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Evaluation of quality in higher education. Commissioning letter.

The Ministry of Education and Research has decided to initiate a research-based evaluation of quality in higher education. The need for an evaluation along these lines was indicated in Meld. St. 18 (2012–2013) *Long-term perspectives – knowledge provides opportunity*, white paper from the Ministry of Education and Research. The Ministry of Education and Research hereby commissions the Research Council of Norway to administer the evaluation, on condition that the Research Council uses the guidelines set out in this commissioning letter as the basis of the evaluation.

1. BACKGROUND

Major changes to the content of education have been carried out in connection with the Quality Reform: the degree structure and study programmes have been reorganised, new teaching and assessment methods and a new system of marks have been introduced, and requirements related to systematic internal and external quality assurance have been established. In addition, all study programmes were required to facilitate international student exchange. The institutions were granted greater academic freedom as well.

It is now over 10 years since the Quality Reform was introduced, and the changes have had time to become an integral part of the sector. Evaluations from the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) and signals from the sector indicate that significant challenges related to quality still exist and that not all institutions have achieved the objectives of the Quality Reform. However, very little research has been conducted on this topic, and a research-based evaluation of quality in education is therefore needed.

2. ABOUT THE EVALUATION

2.1 Objective of the evaluation

The objective of the evaluation is to assess whether the educational programmes offered at Norwegian universities and university colleges are in keeping with the objectives of the Quality Reform and the factors shown by research to result in high educational quality. There is a need both to acquire up-to-date knowledge about the follow-up of the most important quality-related measures of the reform and to obtain input about the road ahead. The evaluation should also provide an overview of the quality of Norwegian higher education in an international perspective.

2.2 Scope of the evaluation

Several projects currently underway will give us more knowledge about quality in higher education, e.g. the student survey being conducted by NOKUT and the strategic project being carried out by the Nordic Institute of Studies in Innovation, Research and Education (NIFU) on commission from the Ministry of Education and Research. The evaluation must supplement these projects and the existing research in order to provide the best overall picture of quality in higher education. This must also be viewed in connection with relevant research projects funded under the *Programme for Research and Innovation in the Educational Sector* (FINNUT) (2014–2023) at the Research Council.

The Ministry is commissioning this evaluation in order to gain insight into the following main thematic areas in particular:

- Efforts to enhance quality;
- Study programmes and degree structure;
- Follow-up of students.

2.3 Content of the evaluation

2.3.1 Efforts to enhance quality

The Quality Reform granted the boards of higher education institutions greater academic freedom. They were given expanded powers of authority, and the boards' responsibility and latitude for strategic action and overall governance of the institutions were strengthened. Moreover, all the institutions were required to implement approved quality assurance systems. These encompass all factors of significance for educational quality, and must ensure ongoing improvements, provide satisfactory documentation of efforts to enhance quality, and uncover inferior quality. NOKUT was established as an independent academic body to ensure and further enhance quality in higher education through accreditation and evaluation. NOKUT's activities are governed by the regulations on quality assurance and quality development in higher education and vocational education. NOKUT has more closely defined the framework for the institutions' quality enhancement and quality assurance efforts in the regulations on supervision of educational quality in higher education.

The evaluation of the Quality Reform carried out in 2007 took place too early to assess how well the efforts to enhance quality were working.¹ However, NOKUT's national role was the

¹ Michelsen S. and Aamodt P.O. (2007): *Evaluering av kvalitetsreformen* ("Evaluation of the Quality Reform"). Final report. Research Council of Norway.

subject of a separate evaluation in 2008.² NOKUT was evaluated again in spring 2013 by the European Association of Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). The establishment of the national qualifications framework for higher education in 2009 has also been a vital tool in the institutions' efforts to enhance quality in education.

The Ministry of Education and Research is seeking greater insight into the activities being employed by Norwegian higher education institutions to safeguard and further enhance educational quality and what the institutions' objectives for educational quality are. In particular, the Ministry would like greater insight into the following thematic areas:

- The role of the boards and institutional management in quality development – how the boards and the managers at various levels follow up the quality enhancement efforts at the institutions and use their latitude for strategic action;
- The connection between the quality assurance system and the students' achievement of learning outcomes – the institutions' routines for assessing learning outcomes;
- How the academic communities ensure quality in exchange agreements;
- The academic staff's expertise and the extent of academic and pedagogical competence development;
- Rewards systems for teaching and personnel policy instruments related to educational quality;
- Quality assurance as an administrative versus academic process;
- The role of students in quality assurance activities;
- The significance of NOKUT's supervisory role in relation to educational quality in general and the establishment of new study options in particular.

2.3.2 Study programmes and degree structure

One of the key measures of the Quality Reform was the introduction of a new degree structure in which the bachelor's, master's and Ph.D. degrees replaced nearly 50 different degrees. Education was to be organised into structured, integrated study programmes. The evaluation of the Quality Reform from 2007³ noted that the institutions used the introduction of the new degree system to make extensive changes in their course offerings. Signals from the sectors and NOKUT indicate that many institutions have not achieved the objective of the new programme approach and that the study programmes are fragmented. An analysis is needed to find out which strategic assessments underlie the study portfolios. In particular, the Ministry is seeking more knowledge about the following thematic areas:

- The institutions' strategies for the overall educational offering. Assessments and reasoning behind changes in the study portfolios – including strategies for renewal and relevance;
- The links between R&D strategy and the establishment of study programmes;
- Integration and coherence within the study programmes and educational management at the programme level;
- The degree to which digital learning resources and tools are integrated into the study programmes;

² Langfeldt L., Harvey L., Huisman J., Westerheijden D. and Stensaker, B., *Evaluation of NOKUT. The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education*, Report 2: NOKUT's national role.

³ Michelsen S. and Aamodt P.O. (2007): *Evaluering av kvalitetsreformen* ("Evaluation of the Quality Reform"). Final report. Research Council of Norway.

- How the legal requirement for R&D-based education is being addressed in the individual study programmes;
- The impact of the qualifications framework for higher education. What kind of systematic efforts are being carried out to ensure that established learning outcomes for the programmes are achieved, in part through teaching and assessment methods.

2.3.3 *Follow-up of students*

One of the main objectives of the Quality Reform was to enhance the quality of higher education through closer follow-up of the students and more student-activating learning. This resulted in, for example, the submission of more coursework during the study programme, regular feedback, more varied methods of assessment, and a closer connection between teaching and assessment. A new scale of marks was introduced and requirements relating to individual education plans were established. The evaluation of the Quality Reform in 2007 concluded that extensive changes in both teaching and assessment methods had been undertaken, but that it was difficult to say whether the students had benefited academically.

Signals from the sector and the students indicate that there is some question as to whether the reform's instruments in the area of teaching and assessment are being used to a sufficient degree. There is a need for a new overview of how teaching and assessment are being performed at the various institutions and what the differences are between various subject areas and faculties. It is also desirable to learn more about the extent to which students gain practical experience in research and development activity during the course of their studies. In particular, the Ministry is seeking more insight into the following thematic areas:

- The scope of student-activating teaching methods;
- The extent to which/how the educational plans are used as a tool for following up students;
- Reasons for drop-out and delayed completion;
- The use of ICT as a teaching tool;
- The degree to which digital resources and unique modules are integrated into study programmes;
- Measures for including R&D in teaching;
- Teaching resources;
- The use of joint international degrees, courses and modules for further enhancing educational quality.

Shedding light on the areas listed above will provide insight into whether the objective of closer follow-up of the students has been achieved. However, it will offer very little information about what takes place in actual teaching situations and how teaching practices incorporate what has been shown by research to be the conditions for good learning processes. To learn more about this, there may be a need for observation studies of teaching in higher education, i.e. that researchers observe real-life teaching situations and analyse the learning processes. Research on basic education and training has shown how important features of the learning environment and work methods vary along with the quality of the education and training. Similar knowledge about higher education is needed as well. Such analyses must be viewed in connection with other data sources, such as the results from NOKUT's student survey.

3. BUDGET FRAMEWORK, ORGANISATION AND CALL FOR PROPOSALS

The Ministry of Education and Research plans to fund the commissioned evaluation over three budget years with an overall framework of NOK 15 million.

The task will be organised as an activity under the *Programme for Research and Innovation in the Educational Sector – FINNUT (2014–2023)*. The researchers will report to the programme board. As the commissioning organisation, the Ministry is interested in ensuring that all areas of the commissioned evaluation are covered and that the requirement related to relevance is fulfilled. This may be accomplished through dialogue between the Ministry of Education and Research and the Research Council regarding the final call for proposals for the evaluation and during the process of assessing and selecting research projects. Specifically, this means that the Research Council will submit the text of the call for proposals to the Ministry prior to publication and that the applications will be reviewed by an internal group from the Ministry to assess their relevance.

The Ministry is also concerned that a binding strategy for dissemination during the project period must be developed. The Research Council must take responsibility for organising meeting places between the researchers and users, including the Ministry of Education and Research. The research communities must submit progress reports during the process and a plan for this must be set up in consultation with the Ministry. Among other things, the Ministry would like to receive a report containing a state-of-the-art review of the various thematic areas early in the evaluation period. In terms of timing, priority is to be given to the area of “efforts to enhance quality”; cf. the discussion above on the main thematic areas of the evaluation. Progress reports related to the dissemination strategy should also be submitted during the process.

The Ministry of Education and Research understands that the Research Council will announce the commission in accordance with its rules for calls for proposals for research funding. However, the call for proposals must include a requirement that Norwegian contract partners must incorporate relevant international research groups in the activities involving topics in which an international perspective will be especially crucial.

Sincerely yours,

Toril Johansson
Director General

Ingvild Marheim Larsen
Senior Adviser

This document has been signed electronically and therefore has no handwritten signatures.