

A brief description of the quality assurance system in Norway

Quality assurance in Norwegian higher education is a dual responsibility. All HEIs are responsible for the quality of their own educational provisions, and it is NOKUT's responsibility to ensure that all institutions follow the legal requirements and provide education of high quality.

There are two main entrances to quality assurance in Norwegian higher education. The first relates to accreditation of educational provisions and the other relates to audits, supervisions and revision of accreditation.

Accreditation

Accreditation is mandatory and universal for all formally recognised higher education in Norway. Accreditation is not limited to a specified period but is considered valid until explicitly revoked following a revision.

The accreditation formula combines institutional and programme accreditation. Institutional accreditation gives universities and colleges certain rights to award national degrees or diplomas. There are four categories of institutions:

- University: authority to self-accredit programmes at all levels, including doctoral programmes
- Specialised university institution: authority to self-accredit programmes at all levels within their doctoral fields
- University college: authority to self-accredit programmes at bachelor's level, but university colleges that have NOKUT accredited Ph.D. programmes can also accredit master's programmes within their doctoral fields
- University colleges without institutional accreditation: for these university colleges, NOKUT must accredit all educational provisions

The system allows institutions to seek institutional accreditation in a different ('higher') category, following a process of institutional accreditation. Thus, a university college may apply to NOKUT for accreditation as a specialised university institution or a university.

In addition to institutional accreditation, NOKUT is responsible for accrediting all programmes that institutions cannot accredit themselves. Thus, new provisions in accredited institutions that go beyond the self-accreditation authority that follows from the institutional category must be accredited by NOKUT.

Control and revocation of accreditation

Because NOKUT's accreditations are not bound by time, it is important to have reliable control mechanisms to ensure that institutions and study programmes comply with the legal framework. To ensure this, NOKUT uses a combination of institutional quality assurance audits, supervision and revision of accreditation of programmes and institutions.

Institutional quality assurance audits represent the systematic, comprehensive mechanism for external scrutiny of the quality of higher education. Each institution must go through an audit of its internal quality assurance system and the institution's systematic quality work. An institution with self-accreditation rights that fails to conduct internal quality assurance in accordance with the criteria loses its rights to self-accredit new educational provisions, until the institution passes another audit. An institution that must apply NOKUT to accredit new educational provisions loses its right to

apply to NOKUT for new accreditations, until the institution passes another audit. An audit cannot itself lead to the loss of institutional accreditation.

Revisions of programmes and institutions can be triggered by indications from NOKUT's audits and supervisory activities, but also by other indications, and they may be carried out as random tests. Revisions of accreditation, both programme accreditation and institutional accreditation, can lead to the loss of accreditation and consequently to the loss of public funding.

The legal framework surrounding Norwegian higher education is fundamentally characterised by autonomous stakeholders. Since institution and programme accreditations are not limited to a specified period, NOKUT uses its extensive capacities to supervise study programmes and institutions to ensure that all educational provisions maintain a high quality. Maintaining the right balance between trust and verification is a key concern in the Norwegian model and all of NOKUT's operations are designed with this balance in mind.

Quality Assurance Guidelines

NOKUT's Academic supervisions regulations, supplementary ministerial regulations, and certain central procedural requirements regulate the requirements for NOKUT's quality assurance activities.

NOKUT has developed detailed guidelines on its quality assurance procedures for higher education institutions. These include guidelines for the institutional quality assurance audit and for the various types of institutional and programme accreditation. The same criteria also apply for supervisions and revisions. The guidelines provide detailed information on the requirements in the regulations. They include information on the criteria, precedents, details on documentation requirements, the relation to other regulations, and provide information on the various steps in NOKUT's procedures.

Recent development within institutional quality assurance audits

The Academic supervision regulations that set out requirements for the institutions' systematic quality assurance practices were revised in 2017. Previously based on comprehensive evaluations, the audits are now based on legal requirements. In order to pass, the institutions must fulfil each requirement. NOKUT and the external experts also advise the institutions on how to further develop their quality assurance practices. It is NOKUT's intention that supervisory activities should inspire the institutions to re-think existing practices and to try out new ideas, so that quality assurance activities can stimulate quality enhancement.

An important change made for the current audits (2018-2024) is that the institutions are organised in groups, according to their characteristics. Institutions that have recently merged, institutions with several campuses, institutions with the same authorizations, or institutions offering education within the same professions or disciplines, are examples of how NOKUT has chosen to set up "audit heats". In each audit heat, there are 4-6 institutions. Both during and after the audits, the institutions are encouraged to talk to each other about their quality assurance work, about documentation, sharing of good practices, and so on. NOKUT believes that such activities have the potential to bring forth mutual inspiration within quality assurance work. In order to foster collaboration and sharing, NOKUT arranges an information meeting for each audit heat 4-5 months before the deadline for submitting the documentation. The intention is that this activity should serve as an important basis for further networking and contact between the institutions.

NOKUT's responsibilities and structure

NOKUT (the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education) is an independent government body with expertise on Norwegian and foreign higher education and vocational education. NOKUT's remit and tasks are defined in the Act relating to universities and university colleges and the Act relating to tertiary vocational education, with pertaining regulations issued by the Ministry of Education and Research.

NOKUT has been in operation since 1 January 2003, has 148 employees, and involves about 900 external experts for its accreditation, quality assurance, evaluations, recognition of foreign education and projects.

NOKUT's mission is to safeguard public trust in Norwegian higher education and recognised foreign education. NOKUT emphasizes dialogue and cooperation with students, education institutions, stakeholders in society and the labour market and other agencies in its work.

Responsibilities

NOKUT's main tasks in external quality assurance and quality enhancement are to:

- Accredite, supervise and contribute to developing the quality of Norwegian institutions in higher education and tertiary vocational education
- Make all accreditation decisions concerning higher education that go beyond the institutions' self-accrediting powers.
- Audit the internal quality assurance systems and systematic quality work of all institutions in higher education and tertiary vocational education
- Carry out supervision with the purpose of revising specific accreditations. Any institution can have its institutional or programme accreditations revoked or suspended following a negative assessment in this type of supervision.
- Carry out evaluations with the general purpose of investigating, assessing and developing the quality of higher education in Norway.
- Develop and systematize knowledge about quality in education through surveys, studies and thematic analyses, including running two large-scale surveys on students' and university teachers' perceptions of educational quality.

In the field of foreign education, NOKUT is the national competence centre for foreign education, and ENIC-NARIC office for Norway. NOKUT:

- Provides information about Norwegian recognition schemes, foreign education and qualifications
- Processes about 10000 applications for legal recognition of foreign education every year
- Operates a dedicated recognition scheme for persons without verifiable documentation
- Is the national contact point for the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the Norwegian Qualifications Framework
- Is the Norwegian Assistance Centre and contact point for regulated professions under the EU Professional Qualifications Directive.
- Since 2020, NOKUT has also been responsible for professional recognition for teacher and kindergarten teachers.

In addition to these professionally independent tasks, NOKUT also undertakes financial inspection as an administrative task on behalf of the Ministry of Education and Research. This involves checking 2

the use of funds allocated by the Ministry of Education and Research through the national budget, and monitoring the security, preparedness and corporate governance of all public universities and university colleges, as well as the following government agencies: the Norwegian Agency for International Cooperation and Quality Enhancement in Higher Education (Diku), the Norwegian Directorate for ICT and Joint Services in Higher Education and Research (UNIT), the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), the Research Council of Norway and the Norwegian National Committees for Research Ethics.

Organisation

The board of NOKUT is the agency's governing body. The Board has decision-making powers over decisions on institutional quality assurance audits, institutional accreditations, programme accreditations at the Ph.D. level and the concluding decisions for all institutional or programme revisions of accreditation.

The Board also decides on decisions concerning finance, strategy, reports and action plans and quality assurance criteria. The Board consists of eight full members, appointed by the Ministry of Education and Research for 4 years. The current chair is Professor Lise Iversen Kulbrandstad. The members are appointed from education institutions and external stakeholders, including two student members. In addition to the eight full members, NOKUT’s staff appoint a ninth, whose vote is restricted to matters relating to NOKUT’s organisation and staff. The Board meets approximately six to eight times a year.

Daily management is delegated to Chief Executive Kristin Vinje, who makes up NOKUT’s management group together with the five Directors of each of NOKUT’s departments:

