



**FOUR YEARS OF EXPERIENCE USING QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEMS:
LESSONS LEARNED FROM THREE INSTITUTIONS**

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Abstract

A study was developed to explore the experiences with Quality Assurance Systems (QAS) in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). An important purpose of this study was to analyse and discuss how QAS is used by different groups at the HEIs; students, academic staff and administrative staff, as well as local and central management. Group interviews were carried out to collect lessons learned from using QAS and perceptions of the influence from QAS on management and the teaching-learning process. The interviews indicate that the use of QAS has contributed to changes in academic and administrative leadership, management and decision-making processes at HEIs. QAS is also related to the development of quantitative indicators of quality, to the use of external evaluations of study programme and has contributed to a more systematic approach to student evaluations. Students, staff and management have some joint recommendations about QAS. It seems important to develop a **web-based system** that is **simple**, easily **accessible** and **usable** for all relevant groups. The system has to be **transparent** with regard to the analysis, the decision-making processes and the **measures** made on the basis of information from the QAS.

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Introduction

Today, most European Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are familiar with the concept Quality Assurance Systems (QAS). Historically, the first implementation and use of QAS can be found within the industrial sector of refining and manufacturing. QAS was used as methods or tools to improve the quality of industrial production and products. During the last decade, QAS has become mandatory for a large number of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). However, it is not obvious that systems developed for the secondary industrial sector are relevant for HEIs.

The increased emphasis on QAS can be seen as part of a European trend towards the deregulation of higher education where governments have reduced their direct controls “in order to support greater autonomy, flexibility, and diversity at the institutional level” (Brennan & Shah, 2000:336). The deregulation of Higher Education is followed by governments making it mandatory for HEIs to develop their own QAS and establishing Agencies for Quality Assurance (ENQA, 2005).

The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) is an independent governmental agency whose purpose is to control and contribute to develop the quality of Norwegian higher education institutions. One of NOKUT’s tasks is to conduct evaluations of quality systems set up by institutions according to the requirements of the Ministry of Education. The use of QAS became mandatory for Norwegian HEIs by law in 2004.

In order to analyze developments in the sector and make experiences visible, a project was set up to explore different perceptions of and experiences with QAS in HEIs. The project resulted in a report (NOKUT, 2008). This paper is an extract of this report, covering central findings from the survey and focusing on success factors and obstacles experienced by HEIs after four years use of QAS.

Theory

New Public Management (NPM) has become “*one of the dominant paradigms for public management across the world*” (McLaughlin & Osborne, 2002:1). There are different definitions of NPM (Schedler and Proeller, 2002), but there are some distinctive characteristics when adapted within an educational context: NPM emphasises the importance of output measures (statistical indicators), more autonomy for HEIs, less direct control from

government, internal QA systems and frequent controls made by outside agencies. The increased importance of NPM has contributed to the implementation and use of QAS in HEIs.

The term quality assurance is related to the process of assuring that the education from an institution attains good or high quality (Stensaker, 2007). QAS can be used as a common point of reference for conversations, e.g. among participants in different areas (e.g. policy, administration, and teaching) or from different communities (students, academic staff, administrative staff and leadership) when talking about a system related to quality assurance. However, there may be divergent opinions and interpretations about strengths and weaknesses related to the use of QAS. One explanation for this can be that QAS is used by groups with different tasks, expertise and positions at the institutions (Engeström, 1987, 1999).

The origins of both NPM and QAS can be found in the secondary industrial sector, and there are several dilemmas when adapting these notions in higher education. QAS focuses on building and sustaining systems for quality, but how is quality in education described and defined (Harvey & Green, 1993; Newton, 2000, 2007)? An important hallmark of these systems is to seek and correct for divergence/deviance. This could easily lead to a perspective where quality is described as meeting certain standards, e.g. the assurance that no component is defect when building cars in a factory. On the other hand, quality in HEIs is much more complicated because it is both distinct and shaded (e.g. a lecture can be valued as good, fairly good or very good). This means that seeking and correcting for unwanted divergence in higher education demands the use of other methods than dealing with divergence in manufacturing (Power, 1994, 1997). It is a dilemma how to use QAS to improve quality in higher education because a QAS does not provide the institutions with any sufficient instruments to examine the complexity of teaching and learning (D'Andrea, 2007).

This project was initiated to answer the following questions: What experiences have been made by students, academic staff, administrative staff and leadership at HEIs that have been using QAS over a period of time? What are the lessons learned (both success factors and obstacles) from using QAS? And do QAS have any implications for management and the quality in the teaching-learning process?

Method

The key element of the project was a set of interviews with the leadership, administrative staff, teachers and students in order to collect their perception of QAS. A total of 36 persons from three different HEIs were interviewed. These HEIs are all relatively small

institutions with quite long experience with QAS, having had an approved QAS in place since 2003/2004. The HEIs were asked to select students, staff and leaders for the interviews.

Group interviews were performed at each institution with each specific group (students, academic staff, administrators, local (faculty/department) and central leadership). The groups consisted of 2-5 individuals from different departments in the institutions. The groups were given open-ended questions about their perception of the development and use of QAS. They were also asked to elaborate and discuss if QAS had any implications for management and the quality in the teaching-learning process.

Discussion

A) Management and leadership

The interviews indicate that the average student has very little knowledge of QAS, which may lead to low interest in using the systems. Student representatives have in general some knowledge. It seems to be important to give the students information about QAS at least every year. Our study shows that there is still room for more and better information about the system to all students, including the student representatives. Also, the academic staff might feel alienated, especially when course (and programme) evaluations, as well as the development of study plans are being conducted and analysed at central level. In such cases, the teachers cannot themselves decide upon what measures should be made. One disadvantage with this is that the implementation of improvement measures takes much time; another potential disadvantage is that the optimal measures are not found, due to the central levels' lack of subject-specific knowledge.

The interviews show that involving academic management, both at central and local level, helps secure that academic management actually assume responsibility and take part in ongoing processes at the institution. It seems that the implementation of QAS has strengthened the positions of the central management and administration at the HEIs. These two groups also express most satisfaction with QAS. One reason for this is that QAS gives information about and control over the activities at the institution (Engeström, 1987). Management at the local units are not as positive as the central management, possibly because QAS requires extra work and resources and because they don't always believe that the system works well as a tool for enhancement.

B) Quantitative indicators in QAS

The institutions are using quantitative indicators as a tool for enhancing and controlling quality to different degrees. This can be seen as a result of the influence from NPM. The management of the institutions find such indicators useful in order to get a view over the study quality and in order to find areas for further scrutiny. Indicators have been developed that cover most of the activities that can be said to have a bearing on study quality. In that way, QAS is a proper tool for collecting quantitative information and report findings in such a way that the institutions can implement goal oriented measures. QAS also provides a framework for systematic analyses over time and between different courses and programmes.

There is a common opinion that the use of quantitative indicators can have a significantly positive effect on selected areas. However, it is important that such indicators are used together with other information: there is a need to analyse the findings thoroughly. With many indicators, findings can be interpreted both as a sign of good study quality and poor study quality, depending on the way one chooses to see it. One example is failure rates, where a high rate may indicate high and reasonable standards or conversely, poor study quality, for instance poor teaching.

There seems to be a trend towards scaling down the use of such indicators, after quite comprehensive use for some years. The reasons for this are to do with the difficulties in finding valid and “productive” indicators, and the fact that it is very work-demanding to collect and analyse the indicators. Also, there is a growing acknowledgment that all features of study quality can’t be measured properly by quantitative indicators, and that the indicators are not necessarily able to capture all cases where the quality is not good enough.

The institutions will continue to use such indicators, but they will select and use them with more discrimination.

C) External evaluations of study programmes

Two of the institutions arrange annual programme evaluations of selected study programmes, using external experts. This is done on the institutions’ own initiative and at their own cost. The expert committees assess internal evaluations, study plans and other formal documents, and have meetings with potential employers. In that way, the institutions get current and future employers’ views on what competencies they expect the students should have after obtaining their degree. The central leadership find these evaluations trustworthy, assuming the evaluations have significance for the development of study plans

and study programmes. In this way, the study programmes are assessed relative to their objectives, the composition of courses, curriculum, relevance, etc.

One of the institutions uses expert groups with international participation in order to get an international perspective on the study programme. It is very resource-demanding to conduct and follow up the results of such evaluations, both in terms of money and time. Any way, the institutions choose to do it, because they get good analyses and useful feedback from the external committees.

D) Student evaluations

In most of the group interviews student evaluations were mentioned as an important part of QAS. One reason for this could be that the use of such evaluations is mandatory (by law) for all HEIs.

The institutions employ various methods to get student feedback, face to face meetings, as well as electronic and paper questionnaires. Further, the evaluations are aimed at a number of different objects (academic staff, course, programme, study quality and learning environment). Also, the responsibility to carry out the student evaluations varies. One of the HEIs carries out all its different types of student evaluations centrally; the other two carry out the course evaluations locally. There are some interesting and problematic dimensions of student evaluations:

- Interpretation of feedback from students
- Formative or summative evaluations
- Anonymous or non-anonymous evaluations
- Response rate
- Centrally or locally driven course evaluations

Student evaluations are not sufficient to assess educational quality. It is also important to analyse what lies behind the comments or statistics the evaluations produce. There might be circumstances beyond the teachers' control that are the reason for the feedback, for instance the size of the student group, resources allocated to the course and the language of teaching may influence on the feedback. One teacher, for instance, got very good feedback when he gave a course in Norwegian and very poor feedback when he gave the same course for a different student group in English. In addition, the level of difficulty of the course or the examination might be of importance for the students' feedback. One teacher points out that by

making the course a little more difficult for the students, there would be more negative feedback in the student evaluation. Therefore, it is important to get deeper into the reasons for the feedback in specific course or program evaluations.

Formative evaluations are carried out during a course, whereas summative evaluations are conducted at the end of a course. In general, one can expect that formative evaluations make it easier to obtain faster and continuous improvements. The three institutions mainly employ summative evaluations. However, one of the institutions has been advised by an external evaluation committee to develop more formative evaluations. One of the other institutions has (also) decided to focus more on formative evaluations. This institution stands out as the institution with most emphasis on face to face meetings with students (and academic staff) during the course or the study program.

The interviews showed that using non-anonymous student evaluations makes it easier to get a good dialogue between teacher and student, but at the same time no anonymity makes it more difficult for the student to address delicate matters and to openly criticise the teacher. This is, among other factors, due to the fact that the teacher, beside teaching and tutoring, also gives grades. With anonymous evaluations, the student does not have to take potential negative sanctions from the teacher into account when making critical comments. Possible side effects by using an anonymous evaluation after the course examination, is that some students' comments might be very harsh on the teachers and also personally insulting. In such cases, the teacher has no possibility to go into a dialogue with the student who made a specific negative comment.

The response rate from the students is a critical factor. When there is a lack of information about what characterises those who do not respond to the evaluation, there will be an uncertainty about the representativeness of the answers in the evaluation. A common feature at the institutions is that it seems to be difficult to motivate students to participate in the evaluations. There may be several reasons for this, like evaluation fatigue, a general lack of interest in such projects and a lack of feed-back to the students, who don't see results from the evaluations. Some experiences show that there may be too many student evaluations and too many different aspects covered by them (teacher, course, programme, learning environment etc). This leads to evaluation fatigue among students and – for that matter - teachers.

Student evaluations of courses, with subsequent analyses and reporting are executed centrally at one of the institutions; at the two other institutions the teachers have the responsibility for the conduct and analyses of the evaluations, as well as the implementation

of improvement measures. If the whole student evaluation process is organized centrally, the teachers and local departments may feel less ownership to it, and it will be more difficult to pinpoint specific themes to focus on. It will also be more difficult to ask the right questions to the students, due to less knowledge about subject specific cultures and course specific problem areas. When teachers - and possibly local leaders - experience alienation from the evaluations, there is a risk is that the results from the evaluations will not be used. However, the central leadership tends to use information from the evaluations in meetings with the local leadership, thus securing some follow-up of the evaluations. By centralizing the process, the leadership is assured that all courses are evaluated, and the leadership will be kept fully informed. One downside might be that the information gathered is less useful than in the case of more course specific evaluations.

Lessons learned: Problems and success factors

A main focus for this project was to explore experiences made and lessons learned by students, staff and management from using QAS. However, there are some dilemmas (e.g. validity) concerning the transfer of recommendations and lessons learned from one institution to another institution. Therefore, it is important to elaborate if and how these examples can be adapted by other HEIs.

Barriers and problems encountered in the use of QAS

Many elements of QAS demand much work, for example the conduction of different evaluations and the analyzing of the information from the wide range of sources that are used. A centrally and systematically driven QAS creates more bureaucracy, with more work for the departments. Institutions can simplify QAS, making it more decentralized; one possible downside with this approach is that the quality work may be more occasional.

All groups of employees have to put much effort into evaluation work. There is a chance that some groups will get tired of all these exercises, especially if the system or the evaluations don't seem to be relevant to what they perceive as educational quality. For example, the academic staff may feel that they are forced to participate in a system they themselves did not design, and whose methods are not good enough to uncover poor quality.

Validity is an important issue when developing and using quantitative indicators to measure quality. Institutions using indicators with low validity will not be able to do sufficient

analysis and it will lead to problems in the decision-making process about choosing the right measures to improve quality in the institution.

QAS provide leaders and administrative staff with information. Students and teachers, on the other hand, may feel alienated from the quality system, particularly if they have to report frequently without enjoying a position where they participate in analyzing and discussing information derived from the QAS.

Students often complain that information from their evaluations are not being used to improve courses, programmes etc. This may not always be the case; quite often their responses will be taken into account after they have finished the evaluated course. However, this is too late for the students. Thus, there is a gap between students' expectations and institutions' possibilities to meet those expectations. An unfortunate consequence of this gap is that students never see that their former participation in evaluations makes any difference. There are many dilemmas connected with student evaluations, e.g. the degree of decentralization, anonymity, frequency, and when to arrange them (in the middle or at the end).

Success factors

The institutions accentuate the importance of a well anchored QAS. A critical factor for a successful QAS is that it is the management who are actually running the processes of the QAS, and that these operations are perceived as one of their vital tasks. The academics have central positions in both the institutional management and the management at the departments. These positions are very important for the success of QAS.

Another success factor is the extension of the QAS. It should not be too extensive or detailed, and it should be adjusted to the resources that are available and needed in order to conduct the quality work, analyse the information and implement improvement measures. The institutions should try to make QAS as simple as possible, thus making it easy to grasp for all relevant groups. A web-based QAS can ease the access and is easier to update.

It is essential that the institutions set aside the time and the resources that are needed in order to give proper training to all the different users of a QAS. There is a need to evolve a culture with focus on quality work.

It seems to be an advantage if the QAS is linked up with the core functions of the HEIs, so that the QAS will focus on what is recognized among students and staff as the most relevant and central issues at the institution.

It is essential that the QAS contains processes and procedures that will uncover challenges and deviations as quickly as possible. Using valid, quantitative indicators can help HEIs to monitor and detect deviations, but only in the areas covered by the indicators. The institutions need adequate capacity and competencies to be able to treat and analyse information collected through the QAS (e.g. indicators). The institutions need proper human resources that can play a major role in the construction and enhancement of the QAS, as well as in training and informing different groups analysing information and finding adequate measures.

It is also important to implement proper improvement measures when deviations are uncovered. The measures should be visible for the staff and students, in order to prove that the QAS is working well, thus motivating the different groups to use the QAS.

Concluding remarks

The notion of QAS was used as a starting point in all group interviews. It seems that students, staff members and leaders have different understandings of the notion and different experiences from using it. These groups do not have the same access to information or support when using the system because they have divergent academic or administrative positions.

The implementation and use of QAS seems to have contributed to a change of roles and positions among students, staff members and management. Leaders and administrators from the central level experience how the system provides them with information about a large numbers of topics. On the other hand, teachers and local managers (in charge of study programs) often find the process with meetings and evaluation both demanding and time-consuming. They also ask for more transparency around the analysis of information, the decision-making processes and the priorities leading to improvement measures and changes.

Extensive systems may aggregate too much information, creating an overload that is difficult to handle. An important feature with a good QAS is that it does not comprise every activity, but is able to capture occasions and vital elements where the quality is poor. In addition, a system that seems intuitive to some may seem unapproachable to others. Therefore, information and training is needed in order to secure a common understanding among staff and students of how the system is supposed to be used and in order to exploit its potential.

Experiences from the institutions indicate that QAS gives a more systematic approach to the revision of study plans and study programmes, and to the conduction and follow up of student evaluations. This is manifested in a better basis for assessing educational quality and implementing measures to enhance educational quality. However, structure is not sufficient in it self, good quality work also depends on how one chooses to work with study plans and teaching. For example may decentralized student evaluations close circles of information too early, with the effect that less information is brought on to the management, compared to what is the case when student evaluations are being conducted at central units.

QAS has given a more systematic approach to quality work, hence given the management better and more information and knowledge about the educational quality. Other groups at the institutions are also better informed. In addition, QAS has led to more participation by the students, and has contributed to making the study plans (and other plans) better. QAS is one tool for the organization and implementation of strategic planning, control and development. But on the other hand, these systems are fragile and therefore a QAS needs to be transparent to avoid easy solutions. The use of quantitative indicators can be useful when related to the operationalization and standardization of mappings, but the necessity of understanding what lies behind the findings is also pointed out.

It seems like the increased autonomy of HEIs and the corresponding national controlling/evaluating systems have come to stay, thus making QAS at the HEIs mandatory.

QAS in the industry has control as its main feature, while the traditional quality work in HEIs has more focus on development. The introduction of QAS at HEIs may result in more focus on control and more power to the central leadership and administration at the HEIs, compared with the traditional culture of equality at the HEIs. This was seen to be an effect of the introduction of QAS at the institutions in this project. An increased professionalization and bureaucratization of the quality work corresponds to the findings in (Stensaker (2006:27)).

Modern QAS in HEIs are often a hybrid of methods borrowed from the industrial sector and methods inherited directly from academic practice. The balance must not be shifted too much towards mechanical, alienating methods. The introduction of unmodified methods from industry may lead to the introduction of strange concepts and ways of thinking. It may be important to modify and reformulate concepts and methods in order to make them suitable for an academic context. Methods of QAS that were developed in the industrial sector must of course be enriched when implemented in HEIs. There is a need for a more qualitative approach and also more 'democratic' processes, in order to explore the depths of more complex quality issues. To optimize quality work, it is necessary to design the system in such

a way that it involves and motivates all groups, especially the academic staff. For HEIs with some experience from using QAS, there seems to be a need for developing QAS towards simplicity and a more focused use.

The systematic nature of QAS makes quality work less dependent on the individual's interest and motivation. QAS can create both attention and a certain discipline towards quality work, because it is compulsory. This was emphasised by the institutions. A system will normally have a disciplining effect, because the actors know that they will be assessed in the QAS framework.

However, using a QAS is not enough to ensure good quality in higher education. The institutions also need adequate resources, competencies and a quality culture among leadership, staff members and students.

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