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Working together to take quality forward

Please note that all fields are obligatory. For a detailed description of the submission requirements and Frequently Asked Questions please consult the Call for Contributions.

Author(s)

Name: Christian Stråhlman (responsible for presentation)

Position: Student

Organisation: The Swedish National Union of Students (SFS)

Country: Sweden

E-mail address: christian.strahlman@gmail.com

Name: Bengt-Ove Boström

Position: Vice-Rector

Organisation: University of Gothenburg

Country: Sweden

E-mail address: bengt-ove.bostrom@pol.gu.se

Proposal

Title:
Working together for enhancement-led and voluntary institutional quality audit

Abstract (150 words max):
The national QA system in Sweden does not any longer include assessment of the institutions' internal QA procedures. The Experts Group on Quality at the Swedish Association for Higher Education (SHUF) has proposed and tested how voluntary audits can be performed by the institutions in collaboration, coordinated by SUHF. The audits have quality enhancement as its sole purpose. The audit method focuses on quality management, acknowledging the diversity of institutions and the national context. This paper includes results from pilot

studies earlier this year. It is demonstrated how voluntary audits can be valuable as an external QA element in the institutions' quality management. Using the audit as a voluntary and flexible element allows it to address the specific needs of the institutions and keeps the strain on human and financial resources limited.

Text of paper (3000 words max):

The national quality assurance system of Sweden has undergone dramatic changes the last years. One of the most significant changes is that the Swedish quality assurance agency no longer has a mandate to assess internal quality assurance processes of higher education institutions. Furthermore, the Agency has been stripped of its previous mandate to give recommendations to institutions on how to enhance quality.

This lack of evaluation of internal quality assurance has been identified by the Swedish Association for Higher Education (SUHF) and the Swedish National Union of Students (SFS) as a gap in the quality assurance system. SUHF's "Expert Group on Quality"[1], has therefore explored if SUHF in cooperation with SFS can assist institutions by providing a framework and coordination of enhancement-led quality audits on a voluntary basis.

In this paper we will present our work on an audit method which was proposed by the Expert Group in October 2012. We will also present two pilot audits that were made with this method at two Swedish universities during spring 2013.

Quality audits in the Swedish quality assurance system

Inspiration for development of quality audits can be sought in the *European standards and guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA* (ESG) [1], standard 2.1:

"External quality assurance procedures should take into account the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes […]"

Högskoleverket (the national QA agency of Sweden) introduced quality audits for Swedish higher education institutions in 2007. These audits aimed to evaluate the institutions' internal quality assurance system based on ESG part 1 in a four year cycle. The audits however came to a premature end in 2009 as the national QA system was abandoned to pave way for a new system.

The current national quality assurance system, introduced by the Swedish government in 2010 [2] and implemented by Högskoleverket in 2011 [3], changed dramatically the scope and aims of external quality assurance. In the words of the Government Bill:

"Previous quality evaluations have focused on processes, i.e. how higher education institutions work. The Government, however, considers that focus should be shifted to the outcomes of study programmes, i.e. what is achieved. Universities and higher education institutions should themselves be responsible for the conditions for, and implementation of, study programmes. This responsibility includes designing systems for evaluating their own activities." [4]

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[1] SUHF has since 2008 hosted an "Expert Group on Quality" with the aim to promote exchange of experiences between the higher education institutions with regard to quality in education, research and administration. The authors are members of this Expert Group – Bengt-Ove Boström as its secretary and Christian Stråhlman as the student member elected by SFS.

The Bill introduces a formal division of responsibilities between the institutions and the *Higher Education Authority (Universitetskanslersämbetet)*, the new Swedish QA agency[2]. The Agency shall assess the achieved learning outcomes of the students which have finalized their study programmes, and satisfy itself that these achieved outcomes are in resonance with the intended learning outcomes codified in the Higher Education Ordinance. The institutions alone have the responsibility to introduce quality assurance processes to achieve these outcomes. The Agency should not assess how the institution achieves the intended outcomes, and it should not give any recommendations to the institution on how to enhance its quality.

This approach has rendered severe criticism, both from the institutions and the student unions. Interestingly, the *European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)* has decided to review the full membership of the Swedish Agency on grounds that they fail to comply with the ESG. The review of *Högskoleverket* (the former Agency) previous to ENQA's decision states in its conclusions that "ESG's first principle is that external quality assurance should build on the results of internal quality assurance, but the Swedish system takes no account of [institutions'] arrangements for internal quality assurance, except at the very margins." [5]

The conclusion must be that there is no instance of the national quality assurance system which covers and evaluates internal quality assurance. However, some universities have in recent years started quality enhancement projects outside the national system. The *Karolinska Institute* has commissioned an external Quality Audit and the universities in Lund, Uppsala and Gothenburg have all conducted projects where one feature has been external assessment of internal quality assurance. This indicates that there is still a need for institutions to engage in these activities.

In the light of these developments, the Expert Group has explored if institutions themselves through SUHF can set up and coordinate *audits* which aims at enhancing internal quality assurance and quality management. The need for audits is a consequence of the national quality assurance system, but has no intentions to form an integral part of it. As we shall see, many benefits can be achieved if the audits can remain voluntary and purely enhancement-led.

Features of an enhancement-led and voluntary audit

Audits coordinated by national university associations and similar organizations are not common in the EHEA. Probably this can be explained by the fact that in many countries the agency takes on this role. On the European level however, the *Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP)* of the *European University Association (EUA)* is a prominent and well established example. Outside the European continent, we have observed that provincial university associations in Canada have set up audit systems. The purpose of these audits is to promote *quality enhancement* at the institution under review. The audit should not result in any "grading" where an institution's quality management could be "failed". Neither an audit panel nor SUHF have power to enforce the implementation of any recommendations. The power of the audit should arise from the institution's

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[2] The Higher Education Authority (Universitetskanslersämbetet) was created January 1st, 2013 and took over its responsibilities for QA from the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (Högskoleverket, HSV).

own commitment to use the audit as a part of its systematic quality management. The panellists should provide recommendations on enhancement of quality based on their observations. It is however always at the discretion of the institution to act on them. The audits are also *voluntary*. Since the responsibility of quality assurance lies with the institution it should have the mandate to decide if an audit would be beneficial for its quality management. The audits coordinated by SUHF should in that sense be regarded as a service for those members wishing to utilize this service.

Audits should acknowledge the *diversity* of higher education institutions in Sweden. SUHF include large comprehensive universities with 60,000 students and small art academies with less than 100 students. The methods laid out should in principle be generic to the extent that all higher education institutions which operate in Sweden could ask for an audit and benefit from it. To achieve this goal, it is necessary that the audit method is *flexible*, both regarding the scope of the audit and the practical arrangements. Since audits will apply only to Swedish institutions, there is a possibility to take into account the common *national context*, e.g. when it comes to the application of the ESG.

It should be firmly stated that students shall be considered an integral part in all elements of QA. *Student involvement* in all stages of planning and executing the audits is therefore crucial and self-evident in the Swedish context. SUHF pursue a strong collaboration with SFS and rely on them to participate with student representation and to nominate student experts for audit panels. The same prerequisite of integration of students and their organizations should apply to the institution under review.

The audit method

In October 2012, all member institutions of SUHF were given the opportunity to apply to take part in the pilots. Two institutions were selected, namely *Karlstad University* and *University West*. The pilots took place during spring 2013.

The focus of the audits was to evaluate *the institutions systematic work with regard to quality assurance and quality enhancement*. The institutions had the opportunity to limit the evaluation focus to quality management in education, but also quality management with regard to research and other activities could be included. The Expert Group argued that the entanglement of these activities, and the importance for the institution management to oversee the whole institution, favoured the more comprehensive approach. The option to limit the scope of the audit should still be open in order to meet the specific needs of each institution. Karlstad University chose to include education and research, while University West opted to also include their work concerning outreach to society.

The audit was based on three generic criteria. These were:

1. The institution is steered and managed in such a way that it maintains and develops a true quality culture.
2. The institution surveys and records its quality development in an efficient manner.
3. The institution has the will and power to pursue effective measures to enhance quality in its activities.

The criteria should be applicable to different institutions and acknowledge their diversity. They should give openness and possibility to describe systematic quality work in different ways and with different approaches. Nevertheless, they should be demanding for the institution. An efficient and active quality management is taken as a norm.

Regarding education the audit method has, in connection to the above principles, been constructed to achieve compliance with the ESG. The Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) has been an important source of inspiration in this regard.

A very common procedure in QA evaluations is to ask the institution to provide a self-assessment report. Such a report would consist of a description of the quality management system of the institution, and an assessment of its strengths and weaknesses. In the pilots the institutions were given the choice to provide only the description, and thus skip the self-assessing component. The Expert Group considered that a full scale self-assessment is a heavy task for an institution, even though it often is a very beneficial exercise. The Expert Group concurred that the audit should not impose any *unnecessary burden* on the institutions. The institution shall commit to provide *necessary* material, but if an institution wants to keep the audit limited it should have the option to do so.

Both Karlstad University and University West chose to deliver a description of their quality management. The form of the description was free. Both universities decided to write their description based on the standards in ESG Part 1, and added description of quality management regarding research. Karlstad University added to the description an assessment done by the institution management on the quality culture of the University. When asked to do so University West also provided a previously made SWOT analysis.

The panels consisted each of four members - one current or former rector, one student and two members with extensive experience in quality audits. Three out of four of the panel members were the same in both panels. The student was nominated by SFS while the others were selected by the Expert Group. Two of the members in one panel, and one in the other, were selected from the group itself. Each panel made site visits at the institution. One panel, inspired by the IEP methodology, divided their site visit into two parts – one visit to "get to know" the university, and one visit for regular interviews with students and staff. The other panel made just one site visit.

Each panel rendered a report with their findings. The panels decided on a somewhat different style of the reports. The report concerning Karlstad University was more extensive and included descriptions of the university's QA processes, while the report concerning University West after short characterizations of QA processes kept to analysis and recommendations.

There was an agreement with the institutions that the reports should be made public. The institutions provided the publication of the report on their web site – and, if they wanted, in print.

Feedback from institutions

To assess the pilots we asked the audited institutions to provide feedback on their perception of the audit process and the results. Since the audit reports were given to the institutions not long before summer vacation, we will get their feedback reports after summer. Their preliminary overall statements are

however that the audits will be very useful for the developmental work of their institutions. In this respect it was very positive that the audits were enhancement oriented. Nevertheless some staff was before the site visit a bit worried and felt as if they themselves were going to be inspected and graded. The site visit however mitigated that feeling. The audit group was perceived as friendly and investigative.

Feedback from panel members

To assess the pilots we asked the panel members to give feedback on their perception of the audit process. The panel members generally argued that the audit seemed to have been a fruitful and beneficial experience for the institution. The feedback given during and after the site visit was very positive. The coordinator and chair of the panels concluded that the cooperation and work in the panels had been very well functioning. For future audits it would however be beneficial if the office of SUHF could take on a limited coordinating role to relieve the chair from practical arrangements.

Those panel members who were in both panels agreed that one visit was sufficient to do the job. The benefit of having one extra visit was not deemed proportional to the extra time and work this visit entails.

Panel members experienced that readiness to evaluate quality management in research and outreach to society was lesser than for quality management in education. One reflection is that quality management of research at institutions in general might still be less mature than quality management of education. Both reports however contain a discussion of the issues at hand, and recommendations are provided. The panel members agree that meaningful discussions were raised during interviews, and that meaningful recommendations could be given.

The panels met with a variety of management, staff and students, and over all the composition of the programs of interviews were a sufficient base for the assessment of the two institutions. Concerning meetings with students the panels concluded that panels should meet both student representatives in boards and "ordinary" students. To also meet the student union board is beneficial for the panel, as they can address issues and current problems with the institution management.

Conclusions

The overarching conclusion of the pilots is that SUHF can indeed coordinate voluntary and enhancement-led audits of quality management which are meaningful for the institutions and their development. These audits can be performed with small resources in terms of administration and organisation, which was one of the aims of the project. The panel members have concurred that the process has been rewarding also for them. One aim of the project has been to investigate if an audit system can reside outside of the national quality assurance system and still function. We have seen positive indications in this regard. Some open questions however remain after the pilots. Even though a pure description may be of good quality, an element of self-assessment increases the usability of the material. The "limited self-assessment" which Karlstad University provided to the panels was considered by the panel members to be a valuable addition to the description. The element of assessment must not

necessarily be drawn from a process which involves the whole institution with all its staff and students. It could be sufficient for the management to make an assessment of strengths and weaknesses with regard to their quality management.

It may be asked whether it would be possible to perform a comprehensive audit with similar benefit at a comprehensive university with large education and research activities. From these pilots, we cannot conclude this. However, since the audits can be tailored for each institution it should be possible to either restrict the scope of the audit or increase it with more panel members and longer site visits. Experiences from the IEP would suggest that this is indeed possible.

After working with the ESG, the panels were of the opinion that ESG need to be interpreted in the national context. This was also what two of the panel members experienced when they served on panels within the former national program for institutional audits. The initial two standards on policy and procedures for quality assurance (ESG 1.1) and on approval, monitoring and periodic review (ESG 1.2) are essential, and could in fact be interpreted as including all the other ESG Part 1 standards – if the other five are interpreted as if they refer to the *development of the performance* of the institution. However, sometimes they seem to concern more the actual quality than quality management. The standards on facilities (ESG 1.5) and public information (ESG 1.7) were deemed less important in the Swedish context, simply because Swedish institutions in general perform very well on these accounts.

The three criteria which were set out by the Expert Group can be said to implement the ESG into a pure quality management perspective. They also put a stronger focus on quality culture and its importance for enhancement. For the scope of these audits, there has been no perceived tension between these two sets of criteria. All ESG standards can be handled in the audit while the general criteria form a structure for investigation and presentation of conclusions.

For a possible continuation of the audits, we have deemed that a small steering committee needs to be instated to uphold and develop the method. A limited administrative resource is also needed.

One possible continuation of the project is to gather a small group of willing and interested future panel members in a pool. One benefit of coordination of a pool through the Association of Higher Education, which can be seen both in IEP and in the Canadian audit systems, is the capacity building which can be achieved. It should be particularly beneficial for student members, as inexperienced student reviewers can learn from more experienced peers. In a bigger picture, the joint knowledge which is achieved if many institutions work together is greater than if each institution handles this by itself.

SUHF need not involve itself more than this. No big administration is needed, and no accreditations will be acknowledged. But if the institutions are willing to work together, and with the student organizations, the audit system coordinated by SUHF could become a common service which will benefit many Swedish institutions in the years to come.

References:

[1] *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*, http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/Documents/Standards-and-Guidelines-for-QA.pdf

[2] Government Bill 2009/10:139, http://www.regeringen.se/sb/d/12489/a/142211 (in Swedish)

[3] Högskoleverket (2011), *The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education's quality evaluation system 2011–2014*, Report 2011:3 R, http://www.hsv.se/download/18.328ff76512e968468bc80004249/1103R-quality-evaluation-system-2011-2014.pdf

[4] *Focus on knowledge – quality in higher education*, Fact Sheet U10.015, http://www.regeringen.se/sb/d/12493/a/143086

[5] *Swedish National Agency for Higher Education: Review of ENQA membership* (2012), http://hsv.se/download/18.1c6d4396136bbbed2bd80002238/HSV_review-ENQA-Criteria-Report-April2012.pdf

Questions for discussion:

1. Which are the pros and cons of university associations coordinating institutional audits?
2. Which are the strengths and weaknesses of the used method?
3. Should the ESG:s be adapted to the national context in institutional audits?

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 2 August 2013 to Ivana Juraga (Ivana.Juraga@eua.be). Please do <u>not</u> send a hard copy or a PDF file.