

Stimulating change through quality assurance

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Many scientists scorn quality assurance routines as time-stealing bureaucratic mandates that serve no useful purpose and even hinder the “real work” of teaching and research. I will discuss how quality assurance can stimulate quality improvement in higher education based on examples from the Norwegian University of Life Sciences (UMB).

UMB has developed routines for quality assurance of its educational offerings in compliance with national requirements. Two key procedures at UMB are student evaluation of courses in all subjects (since 2002) and periodic external evaluation of all study programmes by international panels of experts (since 2003).

Student course evaluations are generally very positive. Teachers and departments follow up negative course evaluations by revising course content and teaching methods, managing personnel and building competence. Student evaluations have improved over time.

UMB’s five bachelor and master programmes in environmental management and forestry were evaluated by an international panel in 2006. After the evaluation, the Department of Environment and Natural Resource Management mobilized its staff in 5 development projects: 1) programme offerings, the educational vision and competence profile of graduates, 2) structure of programmes and course offerings, 3) interdisciplinary problem-based learning and analysis, 4) integrating research into educational programmes and 5) external networking, information, niche analysis and job market for graduates. The follow-up work is expected to lead to deep revision of programme- and course offerings.

Course- and programme evaluation are effective tools for stimulating improvement and change. Attitudes toward quality assurance have become more positive. The staff is involved in evaluation dialog and follow-up activities. They recognize the value of input from students and external experts when identifying areas for improvement and opportunities for excellence. Effective quality assurance routines create arenas for participation in quality issues and quality work. In so doing they develop the organisation’s “quality culture.”