levels of the organization
- How work on quality is organised in routines and measures that ensure broad participation, with defined distribution of responsibility and authority for the various stages of the work
- How the institution retrieves and processes such data and evaluative information as are necessary in order to make satisfactory assessments of the quality of all study units, and how this information is accumulated at higher levels, including the top level of the institution
- How analysis of the information and assessment of goal achievement in work on quality are systematically provided for
- How the institution uses the results of work on quality as a basis for decisions and measures with a view to securing and further developing quality of studies
- How work on quality is made to contribute to resource management and priorities at the institution (human resources, infrastructure, service)
- How the system ensures a focus on the total learning environment and the active participation by students in work on quality and total learning environment
- How an annual Quality Report 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 continued work on quality.

HSV (1995 – 2002)

- Strategy for implementation of quality assurance processes
- Academic leadership
- Co-operation with stakeholders
- Participation in quality enhancement and assurance by staff
- Integration of quality work in all activities at the institution
- Evaluation and follow-up activities
- Internationalisation
- External professional relations
- Gender equality

The criteria foreseen for the coming (2007 – 2012) cycle are:

Objectives and general principles

- The institution has developed clear quality assurance objectives
- The institution has developed well functioning policies, organisation and responsibilities
- There is broad participation in quality assurance activities at all levels

Implementation

- The institution has a system for monitoring and following up all its activities
- Results of monitoring and follow-up are analysed
- Action programmes are prepared as a result of analyses
- Action programmes are implemented and effects are analysed
- The institution monitors and follows up its quality assurance system continuously

Other aspects

- The institution has routines for introducing, developing, revising and closing down programmes and subjects
- The institution has routines for recruiting well qualified staff and for staff development
- The institution cooperates internally, and externally with other institutions nationally and internationally
- The institution cooperates with external stakeholders
- Internationalisation is an important part of the institution's quality processes
- Gender equality and diversity are important aspects of the institution's quality processes
- Student influence is an important part of the institution's quality processes

Outcome, and impact of quality processes

- The institution has processes to ensure that quality work leads to improved quality processes
- The institution has processes to ensure that activities are improved as a result of quality work
- The institution has processes to ensure that quality work leads to long-term impact

Appendix 2

Interviewees at the site visits

The audit panels are having meetings with the representatives of the following groups during the site visits:

Denmark	self-evaluation group
	management at different organisational levels
	administrative staff with regard to quality work
	academic staff
	staff from other units such as library and pedagogical unit
	Total 50–150 persons (50: faculty audit)
Finland	leadership and management
	teaching staff and other staff
	faculties and departments
	students
	external stakeholders
	Total 80-125 persons
Iceland	university management
	self-evaluation group
	departments
	student body
	graduates
	external stakeholders
	Total x persons?
Norway	management and leadership at all levels
	professional staff (teaching staff?)
	administrative staff
	relevant decision-making bodies and advisory bodies
	1–2 external representatives of the board of the institution
	students
	Total 40–200 persons?
Sweden	**First two cycles:**
	university management
	faculty representatives
	teaching staff from selected departments
	"ordinary student" and student union representatives
	administrative units
	board of the institution
	New cycle:
	university management
	faculty representatives
	heads of selected departments
	teaching staff at selected departments
	students (including postgraduate students) from selected departments)
	programme coordinators
	student union representatives
	heads of administrative units
	library and IT units
	In the pilot, more than 100 persons