

NOQA Project 2009/2010

Site visits as an evaluation method

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2011



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Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Preface | 6 |
| 1 Introduction | 7 |
| 2 Introduction to site visit approaches in each country | 9 |
| 2.1 ACE Denmark | 9 |
| 2.1.1 Purpose of the site visit | 9 |
| 2.1.2 Preparation for the site visit | 9 |
| 2.1.3 Execution of the site visit | 10 |
| 2.1.4 Use of data from the site visit | 10 |
| 2.2 EVA | 11 |
| 2.2.1 Purpose of the site visit | 11 |
| 2.2.2 Preparation for the site visit | 11 |
| 2.2.3 Execution of the site visit | 12 |
| 2.2.4 Use of data from the site visit | 12 |
| 2.3 FINHEEC | 12 |
| 2.3.1 Purpose of the site visit | 12 |
| 2.3.2 Preparation for the site visit | 13 |
| 2.3.3 Execution of the site visit | 14 |
| 2.3.4 Use of data from the site visit | 14 |
| 2.4 Höskoleverket | 14 |
| 2.4.1 Purpose of the site visit | 14 |
| 2.4.2 Preparation for the site visit | 15 |
| 2.4.3 Execution of the site visit | 15 |
| 2.4.4 Use of data from the site visit | 15 |
| 2.5 Iceland | 15 |
| 2.5.1 Purpose of the site visit | 15 |
| 2.5.2 Preparation for the site visit | 16 |
| 2.5.3 Execution of the site visit | 17 |
| 2.5.4 Use of data from the site visit | 17 |
| 2.6 NOKUT | 17 |
| 2.6.1 Purpose of the site visit | 17 |
| 2.6.2 Preparation for the site visit | 18 |
| 2.6.3 Execution of the site visit | 18 |
| 2.6.4 Use of data from the site visit | 19 |
| 3 Discussion of similarities and differences between site visit approaches | 20 |
| 3.1 Discussion between ACE Denmark and Höskoleverket | 20 |
| 3.1.1 Purpose of the site visit | 20 |
| 3.1.2 Preparation for the site visit | 20 |
| 3.1.3 Execution of the site visit | 21 |
| 3.1.4 Use of data from the site visit | 21 |
| 3.2 Discussion between EVA and NOKUT | 22 |
| 3.2.1 Purpose of the site visit | 22 |

| | | |
|------------|---|-----------|
| 3.2.2 | Preparation for the site visit | 22 |
| 3.2.3 | Execution of the site visit | 23 |
| 3.2.4 | Use of data from the site visit | 24 |
| 3.3 | Discussion between FINHEEC and Iceland | 24 |
| 3.3.1 | Purpose of the site visit | 24 |
| 3.3.2 | Preparation for the site visit | 24 |
| 3.3.3 | Execution of the site visit | 25 |
| 3.3.4 | Use of data from the site visit | 25 |
| 4 | Overall discussions and conclusions | 26 |
| 4.1 | Overall discussions | 26 |
| 4.2 | Conclusions | 27 |

Preface

The Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education (NOQA) is a forum for disseminating information, sharing experience and pursuing projects of mutual interest. The main objective is to create a joint understanding of different Nordic viewpoints on issues related to higher education quality assurance.

Since 2001, NOQA has engaged in annual projects that have produced new perspectives, encouraged the sharing of experience and points of learning, and has shed light on inter-Nordic challenges within the field of quality assurance in higher education.

At the NOQA-meeting in Helsinki in 2009 it was decided that the 2009-10 Nordic project should take on a different form, with an inter-Nordic exchange focusing on learning and the sharing of experience between the six member organisations. It was also decided that the theme for the next project should be the site visit. The findings, experiences and results of the project are presented in this report.

Activities and organisation of the project

A project team consisting of one representative from each agency was formed, with representatives from EVA and ACE Denmark acting as project coordinators.

The project team consisted of the following members:

- Anne Hougaard Thygesen, EVA
- Marja-Liisa Saarilampi, FINHEEC
- Åsa Ekberg, Höskoleverket
- Jacob Szpilman, ACE Denmark
- Ásgerður Kjartansdóttir, Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið/ Ministry of Education, Science and Culture
- Ole Espen Rakkestad, NOKUT.

Each team member took part in a site visit in one of the other countries. These site visit exchanges form the basis of the project in the sense that they provided insights into other agencies' approaches to site visits, and also created learning opportunities and the basis for discussion about differences and similarities. The project team paired up, planned and carried out the following exchanges:

- NOKUT and EVA
- Höskoleverket and ACE Denmark
- The members from Iceland and FINHEEC were unable to visit each other due to unfortunate practical issues (including a volcanic ash cloud over Europe). However, the two did put together reflections on differences and similarities between approaches to site visits based on the written material that the two have contributed.

The insights gained through these exchanges formed the basis for a discussion seminar at the annual NOQA meeting on 20 May 2010 in Denmark.

The project team hopes that the findings and discussions in this report will further encourage the use of inter-Nordic exchanges as a means of sharing experience and overcoming common challenges.

1 Introduction

The site visit is a central point in the well-established four stage model for external quality assurance of higher education (autonomous agencies, self-assessment reports from the institutions, peer-reviews conducted with site visits and published reports), and all of the Nordic agencies conduct site visits as an integrated element in their evaluation procedures.

There are, however, quite substantial differences between the agencies – and thus also a substantial potential for learning – regarding the way site visits are conceived, conducted and subsequently used as documentation. These differences can to some extent be explained by differences in the national approaches to external quality assurance of higher education, e.g. audit, accreditation, programme evaluation or other evaluation models.

As argued in the NOQA report 2009 and as shown in the table below, the approaches towards external quality assurance in the Nordic countries differ and show little sign of moving towards convergence.

Table 1.1 Main evaluation types used by NOQA members

| Type \ Agency | Institutional Audits | Programme Evaluation | Accreditation |
|----------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------|
| ACE Denmark | | | X |
| EVA | | | X |
| FINHEEC | X | | |
| Högskoleverket | | X | X |
| Iceland | X | X | X |
| NOKUT | X | | X |

In addition, differences in the site visits can also relate to other factors such as national traditions, habits and maybe even regulations. The purpose of this project is thus to discuss similarities and differences in the form, methodology and function of the site visit between the Nordic agencies in order to gain new perspectives and inspiration for the development of the national approaches.

This report comprises a number of documents that were written during the project:

- A description of the approach to site visits from each agency, including form, methodology and function;
- Written reflections from each pair of team members on their experience of participating in a site visit in another country;
- A summary of the seminar discussions, highlighting perspectives and learning points from the project.

This first chapter of the report briefly introduces the NOQA project 2009/10. Chapter 2 of the report introduces the approach to site visits used by each agency. The agencies' approaches will be presented in alphabetical order. Chapter 3 consists of three reflections, written by each pair from the project group that had visited each other in the course of the project. These will be presented in random order. Firstly, the reflections of the participants from ACE Denmark and Högsköleverket, followed by the reflections of EVA and NOKUT and, finally, the reflections of FIN-HEEC and Iceland. Chapter 4 of the report consists of the reflections and discussions that were brought forth during the annual meeting and conclusion of the project.

2 Introduction to site visit approaches in each country

2.1 ACE Denmark

ACE Denmark is the national Danish accreditation agency for higher education in the Danish university sector. ACE Denmark assesses and prepares reports at the study programme level.

There are approximately 900 university study programmes at the eight Danish universities. It is ACE Denmark's role to assess these programmes within a 6-year cycle. Hence, ACE Denmark accredits around 150 existing university study programmes per year.

In addition to the accreditation of existing study programmes, ACE Denmark also accredits new study programmes *ex ante*. Initial accreditation has so far been conducted without the use of experts and site visits, but in 2011 ACE Denmark will conduct a trial period with experts.

The assessments in the form of reports containing ACE Denmark's concluding recommendations are sent to the national Danish Accreditation Council, which has the authority to make decisions regarding accreditation of all higher education in Denmark.

2.1.1 Purpose of the site visit

The site visit takes place as part of the accreditation of existing study programmes. The expert panel, consisting of one academic expert, one student representative and one employer representative, assess the ten criteria (as of July 2010, five criteria) described in ACE Denmark's guidelines on the basis of a self-assessment report and the site visit. There is no formal regulation concerning the structure of the site visit, and the structure of the visit is mainly based on accumulated experience from practice.

2.1.2 Preparation for the site visit

Preparation of the institutions

The process of accreditation is commenced with an initial meeting between the consultants from ACE Denmark and central players from the relevant study programmes 4 to 6 months prior to the site visit.

The purpose of the initial meeting is to introduce ACE Denmark's accreditation concept, to prepare the institutions for writing their self-assessment report and to establish initial contact between the consultants from ACE Denmark and administrative employees connected to the study programmes. Typically, those attending from the institutions are the administrative personnel responsible for compiling the reports, and key scientific personnel (heads of study programmes, heads of institutes, etc.) are also involved in the writing.

The institutions write the self-assessment reports according to ACE Denmark's guidelines for accreditation of existing study programmes. The consultants read this report, check if the reports are complete and, if necessary, request supplementary information from the institutions.

Preparation of the experts

When the members of the expert panel have been recruited, they are sent material on the accreditation process. This includes the guidelines for accreditation, information material on accreditation and the role of the experts, selected key statistics for university study programmes and the national qualification framework for higher education.

The experts are then invited and expected to participate in a one-day-seminar at ACE Denmark, where they are introduced to their role as experts in the accreditation process. At the seminar there is an introduction to the Danish accreditation system, a talk by an experienced former expert and an introduction to the ten criteria with casework.

Immediately before the site visit (or before the initial visit if there are several site visits, i.e. several study programmes) the expert panel participates in a preparatory meeting with the consultants. At this point, the experts are expected to have read the self-assessment reports.

The reports are discussed, and key areas that are deemed problematic or in need of further clarification are identified, serving as a basis for an interview guide containing questions for the site visit. Usually, the consultants have compiled a draft list of questions based on their experience and the self-assessment reports that the experts supplement at the meeting before they decide which questions they think should be asked.

1-2 months before the site visit, the institutions receive a proposal for the structure of the site visit. A few weeks before the site visit the institutions and ACE Denmark exchange information concerning the participants.

2.1.3 Execution of the site visit

The site visit takes place during one day, typically from 09.00 - 16.00, and includes meetings with the management, students and teaching staff. A typical programme is presented below:

| | |
|---|-----------------------|
| Initial meeting with the management, including a 15 minute presentation of the study. | 45 minutes |
| Meeting with students | 1 hour and 15 minutes |
| Meeting with the scientific teaching staff | 1 hour and 15 minutes |
| Discussion in the panel/lunch | 45 minutes |
| Tour | 30 minutes |
| Final meeting with the management | 45 minutes |
| The experts discuss and assess the study programme's compliance with the 10 criteria. | 1-2 hours |

Usually, two consultants from ACE Denmark participate in the meeting along with the panel. One consultant has the primary responsibility and acts as meeting facilitator during the meeting, keeps the time, and makes sure that all the important questions are asked. Meanwhile the second consultant assists, primarily by taking notes and by being able to supplement the primary consultant.

The meetings take place as a sort of semi-structured interview. The experts ask questions that are structured according to the criteria, but in no fixed order. During the site visit, the interviews often evolve and deviate from the planned interview guide as new issues present themselves. The experts are responsible for asking the questions, while the consultant's role is to make sure that all key questions are asked. The consultant can ask supplementary questions.

2.1.4 Use of data from the site visit

The information obtained during the site visit is essential and, along with the self-assessment reports, forms the direct basis for the final assessments. The accreditation reports often refer to the meetings, focusing on information that functions as verification or clarification of factual conditions, whereas impressions are generally left out. The consultants ensure that statements from the site visit cannot be traced to any individual. When referring to the visit in reports, statements are only referenced back to groups/meetings.

2.2 EVA

The Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA) is an independent institution under the auspices of the Ministry of Education covering quality assurance of education and learning from children's day care over primary and secondary school to higher education and further adult education. Within higher education, EVA is responsible for the accreditation of programmes under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture.

EVA uses site visits in a broad range of evaluations. However, for this particular NOQA project, the type of site visit in question is the site visit conducted in relation to the accreditation of existing academy profession degree programmes and professional bachelor programmes (short cycle and first cycle programmes).

2.2.1 Purpose of the site visit

The purpose of the visit is twofold. First of all there is an element of verification, and secondly there is an element of exploration/clarification. Prior to the meeting, the institution in question submits a self-assessment report, which the expert panel read and use as the basis for a preliminary assessment. The parts of the self-assessment report which are clear and are assessed positively need to be verified during the visit by asking the different groups about their experience with this particular part of the self-assessment report. Other parts of the self-assessment report may be less clear, and therefore the site visit also functions as the expert panel's opportunity to further explore and clarify issues.

At the end of the site visit the expert panel has approximately one hour in which to finalise their assessment of every criteria.

2.2.2 Preparation for the site visit

EVA's consultants prepare for the site visit by reading the self-assessment reports from the institutions. The expert panel and EVA's consultants meet approximately one month prior to the site visit in order to make a preliminary assessment of the programme under accreditation. This meeting also serves to prepare the consultants, as they meet the expert panel with professional knowledge about the programme.

Preparation of the institutions

Representatives from the institutions who apply for programme accreditation are invited to an introductory meeting at EVA prior to the start of the accreditation process. At this meeting the institutions are introduced to the accreditation process. The meeting is mostly focussed on clarifying the criteria and does not usually go into too much detail concerning the site visit.

Prior to the site visit, the institutions receive a standard timetable for the visit and are asked to find students and teachers who the expert panel can interview. EVA has written a short document for students taking part in the interview to introduce them to the background and purpose of the site visit and the accreditation process in general.

Preparation of the experts

The experts are introduced to the task of accreditation when they are first contacted by EVA. This is either done through a telephone call, where EVA's consultant explains the task, or via email with a thorough description of the task.

Before the experts receive the self-assessment reports, they are all invited to a joint information meeting where EVA consultants guide them through the accreditation process, the task at hand and an explanation of the criteria that they are to assess.

The experts then receive the self-assessment reports from the programmes that they are assessing, which they must read and briefly comment on. This lays the ground for the first meeting of the expert panels. At the meeting, the consultants also introduce the experts to the visit in more detail, e.g. an introduction to how the interviews are conducted, the distribution of roles during the visit, how to ask good questions, etc.

Finally, the experts receive an interview guide with particular questions for each institution from EVA's consultants, so they can prepare themselves for the interview.

2.2.3 Execution of the site visit

The site visits last one day and follow a fixed programme. The programme only varies under special circumstances. The programme is as follows:

| | |
|---------------|--|
| 10.00 – 10.45 | The management (45 min.) |
| 10.45 – 10.55 | Break with summing up (10 min.) |
| 10.55 – 12.10 | The students (1 h. 15 min.) |
| 12.10 – 12.40 | Lunch (30 min.) |
| 12.40 – 13.20 | Tour (40 min.) |
| 13.20 – 13.40 | Internship coordinators (20 min.) |
| 13.40 – 13.45 | Break (5 min.) |
| 13.45 – 15.00 | The teachers (1h. 15 min.) |
| 15.00 – 15.20 | Break with summing up (20 min.) |
| 15.20 – 15.50 | The management (30 min.) |
| 15.50 – 16.50 | Summing up and final assessment by the expert panel (1 h.) |

The form is a semi structured interview where the expert panel follows the interview guide to make sure that all relevant areas are covered during the day. However, the interview questions are not posed as written questions, but tend to take the form of a planned dialogue. Also, some questions can lead to new areas of inquiry, which the interview guide allows room for, providing all areas of the guide are covered.

Usually, two consultants from EVA (the responsible project consultant and the backup consultant) participate in the site visit together with the expert panel. The project consultant holds the responsibility as chairperson, introducing the day and welcoming all the groups to be interviewed, keeping track of the time and making sure that all relevant areas are covered in each interview. The backup consultant from EVA usually takes notes. However, it is also the responsibility of the experts themselves to take notes, as no official minutes are taken.

The expert panel conducts the interview. Usually each expert has the responsibility for 3-4 criteria. EVA's consultant may ask additional questions to clarify issues, but it is the expert panel's task and responsibility to conduct the interviews.

2.2.4 Use of data from the site visit

The information from the site visit is used in the final accreditation report. However, the written self-assessment report is the primary source of documentation for the report. The interviews are referred to less often and primarily when information from an interview is decisive for the final assessment of a criterion.

2.3 FINHEEC

The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) is an independent expert body. FINHEEC's task is to assist higher education institutions and the Ministry of Education in performing higher education evaluations, thus promoting the quality of higher education. Since its creation in 1996, all FINHEEC's operations have been based on an enhancement-led evaluation approach.

The main types of evaluations conducted by FINHEEC are: institutional audits of quality assurance systems of higher education institutions; thematic evaluations; and centres of excellence evaluations in education.

2.3.1 Purpose of the site visit

The site visit takes place as part of audits, thematic evaluations and centres of excellence evaluations. In the period 2008-2009, FINHEEC undertook 14 audits of quality assurance systems, 2 thematic evaluations and 3 centres of excellence evaluations.

This report covers only audits. The purpose of the audits is to verify and complement the information about the institution's quality assurance system provided by the audit material and to contribute to the development of the institution's quality assurance system by creating an interactive event.

The audit manual (2008-2011) gives detailed instructions concerning the site visit (www.kka.fi).

2.3.2 Preparation for the site visit

The agency nominates one project manager and one backup person for each audit.

The duties of the project manager are as follows: finding experts for the audit group; preparing the audit agreement for the higher education institution; organising the audit training for the audit group; reading the audit material; acting as a secretary at audit meetings and on site visits; writing chapters 1-3 for the audit report and commenting on other chapters (reports are 50-80 pages long); introducing the results to the higher education council; issuing a bulletin of the results to the media; being point of contact with the printer-house; organising the final seminar where the institution is granted an audit certificate; executing with webropol inquiries for the institution and the audit group.

Preparation of the institution

The institution prepares all of the audit material and organises the site visit based on the audit group's instructions and requests.

FINHEEC and the specific institution will together organise an information seminar for the staff of the institution prior to the site visit.

The institution appoints a contact person (usually the quality manager) who has the main responsibility for planning and collecting the audit material from all units in the institution.

Preparation of the experts

All auditors (experts) must have participated in the auditor training organised by FINHEEC. The training takes one working day, and it includes the following issues: the role of FINHEEC as a national and international evaluator; presentation of the premises of the audit; objectives and methodology; the task and operating principles of the audit; the implementation of the audit visit; audit techniques and questions; and the analysis of audit materials and reporting.

Audit group members study the whole audit material provided by the institution.

Audit material consists of:

- 1 A written description of the organisation of the institution;
- 2 A written description of the quality assurance system;
- 3 The quality manual;
- 4 A description of the past development of the quality assurance system;
- 5 A brief written description of the links between the quality assurance system and management system;
- 6 The institution's own SWOT analysis of its quality assurance system;
- 7 A summary of the major improvement targets identified by the quality assurance system, as well as measures commenced on that basis;
- 8 Evidence and samples selected by the institution to substantiate the performance of the quality assurance system. The materials should indicate which evidence relates to each of the seven audit targets.

In their meetings (two before, and two after the site visit), the audit group agree on an internal allocation of tasks and responsibilities, define audit questions related to the auditing criteria, and compile a descriptive and evaluative text for the audit report.

2.3.3 Execution of the site visit

The site visit usually lasts two and a half days, and the first and third days have fixed programmes. The site visit is usually structured in the following way:

First day (from 09.00 – 16.00)

The audit visit starts with a presentation of the institution's quality assurance (20 minutes), followed by interviews with the following:

- The institution's management and persons in charge of quality assurance (1 hour);
- Deans; heads of fields of study; heads of units (1 hour);
- Teaching staff (1 hour);
- Representatives of support and other services (1 hour);
- Students (1 hour);
- Representatives of interest groups and external stakeholders (1 hour);
- As appropriate: researchers; R&D staff; continuing education and open university staff (1 hour).

Second day (from 09.00 to 16.00 pm) and third day (from 09.00 to 15.00)

- Audit focus is on quality assurance of the institution's basic tasks;
- Unit interviews (the audit group can choose where they would like to go);
- Thematic interviews (the audit group can choose where they would like to go);
- Unannounced visits.

The site visit ends with an interview with the management. Here, the institution is always given preliminary feedback from the audit group about their strengths, good practices and recommendations.

The audit techniques used during the visit include semi structured interviews with appropriate groups, observations, familiarisation with materials and thematic discussion(s).

The Higher Education Evaluation Council nominates a chairperson for each audit group. This person always chairs the meetings. The chairperson and secretary visit the institution before the site visit. During the site visit the chairperson introduces each session, leads the discussions and gives preliminary feedback to the institution at the end of the site visit.

The audit group is responsible for asking the questions. The secretary (representative from FIN-HEEC) can ask complementary questions.

The audit group prepares the fixed interview questions before the site visit. However, it is always possible to ask new questions and do some improvisation during the site visit.

2.3.4 Use of data from the site visit

The data from the site visit is used to verify and complement the basic audit material about the institution's quality assurance. The material from the interviews is used as examples in the report.

2.4 Högskoleverket

In March 2010 the Swedish Government proposed a new quality assurance system that was launched in December 2010. The details regarding the use and purpose of the site visit in the new system have not yet been finalised. One aim of the new system is, however, a lesser emphasis on the site visit than in the previous Högskoleverket system. It is the old system that is described here.

2.4.1 Purpose of the site visit

At the moment, Högskoleverket is using site visits for initial accreditation and programme evaluation. The agency no longer carries out audits. There is no formal regulation concerning the structure of the site visit. The structure is mainly based on practice.

2.4.2 Preparation for the site visit

Regarding preparations, there are brief guidelines for the experts, which mainly concern the experts' roles and responsibilities, rather than the site visit itself.

There is usually an introductory meeting with the institution/programme at an early stage of the evaluation process. Following this, the institution/programme receives a proposed agenda for the site visit by Högskoleverket. Other instructions, such as the maximum number of participants, are also included in the proposed agenda. However, no information is provided to the institution about the questions the experts want to ask. One week before the visit, the institution provides the names of the people with whom the panel will meet.

Prior to the site visit the panel has discussed the application for accreditation or evaluation during a meeting with Högskoleverket. They are expected to have read the self-evaluation from the programme at this stage. The experts then discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the self-evaluation and which questions they should ask during the visit.

The day before the visit, the panel and the consultant from Högskoleverket study the agenda and decide which questions should be posed and which member of the panel will ask them. Sometimes specific members of the panel are asked to cover certain specific areas, e.g. student participation, teachers' research, etc. No formal training for conducting interviews is offered.

2.4.3 Execution of the site visit

There is a more or less fixed programme for the site visits. Usually, the panel meets with the following: central management, local management, teachers/supervisors, and students/doctoral students. For professional programmes, representatives from professional practice are also often included. Alterations to this standard model can be made. Sometimes – but not often - the participants from the institution/programme have been prepared for the interviews by their own institution. Högskoleverket is, of course, not involved in this preparation. For a study programme, the visit usually lasts one day (09.00 - 16.00).

The institution/programme chooses the individuals who will participate in the interviews. The students decide among themselves who will participate.

Interviews are usually semi-structured, but the experts decide on the best approach. No directions are made, but sometimes consultants from Högskoleverket do offer some "good advice", especially when experts are new to the task.

The chairperson is always one of the experts. This means that he/she introduces each session, leads the discussions, etc. The chairperson ensures that all relevant questions are asked, although, occasionally, the consultant from the agency may assist with this. The chairperson is usually responsible for providing Högskoleverket with a written assessment from the panel. The question of who is responsible for note taking differs. Sometimes the consultant takes notes and distributes them to the panel, and sometimes the experts take their own notes.

2.4.4 Use of data from the site visit

The panel often refers to the visit in their report. The site visit is one source of information. Therefore, the panel often reflects on statements made by the institution in the self-evaluation based on their impressions from the site visit.

It is thoroughly ensured that statements noted from the site visit (especially from the students) cannot be traced to any individual.

2.5 Iceland

2.5.1 Purpose of the site visit

Site visits are essential to all types of quality assurance organised by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, i.e. programme evaluations, institutional evaluations, accreditations and future quality audits.

The main purpose of site visits in Iceland is to verify and comment on the content of a self-evaluation report.

The Higher Education Institution Act (no. 63/2006), the Rules for Quality Control of Teaching and Research in Higher Education Institutions (no. 321/2009) and Regulations on Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions do not refer explicitly to site visits.

General guidelines for external and internal evaluation from 2006 (currently under revision) explain the purpose of the site visits and set out a template for the agenda (http://bella.mrn.stjr.is/utgafur/gaedaeftirlit_hask_2006.pdf - Chapter 3). These guidelines have influenced the general practice of site visits for all types of quality assurance.

2.5.2 Preparation for the site visit

The Ministry has issued a three year plan for external evaluations, including accreditations, programme evaluations and quality audits. The Ministry works according to a defined procedure when planning external evaluations. In recent years, the Ministry has recruited an external consultant/secretary to assist the expert panel prior to, during and after their stay in Iceland.

The working language of all evaluations is English. The Ministry is responsible for having the self-evaluation reports translated. In some cases, the Ministry has requested the self-evaluation reports in both English and Icelandic. The Ministry checks whether the self-evaluation requirements have been met and nothing important is missing.

The planning of the site visit is in the hands of the Ministry and/or the secretary in co-operation with the institution in question, and it follows in most cases the structure set out in the general guidelines for internal and external evaluation from 2006. The programme for the site visit is finalised a few weeks before the visit. The Ministry contacts the expert panel by e-mail to explain the task.

Preparation of the institutions

The institutions are informed about the external evaluation in the three year plan for external evaluations, and by a formal letter from the Ministry. In all types of quality assurance, the institution must write a self-evaluation report and receives general guidelines from the Ministry on what is required. The institution will often contact the Ministry when drafting the self-evaluation report.

An information meeting regarding the site visit is not a standard procedure. In the first round of the accreditation process, formal introductory meetings for the institution are organised. It is becoming more common to meet the institution prior to commencement of the entire process, and the site visit is one issue that is discussed with them.

The letter and the guidelines are sent to the rector, and it is left to the rector and the quality manager to decide whether to involve relevant staff from the institution in the preparation of the self-evaluation and the site visit.

Preparation of the experts

The task of the consultant/secretary is defined in a contract. The consultant is the contact person connecting the expert panel, the Ministry and the institution. To ensure objectivity, the Ministry does not contact the expert panel during the evaluation but is in contact with the consultant prior to, during and after each evaluation to share information about the state of play. The task of the experts is also defined in a contract. The consultant/secretary to the panel forwards all relevant documents to the expert panel, including the self-evaluation report. The extent of the information depends on the type of evaluation.

Prior to the first meeting of the expert panel, each member is asked to send comments on the self-evaluation report to the secretary. During the first meeting of the expert panel, they are briefed about the purpose of the evaluation by the Ministry, or by the secretary/consultant, with particular focus on the role of the expert panel and the purpose of the site visit.

At the first meeting of the panel, the secretary will summarize the comments of all expert panel members, and subsequently prepare an information sheet about the faculty, summarizing quantitative data and its principal characteristics, based on the self-evaluation. In addition, the secretary of the expert panel will formulate a draft version of the terms of reference for the site visit, for discussion at the preparatory meeting.

The expert panel meets both prior to and after the site visit to plan the work and divide the tasks. There is no formal training of the expert panel for conducting interviews.

2.5.3 Execution of the site visit

For every site visit, the programme is prepared by the Ministry and/or the consultant/secretary, in cooperation with the institution.

General guidelines for external and internal evaluation from 2006 (currently under revision) include a template for the agenda.

The length depends on the type of evaluation. A site visit in the context of an accreditation or a follow-up accreditation takes 1 day (09.00 - 17.00), and a site visit in the context of programme evaluation or institutional evaluation can last up to five days. The site visit consists of formal meetings with stakeholders as well as the inspection of facilities.

All relevant stakeholders are interviewed. The external expert panel normally meets with the management, the self-evaluation group, academic staff, representatives of the student body (undergraduates and graduates) and external stakeholders, regardless of the type of evaluation. The students are selected by the institution in question or the student union. In most cases the expert panel also inspects the facilities.

The meetings are not formal interviews, but rather semi-structured, which sometimes leads to a more open dialogue between the external panel and the stakeholders in the institution. The Ministry has not prepared specific guidelines for the interviews. The meetings take place according to specific themes set out in the guidelines for the external evaluation. There are no specific interview guides with fixed interview questions. Themes are set out in the general guidelines but do not need to be explored in a fixed order.

The meetings are chaired by the chairperson of the external panel. The minutes/notes are taken by the appointed secretary/consultant. Each member of the expert panel also takes personal notes.

The chairperson of the external expert panel is responsible for conducting the interview, but an active contribution and participation is expected of other members of the expert panel. The secretary of the expert panel listens and takes notes but does not participate in the interview.

2.5.4 Use of data from the site visit

The final judgement presented in the final report of the expert panel is based on the self-evaluation report and the site visit. The report reflects the panel's discussion and the information in the self-assessment report. All these elements are vital to form a more considered opinion about the quality of the establishment in question.

In most cases the expert panels refer to the site visit in the final report, and the programme is normally annexed to the report.

2.6 NOKUT

2.6.1 Purpose of the site visit

NOKUT performs site visits for a number of quality assurance purposes. The following describes site visits in the context of quality audits. Quality audits deal with the evaluation of quality assurance systems, which all Norwegian universities and university colleges are required to carry out under the present governmental regulations.

Central to the approach of quality audits is the fact that the material documenting the institution's quality work, as presented to the expert panel, should be "authentic", i.e. it shall not be produced for the sake of NOKUT's evaluation, but already be in place, documenting the continuous quality work already taking place at the institution. From this starting point, NOKUT is presently taking a minor deviation from this principle in the present second cycle of quality audits (NOKUT finished the first six-year cycle of audits last year after having evaluated all systems at all institutions once), where the institution's management are being asked for a brief "position paper" assessing the present status and challenges in their internal quality work.

As for the purpose of the site visit, it is basically twofold in the Norwegian context: verification and exploration/clarification. Since there is no self-assessment presented for these evaluations, the core questions for the expert panels might often be put this way: Are the quality procedures and routines described in the written documentation really taking place "on the ground", and to what extent? Are the practices described in the documentation well known among all relevant groups (student, teachers, staff, etc.)?

In their final report, the expert panel shall conclude whether or not they recommend that NOKUT's board should approve the institution's quality assurance system. In the final meeting of the site visit (with the institution's management) the panel is expected to indicate the direction in which their judgement will go (approval/non-approval/uncertain). As the final judgement should always be in the report, panels are advised not to make oral statements in the final meeting that will tie them to a certain conclusion before they have gone through all the material collected through the interviews at the institutions and have compared this to the written material.

2.6.2 Preparation for the site visit

NOKUT's consultants (or "project leaders") study the documentation sent from the institution and will normally collect key quantitative figures on the institution and its educational activities (e.g. it's size, the number of students passing their exams, the qualifications and competences of the teachers, etc.). New routines for the collection and use of these key figures are presently being worked out within NOKUT.

Preparation of the experts

NOKUT's quality audits currently involve two site visits per audit. NOKUT will normally meet with the expert panel the evening before the first (one-day, introductory) visit to the institution.

For the quality audits, the experts are appointed to a "pool" of experts for one year, and will normally receive one day of general training as part of an annual two-day seminar for all quality audit experts. For any particular audit they later take part in, they will receive the relevant written material, including their mandate, present regulations, NOKUT's criteria for the evaluation of quality assurance systems, etc.

NOKUT does not make use of interview guides in quality audits.

The programme for the main (second) visit is established after the introductory visit. During the introductory visit - having discussed the status of the quality work at the institution with the institution's management - the expert panel should decide which aspects, if any, of the institution's quality assurance system should be subjected to closer scrutiny. The programme will then be planned accordingly.

Normally, NOKUT's consultant on behalf of the expert panel will then discuss the practicalities and details of the programme with the institution in the period between the two visits.

2.6.3 Execution of the site visit

The introductory visit is for one day only, and will normally consist of a two-hour meeting with the institution's management and one or two internal meetings for the panel. The main visit does not have a set duration but, depending on the issues that the panel wants to study more closely, the size of the institution, etc., will normally last 2 or 3 days. The programmes are specially set up

for each visit, but there will be a number of recurring themes, such as interviews with students and teachers at different levels.

Interviews form the core of the site visit, but there will also be internal meetings for the panels and normally also sessions of documentation (additional, not previously sent) studies and some kind of “guided tour” of the institution. As interview guides are not used, the interviews are normally loosely structured around key issues pointed out by each expert panel. Each panel has an appointed leader (one of the experts) who will lead each interview session.

NOKUT’s consultant will hold a low profile during the interviews, but if necessary will answer direct questions concerning the evaluation’s procedures, rules and regulations. During the panel’s internal meetings, the consultant from NOKUT can give advice on how to proceed in order to cover all the criteria and similar questions of formal character. NOKUT’s consultant acts as the panel’s secretary and takes notes during the interviews.

The expert panel conducts the interviews.

2.6.4 Use of data from the site visit

The data from the site visits are used in the panel’s final report as an independent source of information, and answers given to the panel will often be referred to in the report. However, this is done in a way that will not identify individual persons.

3 Discussion of similarities and differences between site visit approaches

3.1 Discussion between ACE Denmark and Höskoleverket

3.1.1 Purpose of the site visit

The purpose of the site visit seems to be more or less the same at Höskoleverket and ACE Denmark. The site visit is an integrated part of the accreditation/assessment process, and the aim is to provide additional information and clarification in order for the experts to form their opinion.

Within the framework of this project, Höskoleverket's visit was part of an ex ante accreditation of a study programme, whereas ACE Denmark's site visit was part of an ex post accreditation of a study programme. This difference is, among other things, reflected in the members of the expert panel.

In Höskoleverket's visit, the visiting party consisted of the two academic experts (typically professors within the relevant field) who have to assess the study programme, a chairperson (hired by Höskoleverket to participate at several (or all) site visits), and a consultant from Höskoleverket.

In ACE Denmark's visit, the visiting party consisted of the expert panel: one academic expert (typically a professor within the relevant field), one student representative and one employer representative; and two consultants from ACE Denmark.

3.1.2 Preparation for the site visit

The consultants from ACE Denmark play a more active part in the preparation for the site visit than the consultant from Höskoleverket. For example, the consultants from ACE Denmark lead the discussion and prepare a draft of preliminary questions. Even though the experts have the final say, the preparations are to a great extent made by the consultants. At Höskoleverket, the chairperson (one of the experts) usually takes this role, and the consultant assists the chairperson in this. In the case of master applications, the chairperson's function is to "calibrate" the statements based on the assessments from the experts.

At ACE Denmark, as well as at Höskoleverket, the panel members are introduced to the concept and their role at a meeting or seminar with the agency. A subsequent one-day meeting at ACE Denmark focuses on the specific study programme and preparing the site visit. This corresponds to the preparatory meeting Höskoleverket holds. The impression was that the meeting at ACE Denmark was more focused, or stringent, perhaps due to the elaborated description of the criteria, calling for a more structured walkthrough – criterion by criterion. Another reason may be the more active role played by the consultants from ACE Denmark in guiding the experts.

During the preparatory meeting at ACE Denmark, the assessment criteria are thoroughly discussed and summarised with a preliminary assessment/statement. A draft list of questions is compiled by the consultants from ACE Denmark and discussed with the experts, who decide which questions they think should be asked. At Höskoleverket the discussion is more "open" or unstructured, focusing on the themes of strengths and weaknesses.

The guidelines for the accreditation of Danish University Programmes (“Vejledning om akkreditering og godkendelse af eksisterende universitetsuddannelser”) describe the criteria in more detail than in Sweden. Because of this, the site visits and the preparations seem to be more focused on specific questions. At Höskoleverket the specific questions or criteria need to be invented by the panel each time. Sometimes this can be good, especially when adjusting the criteria to the programme in question. Sometimes the panel appreciates this element of freedom to invent specific criteria or questions. On the downside, this approach makes the process a bit more time-consuming. It is also a risk that “fine-tuning” between different assessments becomes more difficult with the approach of Höskoleverket.

3.1.3 Execution of the site visit

The general structures of the site visits exhibit strong similarities. Both site visits included meetings with internal institutional representatives, representing the management, teachers and students, respectively.

At Höskoleverket, the meetings with the management consist of a meeting with the central institutional management as well as a meeting with the management related to the particular study programme (head of faculty, director of study programme). Thus a higher, strategic level of management is included in the visit. Both site visits conclude with a second meeting with the management (at study programme level).

Höskoleverket’s individual meetings typically last between 30 and 45 minutes, while ACE Denmark’s individual meetings typically last between 45 and 75 minutes. This probably reflects the higher number of criteria and points of assessment in the Danish accreditation system. However, the general impression from both site visits was that not all points of assessment are included in the discussions between the experts and institutional representatives. Thus, only the matters deemed most in need of clarification by the experts (as discussed at the preparatory meeting or as a result of new issues that surface during the meetings) are brought up.

As in the preparatory meeting, the consultants from ACE Denmark have a more active role in the site visit, often asking supplementary questions, keeping time and making introductory remarks. In the Höskoleverket model, these functions are handled by the chairperson. In both systems the consultant(s) are responsible for taking notes.

The use of the chairperson at Höskoleverket serves to make a clearer distinction between the role/authority of the quality assurance agency and the experts. The use of a chairperson can also downplay some of the potential conflicts regarding “ownership” of the assessment (experts vs. quality assurance agency).

This structure probably also reflects the different roles played by the agencies in the final decision. In Sweden there are two parties involved in the process: the experts and Höskoleverket. The experts make the assessment and Höskoleverket makes the final decision (or in some cases recommendations to the government). In Denmark there are three parties involved in the process: the panel, ACE Denmark and the national accreditation council. The panel makes the assessments; ACE Denmark makes a concluding recommendation; but the authority to decide on the outcome of the accreditation rests with the national accreditation council. Thus, the decision-making authority of Höskoleverket could be seen as supporting a clearer distinction between the experts and the agency.

3.1.4 Use of data from the site visit

The use of data partly reflects the role of the experts in the writing of the report/assessment.

In the Höskoleverket model, the experts make their assessment individually and after the meeting. They, therefore, have time to reflect and re-read parts of the documentation handed in by the institutions before they send in their co-authored written assessment (5-8 pages per application) to the chairperson, who coordinates all the written assessments and is responsible for consistency and calibration.

In the model used by ACE Denmark, the panel makes an assessment at the end of the site visit. The consultants then write the reports (35-45 pages) on the basis of the discussions at the preparatory meeting, the site visit and the assessment meeting. The consultants also have the responsibility for the consistency of the assessments. The report is sent to the experts for correction and validation, and then on, as part of a hearing process, to the university to avoid factual mistakes and misunderstandings.

In both systems the site visit is crucial to the assessment, as it serves as a direct source of information for the experts. Nevertheless, the importance of the site visit is perhaps not fully reflected in the final reports, where factual conditions are favoured over impressions.

Perhaps there is a tendency in Högskoleverket to use information and impressions from the site visit more often in the written assessment and final report. One reason for this could be that the descriptions of the criteria are more detailed in the written guidelines of ACE Denmark. If broader aspects are used, as in the case of Högskoleverket, more questions need to be followed up at the interviews.

3.2 Discussion between EVA and NOKUT

3.2.1 Purpose of the site visit

In the present NOQA-project, the site visits that have been explored by EVA and NOKUT have been site visits in different contexts. NOKUT conducted a site visit in relation to an audit of an institution's quality assurance system, while EVA conducted a site visit in relation to an accreditation of an existing programme. A substantial number of the differences between NOKUT's and EVA's approaches to site visits can be explained by these different contexts. However, there are still quite a number of similarities between the approaches.

NOKUT and EVA both conduct site visits with the twofold purpose of verification and exploration/clarification of written material that the institution/programme has submitted to the agency prior to the site visit. Both agencies use the site visit as a means of gathering information for the expert panel in order for them to approve or disapprove of the institution's programmes or quality assurance systems.

3.2.2 Preparation for the site visit

Preparation of the agencies

Approaches to preparation of the agencies' consultants within NOKUT and EVA are largely the same. The consultants prepare for the site visit by reading the documentation from the institution/programme in order to make the first assessment of the quality of the issues in question (see above). As for EVA, the consultants also prepare for the site visit through internal discussions of the material, the project leader's introduction to the visit, and through the initial meeting with the expert panel.

Preparation of the expert panels

There is quite a substantial difference between the ways the two agencies prepare the experts for the site visits. As for NOKUT, the experts for quality audits are appointed for a number of audits within a one year period, and they receive one day of general training for audit experts, including an introduction to the site visit. As for EVA, the experts receive some general written information on the task at hand, and they all attend a half day information meeting at which the whole process of accreditation is introduced. At the preliminary expert panel meeting for each individual expert panel, EVA's consultant ends the day's discussions with an introduction to the site visit. However, there is no actual training in interview techniques, etc. The observed differences between the agencies' practices when it comes to appointing and preparing the expert panels are, for the most part, again probably due to the different aims of the evaluations covered here: the experts in quality audits are selected mainly for their general expertise in quality assurance work and for their management experience in institutions. In this sense, they are "generalists" that can evaluate any institution's quality assurance system. In programme accreditations, panel members are experts in the programme's subject field, or possess knowledge of the relevant labour market.

And while similar programmes can of course be accredited by the same panel, the perspectives in appointing experts for several accreditation processes at the same time would be limited.

Preparation of the institutions

In the present second cycle of audits, NOKUT introduces the site visit to the institution by carrying out an introductory site visit of a couple of hours' duration approximately one month prior to the main visit. This first meeting between the expert panel and the institution serves the purpose of introducing the expert panel and the institution to each other. (In the first audit cycle there were introductory meetings between the institutions and NOKUT at an administrative level only). The institution has the opportunity to introduce their quality assurance systems, etc., while the expert panel has the opportunity to let the institution know what they intend to focus on at the main site visit.

EVA's approach to introducing the site visit to the institution is rather different in the sense that representatives from all the programmes are invited to an information meeting at EVA prior to the commencement of the entire accreditation process. At this meeting, they are introduced to the whole process, from writing a self-assessment report to the final assessment of the expert panel. During this one day introduction to the process, the site visit is touched upon, as are all other dimensions of the accreditation process.

3.2.3 Execution of the site visit

The programme for the site visit

NOKUT conducts an introductory site visit of about 2-3 hours' duration, where the expert panel meets with the management of the institution. About one month later, NOKUT conducts the main visit of 2-3 days' duration, where the expert panel meets with different groups (see below) and discusses different aspects of the institution's quality assurance system. The programme for the main visit varies from audit to audit depending on the issues, the size of the institution, the quality of the documentation from the institution, etc. The site visit always ends with the expert panel meeting with the institution's management for a second time, where the expert panel presents its preliminary conclusions to the management.

EVA works with a fixed programme for all accreditation site visits, where there is a specific order for the interviewed groups, and the duration of each interview is fixed. The site visit always starts and ends with an interview with the management of the programme in order for the expert panel to round off the day with questions to the management concerning issues that have been raised during the day's interviews. However, the expert panel's conclusions are made following the final interview with the management, and these conclusions are not revealed to the management before they receive the report for hearing.

Who are interviewed?

For NOKUT, the recurring groups that are always interviewed are the management, the students and the teachers. Apart from this, the expert panel can choose who else they would like to interview. This could, for example, be students with positions of trust in the student bodies, quality assurance managers, programme coordinators, etc.

For EVA, the site visit programme is, as mentioned, always fixed, which means that the expert panel always meets with the management, the students, the teachers, the person responsible for the practical trainee part of the educational programme and a guided tour of the programme's facilities.

What is the form of the site visit?

The site visits that NOKUT conduct are run by the expert panel. The panel has an appointed chairperson who introduces the day, welcomes all the interviewees, presents the management with the preliminary conclusions at the end of the visit, etc. All the experts contribute to the interviews with questions, but it is the chairperson of the panel who leads the meeting and lets the other experts contribute with questions. The experts have decided upon some overall themes that they want to explore with each interviewed group, and on the basis of this they conduct each in-

terview as an unstructured interview in which each question may open new aspects that the experts may explore. They do not, therefore, follow a list of questions, and this leaves room for probing into issues that spontaneously show themselves as relevant for the final assessment of the quality assurance system of the institution. The NOKUT consultants adopt a low profile during the visit, where they take notes, assist the expert panel if necessary between the interviews and ask clarification questions.

As for the site visits conducted by EVA, EVA's consultant functions as the chairperson of the meeting, with tasks such as introducing the day's agenda, keeping time and making sure that all relevant areas of the interview guide are covered. The consultant thus takes on a more active role during the site visit than the NOKUT counterpart does. The experts have the responsibility for the interview, and they are each usually allocated a set of criteria to be responsible for. Again, however, EVA's consultant may at times ask additional questions if the proposed questions do not cover all relevant issues, or are necessary for clarification. At the end of the day, the expert panel and the EVA consultant hold an internal meeting where they agree on the assessment of each criterion. The conclusions of this meeting are drawn up in the final report which is drafted by the consultant.

3.2.4 Use of data from the site visit

Both agencies use the data from the site visit as a supplement to the written documentation presented by the institution/programme. The final reports draw on examples and issues brought up during the site visit. However, both agencies are very careful to ensure that no information can be traced back to individuals that have been interviewed by the expert panel.

3.3 Discussion between FINHEEC and Iceland

3.3.1 Purpose of the site visit

In Iceland, site visits are essential to programme evaluations, institutional evaluation, accreditations and future quality audits. In Finland, site visits are part of audits, thematic evaluations and centres of excellence evaluations. FINHEEC do not currently perform accreditations. Site visits are organised by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture in Iceland. In Finland, they are organised by FINHEEC, an independent expert body. Both countries use the reports of the institutions (for example self-evaluations, SWOT analyses) as background material for the site visits.

In Iceland, the main purpose of the site visits is to verify and comment on the content of a self-evaluation report. In Finland, the aim is to ascertain whether the quality assurance system in higher education institutions conforms to its stated objectives. Both countries publish general guidelines/audit manuals on the Internet.

3.3.2 Preparation for the site visit

In Iceland, the Ministry has issued a three year plan (2009-2012) for external evaluations. In Finland, FINHEEC issues an action plan for every four years. In May 2009, 33 out of 49 institutions had been audited.

The Ministry in Iceland is responsible for organising and planning external evaluations. However, in order to ensure objectivity, the Ministry is not involved in executing the evaluations and recruits an external consultant/secretary to assist the expert panel prior to, during and after the stay in Iceland. In Finland, the personnel of FINHEEC manage the organisation of site visits and other secretarial duties. FINHEEC has one project manager and one backup person for each audit.

An adviser in the Ministry in Iceland and the project manager in FINHEEC have many similar duties, including: finding experts for the external evaluation; preparing agreements and other documents; planning the site visit and issuing a bulletin of the results for the media; organising the meetings of the expert group; reading the pre-material; acting as a secretary in the expert group meetings and at the site visit; assisting the expert group in writing the final report. In both countries, the institution nominates a contact person for the evaluation.

In Iceland, the working language of all evaluations is English. In Finland, only two out of 30 audits carried out so far have been in English. In FINHEEC, all auditors must have participated in the auditor training organised by FINHEEC. The training includes the following themes: the role of FINHEEC as a national and international evaluator; presentation of the audit premises, objectives and method; the task and operating principles of the audit; the implementation of the audit visit; audit techniques and questions; and the analysis of audit materials and reporting. In Iceland, there is no formal training of the expert panel for conducting interviews. However, the task of the expert panel is defined in a contract, and the tasks are explained by e-mail and during the first meeting of the expert group, with particular focus on the role of the expert panel and the purpose of the site visit. The expert panels in Iceland and Finland meet prior to and after the site visit to plan the work and divide the tasks.

In Iceland, the institutions are informed about the external evaluation by a formal letter from the Ministry. In Finland the institution and the agency make an agreement, wherein they agree when the site visit shall take place. FINHEEC organises an information seminar for staff of the institution before the site visit. In the accreditation process in Iceland, formal introductory meetings for the institutions are organised.

3.3.3 Execution of the site visit

Both in Iceland and Finland, the programmes for the site visits are prepared in cooperation with the institutions. In Finland, the first and the third day of a site visit have fixed programmes. In Finland, the chairperson and the secretary of the expert group visit the institution prior to the site visit. In Iceland and Finland, the duration of the visit depends on the type of evaluation. In Iceland, a site visit in the context of an accreditation or a follow-up accreditation takes 1 day, and a site visit in the context of a programme evaluation or institutional evaluation can run for up to 5 days. In Finland, a site visit for a centres of excellence evaluation is 1 day, and site visits for audits usually take 2.5 days, although if the institution has a large number of students, a site visit can last up to 5 days.

A number of things are similar for both agencies, including the fact that all relevant stakeholders are interviewed, i.e. the management, the academic staff, the students and the external stakeholders. The interviews are also semi-structured. In Iceland, they can also take the form of an open dialogue. The meetings are chaired by the chairperson of the external panel. Notes are taken by the appointed secretary/consultant. Each member of the expert panel also takes personal notes. The chairperson of the external expert panel is responsible for conducting the interviews, but an active contribution is expected from other members of the expert panel. The secretary of the expert panel listens and takes notes but does not participate in the interview. The FINHEEC secretary can ask complementary questions, if needed.

The meetings take place according to specific themes set out in the guidelines for the external evaluation. There are no specific interview guides with fixed interview questions. The institution gets preliminary feedback from the expert group about their strengths, good practices and recommendations.

3.3.4 Use of data from the site visit

In Iceland and Finland, the final judgement is presented in the report of the expert panel. The report reflects the panel discussions and the information material provided before and during the site visit. Both in Finland and Iceland, the evaluations are based on the enhancement-led principle. This means that all reports include feedback on strengths, good practices and recommendations.

4 Overall discussions and conclusions

4.1 Overall discussions

The project team presented the project and the highlights of their discussions at the annual NOQA meeting in Denmark, 20 - 21 May 2010.

Here the participants were divided into two workshops to discuss some of the important issues identified by the project team. One workshop discussed issues related to the purpose of the site visits and the use of data from the site visits. The other workshop discussed issues regarding the execution of the site visits. During the workshop, and in the following general discussion, a number of interesting observations and viewpoints were presented.

A central aspect of the discussion was the use of interviews at site visits as a source of information. Interviewing relevant groups and persons at the institutions is normally the central element of all site visits in audits and accreditations. Asking questions and carefully writing down the answers to them is basically what expert panels (and agency consultants) do when visiting the institutions. This being the case, there is however, in practice, still little doubt about the supremacy of the presented written documentation in cases where the oral and written representations of an issue differ. The written version is considered the "official" representation and forms the basis of what eventually goes into the reports.

Most of the seminar participants believed that cases of conflicting evidence (oral vs. written) are important observations in themselves, and that such instances would be noted in the report. Others, however, pointed out that the element of verification is still important from the viewpoint that the institutions "can send us anything". It was also considered important to use interviews to "measure commitment". Written material can offer little in this respect. Also of importance is the fact that evaluations and site visits are not solely about control; interviews are meeting places where the experts can offer advice and recommendations to the institution and thereby serve the goal of enhancement as well. One of the participants also stressed that the value of answers given in interviews can vary considerably depending on the particular criterion in question. As a final observation, more than one of the participants had experienced that evaluations that were likely to end with a negative result for an institution due to the questionable quality of the written material, could still end with a positive result based on the answers given in interviews.

The group still believed that it is important to be aware of the limitations and problems involved when conducting site visit interviews. For instance, the agencies can only partially control who is selected for interview, and how they are prepared or trained (if at all), and that persons interviewed will often defend their own institution. From an overall perspective, it was still considered important that institutions should not be punished for being unable to "sell themselves" in interviews.

While the framework of the workshop did not allow for any in-depth discussions on how to improve on site visit interviews as a method, one of the participants did receive some support for his desire to make the interviews more systematic.

Another main issue was the more general question of the role of the experts on the site visits. There seem to be different ways in which the agencies organise the site visits; with the consultants playing either an unobtrusive or active role. The discussion revolved around whether the

consultants/project leaders should adopt an active or a passive role in relation to the institution and/or the experts.

The main dilemma was identified as a tension between the role of the experts and the role of the consultant/agency. From the agencies' perspective, we want to make the experts part of the process and be active, but we also want to have control over the process and secure consistency in the assessments. There was a general notion that the agencies' responsibility for ensuring consistency does make it difficult not to have some kind of control over the experts.

In this discussion, the distinction between peer-review vs. inspectorate was introduced. The degree to which the quality assurance procedure places emphasis on enhancement or control will be reflected in how peer-review vs. inspectorate is perceived, and thus the need for agency involvement.

Therefore, different evaluation procedures may call for different distributions of roles between the experts and the agency. If there is a strong enhancement approach in the evaluation, it is less important that the consultant is active. Accreditation requires more control on the part of the agency/consultant. Nonetheless, there are still differences in the levels of participation among, for example, accreditation site visits across the Nordic countries.

Other factors were also suggested as important for obtaining an optimal role distribution between agency and experts. These included the training of experts, careful recruitment of experts and systematic evaluation of the process (IQA).

As closure to the discussion, the question was not which extreme is best, i.e. strong or weak guidance of experts at site visits, but rather what is the best balance. The needs for consistency and an overall perspective were typical arguments in favour of active consultants. At the same time, all parties considered the peer-review structure of the evaluations essential. Experts are important, both for legitimacy and as real contributors.

4.2 Conclusions

The site visit is an indispensable part of the evaluation procedures of all agencies. As presented in the above descriptions and discussions, the main purpose of the site visit is to serve as a source of information that can be used for verification and/or exploration of the written information received beforehand.

In addition, from an overall perspective, the structures of the site visits show strong similarities. All agencies use expert panels that have received training; at the visits, the experts meet with management, staff and students; and the data from the site visit is reflected in the assessments and used in the reports.

Thus, one conclusion is that the overall structures and purposes of the site visits are similar across the Nordic countries. As noted in the introduction, this is not so surprising, since it shows compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines.

Major differences do exist between the ways the agencies organise their site visits. Some of these can be directly related to the evaluation procedure followed, e.g. in audits, the site visits stretch over several days, whereas accreditation site visits are usually conducted in one day. However, differences in organisation approaches cannot be fully explained by the differences between accreditation, evaluation or audit procedures. Matters such as the inherent focus of systems on enhancement or control, and established practices within the agencies do also play a part as explanatory factors.

Although this means that examples of "best practice" in site visits are hard to identify without taking contextual issues such as national regulations, the nature of the quality assurance systems or even "culture" into account, there remain a large number of learning points connected to different methods of overcoming commonly noted challenges in carrying out site visits.

For instance, Högskoleverket solves the question of securing consistency in assessments by using a panel chairperson that participates in all site visits (accreditation). NOKUT solves this by using experienced experts and hiring experts for longer periods (audits), while EVA and ACE Denmark solve this through the active participation of the consultants (accreditation).

Another common challenge is that students at the site visits should be representative of the entire student body of the institution or study programme. EVA ensures this by requesting that all student participants at the meetings have a certain birth date interval (random selection), and FINHEEC employs surprise visits to interview students. An altogether different approach that Högskoleverket plans to use in their new system is to undertake student surveys, and surveys to both alumni and enrolled students have been discussed. These surveys would complement the interview sessions with students at site visits.

However, the most important learning point might be the self-reflective insight gained from an exchange. As stated by one participant at the annual meeting, when developing new evaluation procedures, there is a very real risk of copying existing concepts and methods. Studying the site visits of other member agencies is an excellent way of thinking about or rethinking the national approach.