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Paper**Title:** Fostering cooperation through enhancement-oriented national evaluations**Abstract**

This paper presents a case study on the enhancement-oriented approach adopted by the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) for national evaluations of educational quality in study programmes. These evaluations complement NOKUT's periodic reviews of quality work at HE institutions by examining specific aspects of educational quality in study programmes. The case study is based on three evaluations; one completed evaluation (2020-2022) and two that are ongoing (since 2022 and 2023, respectively). Each evaluation runs over a two-year period.

Each evaluation addresses key challenges shared by the selected study programmes, while promoting dialogue and knowledge exchange across participating HEIs and between HEIs and external partners.

Prior to each evaluation, NOKUT conducts a stakeholder analysis, followed by a series of input meetings to ensure broad representation in the evaluation design process. By engaging stakeholders

in the selection of key challenges, by promoting an inclusive, dialogue-based approach to self-assessment, by sharing interim findings, and by including a peer observer in each site visit, NOKUT's method facilitates critical reflection, mutual learning and continuous quality enhancement. The resulting evaluation reports give recommendations to each participating study programme, but also discuss their wider social and economic context, shared challenges, labour market relevance, and examples of good practice.

The paper demonstrates how a more collaborative approach to QA can foster cooperation across institutions, academic fields, and professional roles, seen within the context of the three missions of higher education. Elements of this approach could be adapted by other QA agencies for use in review or accreditation activities.

1. Introduction

This paper aims to demonstrate how a more collaborative approach to QA can foster cooperation across academic fields, across HEIs and between HEIs, external partners and other bodies. We will be drawing on our experiences from work on national, programme level evaluations at The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT), where this EQA activity is part of our agency's work to assure and enhance quality in higher education and tertiary vocational education.

Here is an overview of our paper: We will start by saying a little bit about our national context and about NOKUT's EQA activities, then we will introduce our evaluation approach and the example evaluations. Secondly, we will delineate how we select and gather information about key challenges. Then we will go into more detail about how the evaluations foster cooperation and knowledge exchange at the different evaluation stages, seen within the context of the three missions. Lastly, our findings will be summarised, and we will open up a discussion about how aspects of how our evaluation method can be developed further and perhaps adapted for use in other contexts.

Norway has a population of about 5.5 million people, and 48 higher education institutions, spread across the whole country. The HEIs have a total of 305 000 students.

NOKUT has three main ESG activities: Ex-ante accreditations of institutions and study programmes; periodic reviews of institutions' systematic quality work; and national, enhancement-oriented evaluations of educational quality in study programmes.

All of these ESG activities are informed by NOKUT's understanding of quality in education, which is defined in terms of different "quality areas". Two of these quality areas are of particular relevance to the research mission and the third mission of HEIs: One is "academic environment", which is about the academic staff and their expertise, including their research activity. Another is "societal and working life relevance", which is about the link between educational output and society, and about how societal and working life actors can offer important input in programme design, depending on the nature and needs of the different study programmes.

Our recent evaluations have been within academic fields of high importance to society; teacher and medical education. This has provided us with opportunities to engage with all three missions of HE, by facilitating knowledge sharing between key stakeholders at the HEIs, in schools and in healthcare, but also municipalities and regional and national authorities. In this way, different HE stakeholders and societal actors are given the opportunity to influence study programme development, particularly in terms of its relevance to current and future societal needs.

Brief overview of NOKUT's evaluation approach

NOKUT's evaluations are national and comparative, comprising a selected group of study programmes that usually belong to a particular academic subject. Each evaluation runs over a period of about two years, including the evaluation design phase.

The evaluations have two interlinked objectives: Firstly, they should generate knowledge about and assess the quality of higher education. This is important in order to secure society's trust in the educational quality. Secondly, they should support quality enhancement. Participating in a national evaluation not only gives the HEIs access to the expert panel's assessment and recommendations for their own study programme. It also gives them the opportunity to compare their study programme with

that of other institutions, and to exchange knowledge and experiences around key challenges and good practice.

Introducing the example evaluations: teacher education and medical education

NOKUT revised our evaluation methodology in 2020, and we have since conducted three evaluations of selected groups of study programmes. The first of these was completed in 2022, while the others are now in their final stages. As you can see in this table, the included study programmes have been two types of teacher education programmes, as well as medical education. All of these are 5-year study programmes leading to a master's degree.

Table 1: Overview of NOKUTs recent study programme evaluations.

Evaluation	Start date	End date	Number of institutions	Number of students
Integrated secondary teacher education	May 2020	Oct 2022	11	5,000
Integrated primary and lower secondary teacher education	June 2022	Dec 2024	13	11,000
Professional programme in Medicine	Jan 2023	March 2025	4	8,000

2. Focus on key challenges

Selecting key challenges

A guiding principle for NOKUT's evaluations is that they should be *useful* to key stakeholders, and perhaps particularly to those who work on the study programmes in question. We aim for both the evaluation process itself and for the resulting report to be useful. As such, we have opted to focus each evaluation on what appears to be key challenges shared by the selected study programmes. This enables the evaluation to home in on areas where enhancement would be most needed, and to identify potential leverage points where intervention might effect greater change.

So, how are these key challenges identified?

Prior to each evaluation, NOKUT conducts a mapping exercise, to gather data that can help us get an initial overview of strengths and weaknesses in the study programmes. This includes data on student admissions, credit progression, fail rates, grades, study time, student satisfaction, and so on.

After conducting a stakeholder analysis, we then invite key stakeholders, including staff and students from each participating institution to a series of input meetings. In these meetings, we invite participants to share which areas they would most appreciate new insight and expert advice in. We generally have one meeting with each institution, as well as meetings with student bodies and other external bodies. In the case of teacher education, this included meetings with school representatives, people working with schools at the local authority level, and teachers' trade unions. In the case of medical education, it included representatives from hospitals, regional health boards and the doctors' union.

With help from the expert panel, NOKUT then draws up a proposal for the evaluation terms of reference (ToR), which sets out a small number of evaluation themes with accompanying evaluation questions, designed to facilitate an investigation into the key challenges that have been identified. The proposal is reviewed by an evaluation reference group consisting of key stakeholders, and we use their feedback to finalise the terms of reference. A recurring challenge for us is representing diverse input, while limiting

the scope of the evaluation, to avoid creating an unreasonable workload for the expert panel, for the institutions, and for us.

So, what might these evaluation themes look like? Here is one example from each of the three case study evaluations:

1. Coherence in Integrated secondary teacher education

- a. How do the institutions and partner schools work to develop coherence in the study programme?
- b. What promotes and hinders their work to develop coherence in the study programme?

2. Academic communities in Integrated primary and lower secondary teacher education

- a. How do the institutions and schools work on utilising and developing academic, research-based, and professional competencies within their academic communities?
- b. To what extent do the academic communities on campus and in schools have the necessary competencies to implement and develop a teacher education programme that is research-based and profession-oriented?

3. Teaching, learning and assessment in the Professional programme in medicine

- a. How do medical students, teachers and placement supervisors experience and assess the use of various forms of learning activities, assessment, and feedback in the programme?
- b. To what extent does the use of various forms of learning activities, assessment and feedback facilitate the achievement of desired learning outcomes by medical students?

Once the terms of reference are published and shared with the participating institutions, the evaluation is officially underway, and we move on to the data collection phase.

Gathering information on key challenges

In line with the ESG our data collection includes a self-assessment for each institution's study programme and an expert panel site visit to each institution. The self-assessment form is designed specifically for each evaluation, so that it can gather information about the key challenges identified in the ToR. The form is developed by NOKUT and the expert panel, with draft feedback from the reference group. Institutions are not necessarily required to include documentation, but we do ask them to attach some examples that illustrate the key points they make in the text.

In addition to the self-assessment, NOKUT will usually also conduct surveys to learn more about how different stakeholder groups perceive the key challenges we are investigating. How many and what kinds of surveys will depend on the requirements of the ToR, but they have previously included surveys of students, people who have dropped out of the programme, graduates, teaching staff and employers. We might also include other forms of data collection. For example, we have conducted qualitative interviews with doctors who supervise medical students during their clinical placements.

The expert panel's site visit is the final data collection point, which enables them to follow up on findings from the other data sources. The site visit will usually be conducted digitally, rather than physically. This is partially due to logistics, since one expert panel is responsible for visiting all participating institutions. For the evaluation of primary and lower secondary teacher education, this meant thirteen site visits, each running over two days. Other contributing factors are costs and environmental concerns.

Having outlined how we identify and gather information about key challenges, we will now move on to discussing how we try to foster cooperation and knowledge exchange through our approach.

3. Fostering cooperation and knowledge exchange

Fostering cooperation and knowledge exchange in the evaluation design phase

Although NOKUT is ultimately responsible for the evaluation, we invite the institutions and other key stakeholders to collaborate on the design of the evaluation. This collaborative element requires participants to reflect critically on the strengths and weaknesses of their study programmes in the input

meetings. It also requires participants to draw on their own knowledge and experiences in their critical engagement with the proposed ToR in the reference group.

The reference group has been a useful arena for dialogue and the exchange of knowledge and experiences across institutions and across stakeholder groups. We believe it is important to involve external partners, employers, student bodies, trade unions, and so on in these processes, to position them as important stakeholders for the evaluation and for the study programmes. For example, it is crucial that HE providers and schools see teacher education as a shared project. Their cooperation can contribute to quality enhancement of both teacher education and school education. The same goes for HE providers and healthcare providers in the case of medical education. It is vital that medical professionals recognise their role in training the students who will become their colleagues.

Fostering cooperation and knowledge exchange in the data collection phase

The main priority of the data collection phase is of course to gather the data that the expert panel will need to make their assessments and write the evaluation report. However, because we aim for the evaluation *process* to be useful to participants, we try to incorporate collaboration and knowledge exchange in this phase, too.

For example, we know that there may be a tendency to saddle an administrative member of staff with the writing of the self-assessment, and we think a more inclusive process will probably generate better data and better use-value for the institutions. We therefore ask them to involve students, course directors, teaching staff, administrative staff and external partners early in this process, and to facilitate critical reflection and dialogue around different experiences of strengths, challenges and opportunities for quality enhancement. Feedback from the institutions suggests that this approach has been time-consuming but valuable. Cooperating on the self-assessment has provided opportunities for organisational learning, and in many cases kick-started change well before institutions receive the evaluation report.

We also try to avoid the site visit feeling like an interrogation and encourage the expert panel to invite and support critical reflection on strengths and challenges.

Each site visit includes a peer observer from another participating institution. The observer can read the host institution's self-assessment ahead of the visit, and they observe interviews and panel meetings during the visit. They must remain silent during interviews, but the panel will sometimes ask them to share their thoughts afterwards. Some panel experts have been hesitant about this peer observation, fearing that it might hinder free discussion among the panel members. However, NOKUT has received a lot of positive feedback from the institutions, including reports that it reinforces trust in the evaluation and reports that it offers great opportunities for learning about good practice at other institutions. It has also led to more long-term cross-institutional knowledge exchange and cooperation on quality enhancement initiatives. For example, one university made major change to their cooperation with schools, and this initiative was inspired and supported by another university. We are therefore keen to retain peer observation as a part of our site visits.

Finally, we try to share some interim findings during the data collection phase. We do this to aid transparency, to facilitate reflection, and to support the institutions' ongoing quality enhancement work. For example, we share data from the student survey with the institutions, we publish reports on survey results, and we host seminars to share and discuss findings. We have also shared interim feedback from the expert panel, for example after they have gone through the self-assessment form, or after the site visit.

Fostering cooperation and knowledge exchange through the evaluation report and the evaluation follow-up

Each evaluation is concluded with one big evaluation report, largely written by the expert panel. The report includes one chapter per institution / study programme, but also chapters that explore the evaluation themes at a national level, and that include comparative discussions of the study programmes. The reports are designed to facilitate cross-institutional knowledge exchange through an overview of what shared strengths and challenges look like in the different local contexts, and by highlighting examples of local solutions and good practice. This facilitates post-evaluation cooperation between institutions and other stakeholders who wish to learn from each other. Using a joint evaluation report, rather than institutional reports also strengthens the evaluation's contribution to the national

conversation about the role of higher education, and about the relationship between higher education programmes, employers and local or national authorities.

Our evaluation follow-up period is two years. Within a few months of the report launch we run a webinar where institution representatives discuss priorities for their internal follow-up work, and we discuss how NOKUT best can support them during this period. We have so far completed one follow-up period. In that case the institutions opted to submit a written follow-up report, because they believed this would boost the involvement and commitment of faculty and central leadership. They also opted to have a webinar for cross-institutional knowledge exchange about the follow-up work.

4. Summary and thoughts on opportunities for further development

To summarise, our approach to fostering cooperation and knowledge exchange throughout the evaluation process has been well-received, while also posing some challenges. Engaging a wide range of stakeholders, from students to external partners, and facilitating critical reflection, knowledge exchange and cooperation on key challenges has enriched the evaluation data and supported institutions' ongoing enhancement work.

However, the time and resources required for such an inclusive process can be substantial for study programme staff, and our expert panels have at times found the data material overwhelming when they write the report. We need to explore opportunities to reduce the workload for all involved parties, also to enable us to increase the number of evaluations we can carry out at any one time.

The evaluation and the follow-up periods offer a lot of opportunities for knowledge exchange and cooperation, and we see that institutions use this momentum to set in motion a lot of change and enhancement initiatives. However, this also raises questions about the ongoing sustainability and impact of such efforts. To what extent are we fostering long-term improvements and meaningful collaboration, and to what extent does the momentum stall when the follow-up period is over, and staff are met with competing priorities and perhaps budget cuts?

We expect a lot of you grapple with these questions of sustainability: We want to design and implement our evaluations in a way that supports work towards lasting positive change. And we want to keep our focus on use value, cooperation and knowledge exchange, while reducing the workload.

We also hope that there may be elements of our approach that could be adapted for other national contexts. While knowledge exchange and cooperation might look different in an accreditation process or a periodic review, providing opportunities for broad stakeholder dialogue can highlight the collaborative effort necessary for sustainable quality enhancement.