

Stakeholder cooperation within the Nordic agencies for quality assurance in higher education - similarities, differences and examples of good practice

Abstract

The Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education (NOQA) has chosen to focus on stakeholder cooperation in its annual joint project 2011. The main objective of the project is to create an understanding of different Nordic points of view and practices regarding stakeholder cooperation, in particular with respect to employers and other representatives of working life. By the end of the project we will hopefully have answered the questions below, made comparisons between the countries and drawn conclusions about convergence, non-convergence and examples of good practice within our different countries. The gathered knowledge will be disseminated at workshops for the staff at the Nordic Quality Assurance agencies' and interested stakeholders. We hope that sharing, discussing and comparing project findings with experienced colleagues from other countries at the INQAHEE conference in Madrid, will broaden and increase our knowledge further. This will hopefully have a positive impact upon the forthcoming workshops.

The main questions of the project are:

- What is the definition of a stakeholder in our different QA-contexts?
- Who are our main stakeholders?
- How and when do we cooperate with stakeholders?
- What are the benefits of stakeholder cooperation for different actors?
- What competencies are needed from stakeholders taking part in evaluations of higher education?
- How and where do we find relevant individuals representing working life?

Members in the ongoing NOQA stakeholder project and authors of the presentation:

Karin Agélii, Project Manager at the National Agency for Higher Education, Sweden

Stefán Baldursson, Director of the Office of Evaluation and Analysis at the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, Iceland

Karl Holm, Chief Planning Officer at the Finnish Higher Education Council, FINHEEC

Tove Blytt Holmen, Deputy Director General at the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education, NOKUT

Thomas Lange, Head of Section, ACE Denmark

Ellen Silleborg, Evaluation Officer, EVA, Denmark

Stakeholder cooperation within the Nordic agencies for quality assurance in higher education - similarities, differences and examples of good practice

The Nordic network and the stakeholder project

The neighbouring Nordic countries (i.e. Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) are often seen as a homogenous and coordinated cultural area including the sphere of higher education. In a sense the assumption is correct since the countries share a common history, language roots and have a long tradition of cooperation both political and popular. There are

however major cultural and political differences that have implications on how HE is organised and how quality within the different HEIs is perceived. This implies also the roles and the focus of the national QA-agencies in each country.

A network called The Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education (NOQA) has been established by the five Nordic countries and their respective national organizations engaged in evaluation and quality assurance of higher education. The network has convened on a regular basis since 1992. An important form of collaboration within NOQA is annual joint projects concerning interesting and important issues. In 2011 NOQA has chosen to focus on stakeholder cooperation in its annual project.

The main objective of the 2011 annual project is to create an understanding of different Nordic points of view, experiences and practices regarding stakeholder cooperation, in particular with respect to employers and other representatives of working life. The participating organisations will learn from each other by discussing and putting experiences down in writing, bringing forth mainly good examples which will strengthen the quality in respect to stakeholder cooperation. By the end of the project in May 2011, we will hopefully have made comparisons, drawn conclusions and found some examples of good practice within our different countries. We will then disseminate the gathered knowledge through workshops for the staff at the Nordic QA-agencies' interested stakeholders within our respective countries.

Sharing and discussing project findings so forth – convergence, non-convergence and examples of good practice – with QA-colleagues from other countries at the INQAHEE conference in Madrid, will broaden our scope even more and form a really good basis for the future workshops.

Some general challenges

A common situation in all Nordic countries is that the governments in each country have assigned one special agency (two in Denmark) to assure and nationally evaluate the quality of higher education. Increased stakeholder cooperation and transparency in the QA-processes are also often pinpointed by the governments as important means to reassure that the output of the HE sector is in line with the needs and requirements of the working life and society in general. Each of the Nordic QA-agencies thus share an overarching “struggle” to establish sustainable and open cooperation with stakeholders and establish accepted definitions of quality and common general understandings of how to measure quality in the context of higher education.

Within this “struggle” the Nordic QA-agencies are facing common challenges. One challenge concerns the fact that the QA-agencies should¹ have autonomous responsibility for their operations and see to that their conclusions and recommendations are not influenced by third parties such as higher education institutions, governments/ministries or other stakeholders. It is a delicate task for a governmentally installed QA-agency, financed by taxes, to keep its integrity, stay in line with its government's directions and invite representatives from HEIs and working life to discuss definitions of quality, new methods and alternative sources of knowledge of relevance for QA.

¹The Nordic and European quality assurance agencies need to comply with the European standards and guidelines for evaluation of higher education provided by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). One of the ENQA-standards is the QA-agencies independence from external pressure and that they are able to keep their integrity.

In all of the Nordic agencies the peer-review method is used in one way or another when evaluating. It is also common that the peer/expert groups include representatives from working life. If the definition of quality differs between the peers from HE and the representatives from working life the QA-agencies might be facing a quite serious problem. The usual and traditional reason for peers from the HE sector to engage in the national QA-activities is that they believe their work contributes to high quality in their own field of HE. If the peers, for some reason, start doubting this rationale they will no longer be willing to act as peers.

A tentative scenario in a peer-less QA-system is that “hard facts” which are easy to gather and measure, for example quantitative figures showing examination rates, retention/drop-out rates or transition rates from university to working life, becomes the main basis for evaluation. Qualitative aspects and pedagogical artefacts which need to be analysed and interpreted by HE-specialists, for example students’ thesis showing the level of learning outcome, will vanish. Swedish experiences imply that working life representatives would actually prefer a QA-system based on “hard facts” rather than a peer-review system.

Present situation in the Nordic countries

Denmark

Population 5,4 million. Higher education institutions approximately 40

The structure of the Danish accreditation system



ACE Denmark and Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA) is the two national accreditation operators which also includes the Accreditation Council.

From a legislative perspective, the responsibility for accreditation is laid down partly for ACE-Denmark in *The Danish Act on the Accreditation Agency for Higher Education* and partly for EVA in *the EVA Act, the Accreditation Act, the Order of the Danish Ministry of Education on accreditation* and *The Order of the Danish Ministry of Culture on accreditation*.

ACE Denmark is the operator for the study programmes under the auspices of the Ministry of Science. ACE Denmark prepares accreditation reports for the higher education study programmes at the eight Danish universities. These offer research based programmes, and are regulated by the Ministry of Science in the Danish University Act (Universitetsloven). There are approximately 1,050 study programmes, educating approximately 121,000 students. ACE

Denmark is the operator of accreditation of these research based higher education programmes in the university sector.

The Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA) prepares accreditation reports for the higher education study programmes. They do so for eight University Colleges (Professionshøjskoler) and ten Academies of professional higher education (Erhvervsakademier). Both EVA and the University Colleges and Academies are regulated by the Ministry of Education throughout different laws. EVA also does accreditation for study programmes under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture and others.

ACE Denmark and EVA collect national and international experience of relevance to accreditation. ACE Denmark and EVA also identify and appoint groups of experts for the programmes under review and ask the institutions to comment on the members and the composition of each panel. The panels meet to discuss the documentation reports and for existing programmes they prepare the site visits. An accreditation report from ACE Denmark and EVA is a systematic review of a study programme aiming to assess whether the programme meets the predefined criteria.

Study programmes operated under ACE Denmark are assessed on the basis of five predefined relevance and quality criteria laid down by the Minister for Science in the Accreditation Order. The criteria can be divided into three columns:

Criteria column I	Criteria column II	Criteria column III
The labour market's demand for the study programme	Research-based study programme	Academic profile and level of the study programme as well as internal quality assurance
- Criterion 1: Demand for the study programme	- Criterion 2: The study programme is research-based and is associated with an active, highquality research environment	- Criterion 3: Academic profile of the study programme and learning outcome targets - Criterion 4: Structure and organisation of the study programme - Criterion 5: Continuous internal quality assurance of the study programme

Study programmes operated under EVA are assessed on the basis on predefined criteria. The table below shows the criteria described in *The Order of the Danish Ministry of Education on accreditation* by the Ministry of Education:

Program	Criteria focus
New study programmes for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional bachelor's degree • Diploma study programmes • Vocational academy programmes. 	1. Relevance and demand 2. Learning outcome 3. Structure.
New local provision for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional bachelor's degree • Diploma study programmes • Vocational academy programmes. 	1. Demand and recruiter contact 2. Work experience placements 3. Structure 4. Knowledge base 5. Technical environment 6. Facilities and resources 7. Quality assurance.
Existing programmes for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vocational academy programmes • Professional bachelor's programmes. 	1. Employment 2. Recruiter and graduate 3. Profession base 4. Development base in relation to profession 5. Development base in relation to research knowledge 6. Learning outcome 7. Content and structure 8. Teachers 9. Work experience placement 10. QA of work experience placement 11. Facilities and resources 12. Internationalisation 13. QA of the internationalisation 14. Systematic and continuous QA 15. Completion 16. Assessment of learning outcome 17. Attainment of learning outcome.

Finland

Population 5,4 million. Higher education institutions 44.

The main method by Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council FINHEEC is audit of quality assurance system. The audit has been processed since 2005. Second phase of the process has been launched for the years 2011-2017. FINHEEC pursues also programme and thematic evaluations and evaluations of centres of excellence in education.

There are twelve council members, eight from HEI's of both higher education sectors (four universities and four universities of applied sciences), two representatives from the working life and two students. The council is nominated by the minister of education. The aim is to develop Finnish HEIs and their international competitiveness by means of evaluations, support to quality assurance, supply of comparative data, recommendations for development, and diffusion of good practices. FINHEEC produces up-to-date information for the Ministry of Education and Culture and other stakeholders in support of evidence-based decisionmaking and development.

FINHEEC appoints the panel members. Usually the panel is composed of 5-6 members, three or four of whom are HEI exponents of both higher education sectors, one student representative and one work life representative. There are no specific qualification requirements for the panel members but a training is organised for all members

The FINHEEC evaluations use an enhancement-led approach. The aim is to help higher education institutions to identify the strengths and good practices in their operations as well as development targets. Enhancement-led evaluation supports the institutions in realising their own strategic aims and targeting their future development and also engenders constant development. The key procedures in enhancement-led evaluation are varied, inclusive evaluation methods and the incorporation of external evaluation into the everyday work and normal development of the higher education institutions. The enhancement-led approach is used in all the phases of the FINHEEC evaluation process: as part of planning, implementation, reporting and follow-up. Consequences are merely indirect what comes for financing or existing of particular institution or programme.

According to the provision, FINHEEC is an independent expert body, which means independent responsibility for its operation. Further, 'independence' means that the evaluation findings, conclusions and recommendations are independent from the influence of third parties, such as the higher education institutions, ministries or other parties concerned. In operating in the Evaluation Council, the members of the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council are independent experts. They do not represent their own background organization but seek to promote quality enhancement in all the higher education institutions under review and the development of the Finnish higher education system as a whole.

The Evaluation Council shall appoint planning and evaluation groups for evaluation projects and chairpersons to the groups. Deputies may also be appointed for the group members. The chairperson of a planning group is generally elected from the members of the Evaluation Council, which promotes the flow of information between the planning group and the Council.

An important duty is stakeholder cooperation. FINHEEC has defined its key national and international stakeholders, which include the HEIs, the Ministry of Education and Culture, rectors' councils and student organisations as well as various evaluation organisations and their networks such as the ENQA.

The central goal of stakeholder cooperation is to maintain close contacts with the higher education sector and other stakeholders and the ability to react to observations received from these sources. Relationships are maintained by participating in various events and by organising high-quality seminars and education services. FINHEEC maintains active contact with the most important stakeholders.

FINHEEC's goal is to engage in mutually developing cooperation and to provide qualitative data on HEI activities. The aim is to be the trendsetter for national stakeholders in quality assurance and international development of the field. Thus, the aims of stakeholder cooperation are concentrated on the consolidation of the social significance of higher education evaluation activities. FINHEEC aims at being the national and international forerunner in evaluation activities. The bottom line of the activities is to promote high-quality and competitive higher education. Relationships are maintained by participating in various

events and by organising high-quality seminars and education services. National quality assurance agencies should maintain active contacts with the most important stakeholders.

Iceland

population 320 000. Higher education institutions 7.

The Minister of Education, Science and Culture has recently established an independent international quality board responsible for quality control of teaching and research in higher education institutions. The quality board should be fully operational in 2011. The board will be responsible for the design and implementation of the method for external quality assurance to cover all the higher education institutions in Iceland. The methodology will include at least three foci: the management of quality at the level of the institution; the management of quality at the programme/faculty level; and the management of the quality of research with a particular emphasis on the impact of research on teaching and learning. The methodology should embrace all award-bearing taught courses - both undergraduate and post-graduate.

In the University Act, and corresponding rules, there are no direct references to the social partners. So, from a legal standpoint, there is not obligation to involve working life representatives in the evaluation of universities. However, as tertiary education has become a central means by which young adults equip themselves for working life, the Ministry attempts to include representatives from working life in evaluation panels.

The main role of the labour markets representatives in the evaluation process is to participate in evaluation panels. In addition, the Ministry may consult working life on a ad hoc basis.

There is no formal procedure used to select working life representatives. In practice, however, the Ministry consults labour professional associations, labour market associations, individuals and, in some cases universities, when searching for individuals to take a seat in evaluation panels. For panel members No formal qualifications required. Generally we look for individuals with Master or Ph.d. degree, and good work experience, in the respective or related fields. Program evaluations are generally enhanced oriented, and therefore not high-risk evaluations, but if findings indicate serious flaws in the conditions or management of the program the Minister may initiate a formal accreditation process that can lead to a termination of the accreditation.

Question related to stakeholder cooperation in Iceland are:

1. How can working life contribute to the evaluation of universities?
2. What should be avoided in labor market's involvement in the evaluation process?
3. What sort of qualifications are we looking for in working life representatives?

Norway

Population 4,7 million. Higher education institutions 41.

Commissioned by the Norwegian government, The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in education (NOKUT) is responsible for the national quality assurance of Norwegian higher education. The model for quality assurance is a composite model with different tools in interaction.

All quality assurance is based on the institution's self-accrediting powers to establish new study programmes depending on which category of higher education institution the institution belongs to:

- A university has self-accrediting powers to establish any study programme both in first, second and third cycle.
- A specialised university has self-accrediting powers to establish any study programme both in first, second and third cycle within the field of specialisation.
- An accredited university college has self-accrediting powers to establish any study programme within the first cycle
- An unaccredited college has no self-accrediting powers.

NOKUT's mandate regarding supervision of educational quality in higher education is as follows:

1. Initial accreditation of study programmes in first, second and third cycle initiated by application from an institution without sufficient self-accrediting power.
2. Initial institutional accreditation initiated by application from an institution that wants to become accredited in new HEI category (as mentioned above).
3. Assessing internal systems for institutional quality assurance (audit). Obligatory and cyclical, at least every sixth year.
4. Direct supervision of quality in all higher education irrespectively of institutional category. On indications of severe failure in quality, the supervision may result in re-accreditation of the study programme(s) in question. The procedure for supervision of existing higher education, however, are so new that the details (policies and praxis) are not yet fully formulated or tested in reality. It is therefore a bit difficult to describe them clearly within this NOQA project.

Outside their self-accrediting powers, the institutions may apply to NOKUT to get accreditation needed to establish study programmes, see initial accreditation no 1 above. Criteria for accreditation are decided by NOKUT. For initial accreditation of study programmes NOKUT will appoint experts with high academic competencies. The experts will assess the application as it is, mainly paper based. An exemption is for initial accreditation concerning studies in third cycle (Phd) where the expert panel also includes a ph.d. student and will make a site visit.

Concerning initial institutional accreditation, no 2 above, NOKUT appoints an expert panel, including an expert from abroad, of which one member is a student and one member is representing society in general.

If supervision of existing activity ends up in re-accreditation, NOKUT will also appoint an expert panel with a student member, the others having relevant academic competencies including an expert from abroad.

NOKUT is working in cooperation with external stakeholders represented by students, institutions, labour market and society in general through more activities than the expert panels:

- The Ministry appoints the NOKUT Board, consisting of representatives for institutions, students and labour market.
- When making site visits, the panels will interview separately both students and representatives from relevant labour market or society in general.
- Annual conferences concerning quality assurance in higher education is open to active participation for all parties.

NOKUT has a constant focus on efficiency and effectiveness. If involving stakeholders, means that their share in expert panels will increase, this has to be reflected in the aims and ambitions of external quality assurance and the money and time set for that purpose. We certainly have to discuss what will be the added value. In that discussion we do have to bear in mind that the institutions themselves are those who develop the content of studies, train the students and thereby are the producers of knowledge for society. Will not this be the most important arena for interaction of the different stakeholders?

Sweden

Population 9,4 million. Higher education institutions 52.

Two main QA-activities

Commissioned by the Swedish government The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (SNAHE) is responsible for the Swedish national QA-system for HE. For the time being the system consists of two main assessment activities:

- Initial accreditation² of subjects and programmes on first cycle level (candidate exam) and second cycle level (magister and master exam) as well as on PhD-level. The initial accreditation activity focus on reviewing - on request from HEIs - the prerequisites and planned processes for not yet started programmes/subject exams.
- Re-accreditation of all subjects and programmes on first and second cycle³ during the period of 2011-2014. The re-accrediting activity is to assess how well the achieved learning outcomes (showed foremost in student theses) goes with the intended learning outcomes (ILOs) stated in the Higher Education Ordinance. The expert groups within a re-accreditation project are to give each evaluated programme/exam a score on a three graded scale. Programmes with the lowest score have one year to improve their shortcomings. If they don't improve SNAHE withdraws the HEIs permission to conduct the programme. Programmes with the highest grade will contribute with small financial award to their HEI.

The re-accrediting procedures are however so new that the details (policies and praxis) are not yet fully formulated or tested in reality. It is therefore a bit difficult to describe them clearly within the NOQA project.

Implementation of the new re-accreditation system

In July 2010 SNAHE got an assignment from the Swedish government to design, implement and see to that a new national system for re-accreditation of education at first and second

²To get a permission to establish a new program/subject exam a HEI has to apply to SNAHE and go through the initial accreditation process. Some HEIs have the right to start new programs without permission from SNAHE. They however have to go through SNAHEs re-accrediting procedures.

³ The government has commissioned SNAHE to develop a structure for re-accreditation on PhD-level as soon as possible.

cycle would be ready to start in January 2011. The government clearly pointed out that the system should reflect current political intensions of increasing autonomy for the HEIs. The government also stated that SNAHE should work out the new system in cooperation with three main stakeholders:

- the higher education institutions, represented mainly by the Association of Swedish Higher Education.
- the students, represented by the Swedish National Union of Students.
and
- representatives from working life (mostly civil servants at large sector and employers' associations and trade unions).

Reference group

During the creation and implementation of the new re-accreditation system SNAHE established a reference group consisting of representatives from the three stakeholder groups. The status of the reference group has been consultative. A discontent with the way the government and SNAHE have dealt with the cooperation with working life has been expressed by some of the working life associations. The complaints directed towards SNAHE have mainly concerned the choice of working life representatives in the reference group and that there are too few representatives from working life in the expert groups conducting the actual evaluations.

Ad hoc meetings

To meet the discontent leaders from SNAHE at different levels have organized ad hoc meetings with different associations on many occasions. The question for the moment is whether the reference group should linger on in the same or a different constellation or if SNAHE will declare its mission completed now when the re-assessing cycle has started.

Expert panels with representatives from working life

The government also stated in its assignment that every re-accreditation project should engage expert groups that include representatives from the three stakeholders, i.e. HE-staff, students and working life representatives. The task of the expert groups is to conduct analyses and judgements mainly of how well the student theses' meet the requirements in the national ILOs. The expert groups are also to meet with staff (leaders, administrators and teachers/researchers) and students at site visits. And in the end of the assessment the expert group members must agree on a judgement on a three graded scale showing how well each programme reach the ILOs.

Nomination of experts

The experts from each stakeholder group are nominated by representative associations. SNAHE sends a letter to the associations and invites them to nominate suitable persons. It has been noticed that the invited associations sometimes stands for different views for example on how to increase the employability of students and thus whom they would like to see as representatives for working life in the expert groups. SNAHE is currently trying to establish policies and praxis etc. for choosing/appointing certain nominating associations.

Consultation meetings

According to the governments' assignment working life representatives - from suitable sector/employers organisations, trade unions and important employers - are also invited to a consultation meeting in the beginning of every re-accreditation process. At the meeting the SNAHE staff, and if possible members of the evolving expert group, have a dialogue with the

invited working life representatives concerning the meaning of the ILOs and what outcomes the working life representatives believe are the most important for the employability of students. Notes taken during the meeting are distributed and presented to the expert group members.

Working life expert qualifications

Qualifications of persons nominated by the working life associations are described in the nomination invitation letter. The working life representatives need not to have a certain exam. Instead integrity, ability to cooperate and relevant vocational experience are mentioned. However the role and actual assessment activities of the working life experts (f.ex. what documents they are going to analyse and assess) have not yet found solid forms. There are assumptions that the working life representatives in the expert groups should be able to perform the same tasks as the experts from the HEIs. These assumptions are challenged by the fact that:

- The experts from working life do not have the same amount of time for the mission and they do not control their own time as freely as the experts from the HEIs.
- The experts from working life are not as familiar with the national ILOs and with interpreting/assessing learning outcomes in student theses as the experts from the HEIs.
- Working life experts from different associations do not necessarily interpret the ILOs in the same way and it is not uncommon that the working life representatives have different interpretations than the experts from the HEIs.

Interpretation of the ILOs

SNAHE tries to solve the latter challenge by organising meeting structures which support and make deep discussions possible aiming at agreements about how to define and interpret the ILOs. During spring 2011 eight expert groups are right in the middle of these discussions which should conclude with a written statement on how the expert panels interpret the ILOs. As a means to increase the transparency these statements are then presented to agents at the assessed programmes in the beginning of their their self-assessment process.