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Responsible QA – committing to impact

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Paper proposal form

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2003, and then Director of Analysis and Development between 2008 and 2011. He has served, often as panel chair, in evaluations of higher education in several countries and in ENQA evaluations of QA agencies. He has frequently presented papers at EQAF and EAIR conferences and is currently chair of ENQA's Appeals and Complaints Committee.

The paper will be presented by Jon Haakstad

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Proposal

Title: Teaching in Higher Education; consistency and change in context and role

Abstract (150 words max):

In the summer of 2016 NOKUT conducted a survey of academic teachers' perceptions of quality in 'their own' educational programmes. From this survey, the theme of teacher collaboration and quality enhancement was selected for a qualitative follow-up study. The teachers' responses on these issues seemed to contradict some commonly held views about higher education teaching: that it is carried out with less enthusiasm than research, that it lacks collective enhancement effort and, therefore, is characterised by methodological conservatism. Often contradicting these assumptions, the survey indicates that a change in teaching culture may have taken place. In the follow-up study we wanted to probe if this is really so, and in case it is, if it is an effect of the many reforms and changes in contextual circumstances that have taken place during the same period. Group interviews with 33 experienced teachers in different disciplines indicate that there have indeed been significant changes, but perhaps not so much as a result of policy intentions and reform efforts.

The paper is based on: research

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? No

Text of paper (3000 words max):

Teaching in Higher Education: Consistency and change in context and role

Introduction

In the summer of 2016 NOKUT conducted a survey (NOKUT, 2017) of academic teachers' perceptions of quality in 'their own' educational programmes. The survey asked all active teachers in a selection of disciplines¹ in Norwegian higher education institutions a number of

¹ The disciplines were: political science; social economics; sociology; teacher education; engineering (BA); engineering(MA); humanities (not languages) and architecture.

questions about different aspects of their programmes. One of the sections in the survey had questions about cooperation and general engagement in teaching and programme development, or what we may broadly label as quality culture for teaching. This theme was selected for a qualitative follow-up study, since the teachers' responses on these issues seemed to contradict some commonly held views about higher education teaching². Can we talk of a change in teaching culture over the last 15 – 20 years? And if we can, is this an effect of the many reforms and changes in contextual circumstances that have taken place during the same period? In-depth interviews were conducted on these issues after a predefined guide with a sample of 33 experienced academic teachers in discipline groups of 2 – 4 persons³. Although the project is restricted to the Norwegian scene, we expect our findings to be relevant for other European countries as well.

The myth of the 'resilient' academic and the challenges of a changing context

A persistent myth about HE teaching has been its resilience to change and its resistance to reforms and outside steering. According to K. Crawford (Crawford 2010), academics see their professional development as more depending on personal autonomy and discipline networks than on national and institutional policies. A proverbial 'quote' has it that "I'd like to see the reform that will change the way I teach." We can split up the myth into four assumptions:

The anti-reform teacher: Efforts to modernise higher education through structural reforms threaten academic freedom and the autonomy of the discipline communities.

The unwilling teacher: Research, not teaching, defines status, promotion and career. You are 'allowed' time and resources to do research; you are 'obliged' to teach. Consequently, real engagement in teaching is lacking.

The conservative teacher: Discipline knowledge is what matters. Teaching follows 'naturally' from this well of knowledge. Therefore, traditional methods based on knowledge transfer still dominate.

The lonely teacher: A HE teacher is a lonely king in his own teaching realm: The assumption is that there is little cooperation with other teachers and little insight from the outside into the teaching process.

Over the last two decades, the context of HE teaching has changed radically. Key words are increased volume, the Bologna process and structural reforms inspired by New Public Management. How do the academics assess the impact and merits of these reforms? And how has the 'resilience' of academics fared under the pressure of externally driven change? Programmes at the BA level directed at certain professions, e.g. teaching, engineering, nursing and other health professions, make up about one half of Norwegian higher education⁴. These are all programmes that must find their form inside a framework of national curriculum guidelines. These types of programmes, and teacher training in particular, have got more than their fair share of attention from the Government after 2000. They have been the objects of comprehensive evaluations and other investigative projects and have had to adapt to several reforms. The attitude of our informants from these programmes was mostly critical: although each reform step as such might be reasonable, the constant exposure to interventions and enforced change was not. There was a tiredness with all these outside interventions and a growing feeling of public distrust. Nor did they see that

² A similar, if small-scale, project by NOKUT in 2012 had indicated that HE cultures are largely conservative in terms of didactic orientation (Haakstad and Nesje, 2012).

³ A full report from the project will be published by NOKUT in the early autumn of 2017.

⁴ This proportion is changing now, as all teacher education programmes for primary and secondary school has been raised to the MA level as from 2016 and will now take 5 years.



the programmes had really improved much in content or in teaching methodologies as a result of the reform efforts, at least not when seen on the background of cost in time and resources.

For nearly all other educational types, the Bologna process and its national corollary, the Quality Reform⁵, meant a total shake-up of the degree structure that should make programmes better attuned to working life demands and better serviced for the students through tighter guidance and follow-up. Dropout rates would improve and more students would complete their education inside the time norm. However, neither the statistics nor our informants' opinions bear witness to unqualified success on these scores. Completion rates have not improved significantly and although the informants agreed that more written work for students has also meant an overall increase in follow-up (and in teacher workload!), the intended increase in individual academic counselling has not occurred. Students still rate academic counselling as one of the weakest aspects of their programmes, although the teachers we interviewed would claim that students largely fail to make use of the counselling opportunities that are in fact available.

When the degree structure changed, many disciplines – most typically in the humanities – lost their traditional form and position in the provision landscape. With the reform, the pattern of disciplines became more atomised, or specialised, and discipline communities had to carve out new 'identities' in the way they presented themselves to students. According to our informants, this was at first a welcome change: with more specialisation, work could become more academically satisfying. But the new structure of discipline units that now formed the basis of first cycle programmes turned out to be problematic. Programmes often had weaknesses in coherence and working life relevance, which in turn led to problems related to student recruitment and sustainability. Our informants had difficulties in seeing how the new degree structure has led to better teaching, or to candidates with more relevant competences. Rather, a debate now rages whether the BA degree can in fact stand alone as a qualification⁶.

The Bologna process also included the adoption of a national Qualifications Framework. The reform demands that learning outcome, rather than curriculum and content, must now define the aims of teaching programmes. Opinions differed quite sharply among our informants about the merits of this reform: Those who taught in profession studies tended to express satisfaction, saying that the process of rewriting the study plans had sharpened their awareness of candidate competences. Among discipline teachers, on the other hand, we often heard expression like "the emperor's new clothes" and "an obligatory exercise that we carried out for reasons of compliance". Most informants seemed to agree, though, that the reform had produced a welcome emphasis on generic skills and competences.

The transition from 'elite' to 'mass' education is not the result of a single reform, but a general development that goes much further back than 20 years. But even in a 15 – 20 years' perspective most of our informants would describe how they had experienced changes in heterogeneity in their student groups. Not so much in talent and aptitude, perhaps, as in attitude and engagement. They would stress that "fresh students do not carry with them a reasonably broad knowledge base any more, things you can take for granted and build on", as one informant said. Another formulated a common opinion: "Today's students are more like pupils: they act like clients and they negotiate; they demand that we structure their work for them. And if they fail, they file a complaint." On the other hand, many would stress how today's students are more forthcoming and self-assured, and often more skilful. Overall,

⁵ A comprehensive reform of Norwegian higher education in 2002 that harmonised the degree structure to the Bologna pattern and introduced formal quality assurance.

⁶ See Haakstad and Kantardjiev: *Arbeidslivsrelevans i høyere utdanning*, (NOKUT-rapport 2015 – 1).

underperforming students were not a big topic, although we heard claims that “general levels have fallen by a whole grade”, as one informant put it.

Change and impact: internal factors

It was no easier to find evidence in the interviews of institutional policies having had a developmental influence on educational practice. Institutional management, it was said, focuses on building strategic profiles and programme portfolios, and not on the delivery of educational programmes ‘on the ground’. Some would even go as far as to say, with one of our informants, that “the leadership is only interested in research volumes and candidate production and follow these goals with an administrative logic”. The teachers were often aware of a certain educational policy to make their institution attractive to students, e.g. that teaching is closely linked to research, or that the institution makes advanced use of ICT technology, or that interactive learning methods are actively promoted. But they were less sure to what extent these broad goals and ideals were actually followed up. Institutional leaderships were more often seen as the executive arm of the Government, charged with the job of seeing national reforms through.

Nor was leadership at the medium level, e.g. faculty or department leaders, seen to have much influence on the actual teaching and learning processes, although our informants saw their functions as important for other reasons (see below). So-called academic leadership easily becomes administrative rather than academic: keeping budgets, distributing tasks, administering timetables and acting as an arbiter in conflicts. Our informants saw academic leaders’ scope and authority for making academic decisions as limited, squeezed as they are between the institutional leadership from above and the values connected with individual academic freedom and discipline group consensus from below.

This all points to a conclusion that supports the idea of the ‘resilient academic’: Our informants revealed a tendency to take a critical and defensive attitude towards the many reforms that have affected their jobs. After all, none of the reforms came about on the initiative of the academic community itself; rather, one of their effects has been to shift power and influence away from active teachers and researchers and on to institutional and political leaderships. The overall impression is that the potentially transformative force of national reforms is absorbed and diluted through accommodation strategies and ‘going under the radar’, while institutional leaderships seem to lack the power or motivation to act as reformers in the educational field. Instead, the interviews brought out the rather common view that in those cases where innovative practices had in fact been introduced, the driving force behind the changes was typically the discipline community itself.

The most effective factor for change: resources

There was however one contextual factor that the informants repeatedly mentioned as having affected their teaching: cuts in time resources. On the one hand, such cuts are pressing through certain money-saving changes in the offer to students; on the other hand, less time resources contribute to a work overload that drains the teaching staff of energy and prevents them from being more proactive in reforming their didactic practice. This agrees with Stensaker’s findings that increased bureaucratic and entrepreneurial demands contribute to create a work overload that threatens professional quality (Stensaker, 2006). It also agrees with what Tight found for the UK (Tight, 2010) and it echoes the findings in the Teacher Survey, where the majority of respondents pointed at increased resources as the single factor that would do most to improve educational quality. The experience of meagre time resources for teaching may also help explain a seeming ‘paradox’ in the Teacher Survey: while a majority of the respondents valued interactive teaching methods the highest, an equally large majority stated that lectures are still the preferred form. Nearly all our informants expressed that they experience a more stressful work situation as compared with



10 – 15 years ago: fewer lessons to cover the same ground as before, larger student groups and consequently less face-to-face contact with the students. To quote one informant: “More students, more feedback work, fewer teaching hours and more pressure to do research.” Many informants would also point at the increased demand for documentation and reporting. As one of them said: “ICT technology has changed our work a lot: it makes many operations easier but it has also created new challenges and demands. It is difficult to say that it has made our work any easier. Increased bureaucracy makes our day busier than before but this does not show in the time accounts.”

Collegial cooperation and engagement for teaching

One of our reasons for conducting this follow-up study were some results in the Teacher Survey that indicated a higher level of collegial cooperation around teaching, and more enthusiasm for the teaching mission, than we had expected. The interviews confirmed this picture. For one thing, the informants supported Mårtensson’s finding (Mårtensson & al., 2012) that teaching makes up an essential part of academics’ professional identities. Secondly, they generally agreed that there is much more cooperation now than 10-15 years ago. It may take different forms and there are variations in degree, but nobody can withdraw from it completely any more. In some cases, teaching is organised in teams that work tightly together, often even by sharing lessons. And if not, nearly all respondents would claim that cooperation is widespread through the exchange of information, ideas, project plans and study materials, etc. They would describe their discipline cultures as open, with little envy or unsound competition, which they clearly perceived as a positive change compared with two decades back. Judging from our informants’ descriptions, the ‘myths’ of the unwilling and lonely teacher needs some adjustments.

On this background, it is only to be expected that most teachers would also claim that teaching had improved during their careers. Although the lecture remains at the core of the teaching tool-kit, the totality was described as more varied, dynamic and interactive than before. Teaching is often organised in fewer but longer sequences, with variation between lecture bits, short work assignments and seminar-like discussions. Many programmes also include project work, while increased use of written assignments serves to strengthen the students’ communicative and other generic skills. In the words of one informant: “Teaching has clearly improved in later years. It has become more practical, more instructive, and easier for the students to follow. Better teaching has been necessary in order to compensate for less teaching hours and more heterogeneous student groups.” The myth of the methodologically conservative teacher was to some extent contradicted by our informants.

Quality culture - and quality work

Our findings present a somewhat contradictory picture as far as the question of teachers’ conservatism versus enhancement orientation is concerned. And it was rather striking to see how these variations followed variations in the description of how their nearest academic leaders function. Our informants unanimously stressed the importance of this group: “If they are not in a position to decide and command, their influence as culture-makers is crucial”, one informant said. Those discipline communities that were characterised by inventiveness, cooperation and engagement for teaching would typically have inspiring mid-level leadership who manage to gather their colleagues around enhancement efforts, whereas communities with more remote leaders would answer more to the traditional pattern of the isolated teacher.

Our dominating impression was in fact one of engaged, progressively minded discipline communities that held their commitment to teaching high. So if national reforms and other interventions seem to have little impact on discipline cultures, what is it then that has motivated these enhancement drives? The causes may be many – like improved technology



and communication – but the typical story that we heard in the interviews described how the communities have adapted their practice in response to changes in the external circumstances that they often found negative: teaching was said to have become better because of these efforts. It may seem as if the pressures from the outside have had the effect of improving teaching for the wrong reasons: New demands and cuts in time resources have triggered inventiveness and necessitated cooperative practices. Teaching may partly have changed as a defensive measure.

During the last ten years there has been much talk of 'quality culture', often in connection with quality work and QA systems. The Teacher Survey had some questions about this and came up with responses that were a bit surprising: they contradicted, as it seemed, the 'myths' of the lonely and anti-reform teacher, as clear majorities answered that they participate in enhancement-oriented discussions around their programme. Nearly two thirds of them even stated that they had taken part in producing 'status or quality reports' about their programme 'to some extent' or 'to a great extent'. The interviews both confirmed and qualified this picture of wide participation. The QA systems now seem to be implemented and accepted in work routines. To quote from a typical statement: "We conduct halfway and full cycle evaluations of our programmes every one and three years respectively. Much is based on quantitative information and the students' course evaluations. Programme leaders and programme committees analyse the information and produce reports for the faculty leadership, who seem genuinely interested in what we do. But although these routines work well, it is difficult to see how they lead to any change." Another typical statement echoes this: "The system works, but not very collectively, and without offering much feedback. We fill in our comments and pass them on individually, but seldom get to know if things are followed up by those responsible higher up in the organisation." Our informants did not see the systems as a driver for collective enhancement efforts. They accepted them as 'probably necessary' but revealed little genuine enthusiasm for them. The collective enhancement efforts largely seem to happen outside the systems.

When asked what they associated with the term 'quality culture', most of our informants gave uncertain answers. But they would agree that quality culture requires that all or most of the teaching community must have a shared ambition and engagement for quality in their work. Our informants would typically stress that they did indeed have such a culture, and that it includes enthusiasm for teaching, not only research. So much for the 'unwilling teacher'. This culture, however, was not seen as connected with formal quality work; nor was it associated with a heightened didactic consciousness. Rather, our informants associated the term, including its collaborative element, directly with their academic endeavours in research and teaching and would stress that such engagement is an inherent characteristic of academic communities. In the words of one informant: "We have a quality culture because we share the academic interest and pride that always drives us towards high quality." Another followed on: "Most academic cultures are quality cultures. We do not need this honour word." Conservative or not, it seems indeed that academic cultures are fairly self-conscious and resilient cultures.

References:



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Discussion questions:

A discussion could go around the need for didactic reform and development in higher education teaching (or not) and how Forum participants from different countries see this issue.

Another possible theme is to what extent big reforms that are taking place – or have recently taken place – in higher education affect teaching

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 24 July 2017 to QAForum@eua.be. The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith_Jones.doc. Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.