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Paper

Title: Using surveys to foster cooperation in the development of the master's thesis of initial teacher education

Abstract

Norwegian initial teacher education was reformed in 2017 to a master's education. Central motivations for adding a master's thesis, was the perceived disconnect between the practices of initial school teachers on one hand and research literature on initial school teaching on the other hand. The reform attempted to use the master's thesis as a vehicle to strengthen cooperation between researchers, school teachers, and students, leading to improvements in research, education and third mission activities. The Norwegian Agency of Quality Assurance in Education is conducting an enhancement-oriented, ESG-compliant evaluation of initial teacher education. One objective of the evaluation is to help HEIs with the master's thesis in order to improve and secure the competencies of newly educated school teachers, preparing them to utilize and conduct research. The evaluation uses data from several sources, including surveys directed at students, newly educated teachers, campus-based teacher educators and school-based teacher educators. We discuss how surveys add to the minimum methodological requirements set by ESG, in the context of enhancement-oriented evaluation. Thereafter, we present and discuss different stakeholders' views on the work with the master's thesis. We focus on the integration of the research field and the master's thesis and on the integration between the "initial school field" and the master's thesis. Reflecting on our experiences from the evaluation, we argue that multiple surveys can help foster cooperation among stakeholders, most importantly through representative information about stakeholder perceptions of quality, by creating engagement in quality work and by stimulating reflection on notions of quality.

Introduction

What is the value of surveys, in enhancement oriented, ESG-compliant evaluations?

According to the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG 2015), expert committees must include student and worklife representatives.

Stakeholders should be involved in the design of the evaluation method, and evaluations must include self-assessments and institutional site-visits. However, in our experience, these data sources do not create equal footing for discussion about the viewpoints of broader stakeholder groups, such as the average student, teacher or work life representative.

We argue that multiple surveys can help foster cooperation among stakeholders, through representative information about stakeholder perceptions of quality, suggestions for improvement and stakeholder engagement, thus adding value to the minimum requirements set by the ESG. We utilize the ongoing evaluation conducted by NOKUT, the Norwegian Agency of Quality Assurance in Education, of Norwegian initial teacher education as a case.

We proceed by first providing background on enhancement-oriented NOKUT evaluations and initial teacher education. Thereafter, we situate surveys theoretically in the landscape of quality in higher education, quality enhancement and the ESG, making an argument for how surveys add value. Finally, we provide data from four surveys directed at various stakeholders in initial teacher education in Norway.

Background

NOKUT EVALUATION METHOD

The current iteration of NOKUTs evaluation method was developed from 2020-2021, and first applied in the evaluation of teacher education. The method is typically applied to all Norwegian study programs of a certain type, such as all medical schools or primary school teacher educations. Unlike NOKUTs accreditation and other assurance activities, evaluations do not focus on quality assurance systems, and there are no legal consequences facing higher education institutions partaking in NOKUT evaluations. Instead, the evaluation method is formative, emphasizing enhancement through learning and cooperation between different stakeholder groups across institutions. Thus, the evaluation method suits groups of study programs that complies with legal requirements, but that has tangible room for improvement, for instance through advice from expert committees on how to deal with common challenges, or through identified potential for mutual learning across institutions¹. In accordance with Norwegian law, NOKUT “*shall conduct evaluations of significance to assess quality in higher education*”². The evaluation method complies with ESG and is recognized as an ESG-activity.

REFORM

The 2017 reform of Norwegian initial teacher education represented a major shift in the approach to teacher training, with the aim of raising educational quality and ensuring better student outcomes. The reform extended the teacher education program from four years to five, upgrading it from a bachelor's degree to a master's degree. This change placed a stronger focus on in-depth subject knowledge, pedagogical skills, and research-based teaching practices, ensuring that teachers are better equipped to meet the needs of diverse classrooms. The reform also emphasized the importance of hands-on experience, with a requirement for extended school placement periods, fostering stronger links between universities and local schools.

By requiring a master's thesis, the reform encouraged teachers to engage in academic research, thus promoting a culture of lifelong learning and continuous improvement. The goal was to develop a higher standard of teaching professionals who are not only subject experts but also adept at handling

¹ When considering which study programs to select for evaluation, NOKUT currently analyze study programs in higher education using surveys, statistical indicators and qualitative evidence. NOKUT consider the results from analyzes holistically; study programs that potentially violate legal requirements are selected for future audit.

² Changed in the recently enacted version of national university law – evaluations currently regulated as “an activity that NOKUT shall conduct independently”, implying that NOKUT is expected to conduct evaluations.

the complexities of modern education. Ultimately, the reform aimed to better prepare teachers to face future challenges and contribute to raising the overall quality of Norwegian education (Advisory Panel for Teacher Education, 2020). In sum, the reform attempted to use the master's thesis as a vehicle to strengthen cooperation between researchers, teachers in primary schools and students, leading to improvements in research, education and third mission activities.

NOKUT EVALUATION OF INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION

NOKUT is conducting an enhancement-oriented evaluation of initial teacher education. The evaluation is scheduled to be completed in the autumn of 2024. The evaluation is being conducted by an expert committee, consisting of researchers/teachers, students and a teacher from initial school who also contribute to the initial teacher education. NOKUT staff supports the expert panel.

The evaluation has four themes, including the *master's thesis*. One objective of the evaluation is to help HEIs with their work on the master's thesis to improve and secure the competencies of newly educated schoolteachers, preparing them to utilize and conduct research.

The evaluation primarily uses data from three sources: The institutions' self-assessments, interviews during site visits and surveys among different stakeholders.

NOKUT conducted surveys directed at students, newly educated teachers (candidates), campus-based teacher educators and school-based teacher educators.

Theory

NOTIONS OF QUALITY ENHANCEMENT AND ENHANCEMENT METHODOLOGY IN ESG AND NOKUT EVALUATION ACTIVITIES

In the following, we first discuss the implications of ESG for quality, quality enhancement and enhancement methodology. This allows us to situate the role of surveys in enhancement-oriented evaluations, in the context of ESG. We acknowledge that ESG by design leaves space for external accreditation agencies to design methods that are fit for purpose. To make the added value of surveys clear, we nevertheless discuss the minimum requirements specified in the ESG standards as a stand-alone enhancement methodology in the following.

QUALITY, ENHANCEMENT AND THE ESG

Quality of outputs and outcomes³ in higher education means different things to different people. For instance, Harvey and Green (1993; see also Harvey and Stensaker 2008) distinguish between quality-standards in higher education framing quality as something exceptional, as consistency or perfection, as value for money, fitness for purpose and as a transformation of the student. Furthermore, different stakeholder groups have affinities towards different quality-standards (Harvey and Green 1993; see also Castells 2001; Garritzmann 2016). For instance, students tend to agree with transformational perspective but are more split in their views on value for money and fitness for purpose (Jungblut, Vukasovic and Stensaker 2015). The existence of a plethora of quality-standards reflects that higher education is perceived as able to contribute to many outcomes, making it necessary to distinguish between different kinds of quality instead of operating with a single, unitary conception of quality. It does not necessarily imply that quality is relative or that anything goes.

³ It is commonplace to assess public performance in terms of an input-output-outcome model of production (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011, p.16). Much of what is written on quality in higher education and research is either explicitly modelled on this framework (e.g. Martin and Irvine 1983; NOKUT 2022), or resonates with the distinctions between inputs, process, output and subsequent outcomes (e.g. Harvey and Green 1993). The model could be substituted, for instance with a model of the performance of less hierarchical governance networks. In the following discussion, we nevertheless adopt the input-output-outcome model to stay consistent with the literature discussed.

Perhaps for this reason, the ESG (ESG 2015, p.6) eschews defining the quality of outputs and outcomes, but points towards the “crucial role” of higher education in socio-economic and cultural development. Yet, other values, such as the potential contribution of higher education towards democratic citizenship is left out of the ESG (Jungblut, Petö and Stensaker 2023). Furthermore, the ESG (2015) does take the insight that different stakeholder groups may have affinities towards various conceptions of quality into account, by mandating that expert committees in external assurance must include work-life representatives and students.

ESG arguably place most emphasis on characterizing *process* in terms of quality. ESG (2015, p. 7) does not provide a precise model for the relationship between process, output and outcomes. ESG does specify that “*Quality, whilst not easy to define, is mainly a result of the interaction between teachers, students and the institutional learning environment.*”. In addition to identifying the primary contributors to quality, ESG specifies that a good process includes concrete characteristics such student-centered learning and processes of program design that ensures programs fit to achieve intended learning outcomes. This specificity enables operationalization of ESG in assessment of learning process, where ESG offer fewer directions for assessment of quality in learning outcomes and the subsequent impact of higher education.

As a concept, enhancement is seemingly rather simple in comparison with quality; Given a clear quality standard, any kind of activity that brings about improvement constitutes enhancement. However, this raises the question of what kinds of evaluation-activities that can cause quality-improvement. In external evaluations that can recommend, but not enforce changes, the users ultimately decides whether anything happens. Therefore, user-oriented evaluation approaches, departing from Michael Q Patton’s (1998) insight “intended use for intended users”, such as utilization-focused evaluation or collaborative evaluation (Cousins 2019), that place emphasis on trust-building and stakeholder participation, giving stakeholders ownership, provides a useful baseline for thinking about whether evaluation activities are likely to produce enhancement.

In line with user-oriented approaches to evaluation, current ESG (2015) standards and guidelines emphasize stakeholder involvement in the design of evaluations. ESG mandate that evaluations must include self-assessment from the institution, a site-visit (or some other form of external assessment) and follow-up activities to help implementation of guidance from expert-committee. However, the experience of NOKUT is that self-assessment reports primarily are written and structured by administration and leadership, even if the perspectives of students and teachers are included. Even if students and teachers were to figure prominently in self-assessments and site-visits, they will seldom be representative of the populations of teachers and students⁴. As mentioned above, ESG identifies students and teachers as central to improvement of educational quality. Without representative knowledge of their perspectives on room for improvement, leadership of study programs evaluated are left without secure foundations for beliefs they may have about how students and teachers would like the study program to improve.

Additionally, both experience from NOKUT evaluations and research literature showcase that notions of quality often are tacit; making quality notions explicit is hard work. This is true in higher education (Harvey and Greene 1993), in research (Langfeldt et.al 2020; Lamont 2009) and more generally (Dahler-Larsen 2019). For a complex concept such as quality in higher education, the act of reflecting on your own conception of quality and notions of quality held by others, may lead to increased consciousness and a willingness to change unfounded practices. Following the minimum requirements of ESG deprives most teachers and students from the opportunity to reflect on their notions of quality in external evaluations.

⁴ In the Norwegian context, internal information management systems tend to be geared towards courses, not study programs - the evaluation objects of interest here. Having institutional leadership or administrative staff organize representative data collection could be a solution but leaves the agenda-setting power with a particular stakeholder group. Teachers and students could theoretically organize themselves, but this does not seem practically feasible.

One could attempt to stimulate such reflection in different manners (see e.g. Stensaker and Matear 2024 on student involvement). In NOKUT evaluations, we utilize surveys directed towards different stakeholder groups, including teachers and students, but typically also work-life representatives, such as in the evaluation of initial teacher education. The surveys include closed questions, in tandem with several open-ended questions inviting reflection. Yet, the surveys do more work in NOKUT evaluations than to serve as small self-assessments for broader stakeholder groups.

NOKUT use the surveys as a vehicle for spreading knowledge of ongoing evaluations, collaborating with student and work life organizations to spread awareness of the evaluation, and arranging webinars with invited speakers on the topic of quality in education. We also publish reports with results from the surveys – we strive to disseminate our findings broadly to each stakeholder group through presentations, webinars and other events, to provide knowledge and stimulate reflection. Furthermore, we conduct our surveys between self-assessment and institutional site-visit, allowing us to provide answers to questions and assumptions held by various stakeholders in the early stages of the evaluations for further reflection in the site-visits. Sometimes, evidence from different data-sources appear to be in conflict, often leading to interesting reflection among expert committee and stakeholders.

By providing a common knowledge base of commonalities and discrepancies between the experiences and quality notions of different stakeholders, that combines qualitative data with a representative description of the viewpoints of broader stakeholder groups, NOKUT believe the current evaluation method can facilitate cooperation among stakeholder groups in addressing both “low-hanging fruits” and engaging in more difficult discussions about what a study program should strive to be. Thus, for enhancement-oriented evaluations, we argue that a set of surveys to broad stakeholder groups provide a major improvement on the minimum requirements set by the ESG. In the next section, we provide some example survey-data that showcase the utility of NOKUT’s approach.

Some results from initial-teacher surveys

NOKUT conducted, in 2023, surveys among students, newly educated teachers (candidates), campus-based teacher educators and school-based teacher educators. In the table below we present the number of respondents and the response rates in each group.

Table 1

Stakeholder groups	Respondents	Response rate
Students	3 409	30 %
Candidates	738	18 %
Campus-based teacher educators	543	>31 %*
School-based teacher educators	967	>31 %*

** It is not possible to calculate precise response rates in the surveys among the campus-based and the school-based teacher educators. We estimate the response rate to be 31 % or somewhat higher.*

The stakeholder groups received questions relevant to the evaluation themes. There was overlap in the questions different groups received, making it possible to compare the different groups’ views and experiences. The school-based teacher educators received fewer questions about the master’s thesis than the other groups. Here, we focus on the integration of the research field and the master’s thesis and on the integration between the “initial school field” and the master’s thesis. We will use data from the close-ended, as well as the open-ended questions.

The fifth-year students typically prepare for their master’s thesis through various courses and seminars. Between 85 and 98 percent of the respondents answered that they have received training/guidance in qualitative and quantitative method, scientific theory, research ethics, to search for research literature and project design. And 75 per cent have received training/guidance in academic writing. On the other hand, findings from the survey among the campus-based teacher educators indicates that the students are not well enough prepared. In an open-ended question about the students’ greatest challenges in their work with the master’s thesis, nearly half of the 300 respondents that filled in text, highlighting challenges related to the students’ academic skills and expressed that they are not at a sufficient level to be able to write good master’s theses. This clearly

indicates that although the students attended relevant courses, they were not confident in their academic skills.

The school field is not much involved in the master's thesis, neither in the choice of topic and research question, nor in execution. Only three percent of the fifth-years students reported that they received suggestions on the choice of topic and research question for the master's thesis from a practice teacher or others in the school system.

Most of the fifth-years students reported that they rarely or never collect data during their practice periods or develop their thesis in collaboration with their practice teachers. For the statement "I use practice periods to collect data for my master's thesis," 91 percent stated that this was rarely or never the case. Similarly, for the statement "I developed my research topic in collaboration with practice teachers," the figure was 90 percent.

The campus-based teacher educators were asked to respond to the statement, "Students often link their master's thesis to their own practice." 77 percent answered "Yes," while 23 percent answered "No". This seemingly contrasts with the students' responses to the statements about the master's thesis connection to the practice periods/practice teachers, where very few reported that there is a strong connection.

Candidates were asked "Have you presented findings from your master's thesis to representatives from the school?". 24 percent answered "Yes" to the question, 76 percent "No". The lecturers were asked the question "To what extent are results from master's theses disseminated in schools you collaborate with?". Here, the share of "Don't know / not relevant" is a whopping 42 per cent. Among the others who answered, only 6 percent stated "To a great extent" or "To a very large extent", while 58 percent answered "To no / very little extent" or "To a small extent". This clearly shows that there is room for improvement in the link-up between the research field, which the master's thesis is a part of, and the "initial school field". On these questions, the answers from the two stakeholder groups do not deviate, the candidates and the lecturers have the same experiences on the (lack of) dissemination of the master's thesis to the school field.

These and other results, served as the basis for discussions of the potential for increasing collaboration between the higher education institutions and primary schools, and the relevance (and meaning of "relevance") of the master thesis during site-visits. Having everyone agree on the viewpoints and practices of other stakeholder groups, provides more clarity to the discussions than we likely could have achieved without such data.

Conclusion

We have argued that surveys, as utilized in NOKUT evaluations, add value to ESG-compliant enhancement-oriented evaluations directed at the quality of study programs by:

- Providing representative knowledge about the quality-notions and practices of larger stakeholder populations
- Providing members of large stakeholder groups with an opportunity to reflect on their own practices and quality-notions through open-ended questions
- Serving as a vehicle for creating engagement and awareness in user-oriented evaluations
- Creating the opportunity for stakeholders to triangulate different pieces of data, to gain a better understanding of quality in their study program
- Identifying fruitful areas for collaboration between stakeholders to achieve common goals, and areas of conflict between different notions of quality.

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