Chapter 2
Quality Systems in Higher Education Institutions: Enabling and Constraining Quality Work

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Introduction

The concern for quality is not a new phenomenon, since achieving quality has always been at the core of the academic enterprise. The novelty of the quality debate in the last three decades lies in the explicit and direct policy interest in enhancing quality in higher education through new policy instruments and external accountability mechanisms (Brennan and Shah 2000; Westerheijden et al. 1994, 2007). While the expectation of accountability has been enhanced, there is also a continuous concern for quality assurance systems to maintain an effective balance between accountability and improvement (Danø and Stensaker 2007).

The expansion of external quality assurance and changing governance arrangements have created a demand for having internal capacity to produce relevant information. Formalised internal quality systems are a result of such demands. An important task for internal quality systems is to address external demands and expectations, and to hold higher education institutions accountable to public authorities and society. At the same time, the systems that are established become interlinked with the internal life of higher education institutions, by also having the potential to provide relevant information to internal stakeholders (Brennan and Shah 2000). The appropriate audience for such information is institutional and faculty leadership, study program leaders and educational practitioners, as well as students and other stakeholders. While all having a legitimate interest in the quality of the educational provision, these stakeholders have diverse needs. For example,

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external accountability demands would likely be most concerned with assuring minimum standards and following an externally defined threshold for quality management, institutional leadership would likely be interested in identifying ways for strategic organizational improvement, while study program leaders and educational practitioners would need detailed and rich data that is more directly related to individual practices. In this chapter, we explore how institutional quality systems manage these potentially contradictory tasks and expectations. Having this in mind, internal quality systems have an important role in setting the frame for various kinds of 'quality work' taking place in the institutions (see also Chap. 1). Consequently, core questions for this chapter are the following: How do universities and colleges structure their internal formalized quality related processes? To what extent do external standards increasingly shape how institutions conduct their internal quality systems, thereby making such systems increasingly focused on accountability and standardisation? To what extent do these systems cater to the needs of institutional leadership to govern their institutions more strategically? In addition, to what extent are these systems contributing to quality enhancement processes locally, within study programs? We end the chapter by discussing the possible implications of the systems' different tasks and expectations for the 'quality work' conducted within these systems.

The chapter builds on four institutional case studies conducted in the QNHE project.[1] The cases were selected from a larger set of qualitative case studies, to represent a variety of institutional practices and in this manner illustrate different contexts and means to structure internal quality processes. The empirical material includes interviews with various actors within the institutions (including e.g. representatives of institutional leadership, administrative staff involved in quality work at the central and local institutional level, academic staff representatives, student representatives, and staff working with university pedagogy) and various institutional documents (procedures and guidelines regarding the internal quality systems, reports and data produced, etc). Interviews were conducted in the institutions primarily during autumn 2016. The number of interviews varied among the case institutions and most of the interviews were transcribed in verbatim. The analysis was conducted thematically, following the core concepts introduced later in this chapter. While the case descriptions are based on a synthesis of all the interviews, if referring to specific information from individual interviews, we refer to the interviews as (Int-case), with individual numbering of interviews for each of the case institutions.

The chapter will first discuss the specific external demands for internal quality systems in Norway. After this, the chapter presents a review of international literature on internal quality management, followed by the analytical framework for

[1] QNHE: Quality in Norwegian higher education project, see Chap. 1 for more information.

the chapter and the empirical analysis of the cases. The chapter concludes with a reflection on common patterns shared across the institutions.

A Few Words About the Context…

In Norway, both universities and university colleges are required to have an internal quality management system. While university colleges also need accreditation for study programs at master and PhD level, universities are self-accrediting. Nevertheless, NOKUT (The Norwegian QA agency) conducts audits (termed "periodic supervision") of internal quality management systems in both types of institutions. A negative decision in the audit process means that an institution is given a certain time to rectify deficiencies and then go through a new audit. If it fails to respond adequately, the Ministry of Education and Research can revoke its authorisation to establish new study programs, independent of its formal institutional status.

The requirement to have an internal quality assurance system is stipulated in the Law of Higher Education. The general HE law specifies that institutions need to have a "(§ 1–6) satisfactory internal system for quality assurance that would assure and develop quality of education. Council for educational matters should be part of this system." Additionally, under demands for learning environments it is noted that "(§ 4–3) institutions' work with learning environments should be a part of internal quality assurance systems." The criteria for how such internal system for quality assurance should look like are more specified in the regulation for the supervisory role of NOKUT (*Studietilsynsforskrift*). There are six criteria for internal quality systems (§ 4–1 in the regulation, NOKUT translation):

- *The institution's quality assurance practices must be integrated in a strategy and cover all areas of importance for the quality of the students' learning outcome.*
- *The quality assurance practices must be endorsed by the institution's board and all levels of management. Through their quality assurance practices, institutions shall promote a quality culture among staff and students.*
- *Institutions must have systems in place for systematically ensuring that all study programmes offered meet the requirements of the Regulations concerning the Quality Assurance and Quality Development of Higher Education and Tertiary Vocational Education Sections 3–1 to 3–4 and Chapter 2 of these Regulations, and any additional requirements that apply.*
- *The institution must systematically obtain information from relevant sources to be able to evaluate the quality of all study programmes offered.*
- *Knowledge derived from the quality assurance practices must be used to enhance the quality of the study programmes and identify any deficiencies in quality. Quality deficiencies shall be rectified within reasonable time.*
- *Results derived from quality assurance practices shall form part of the knowledge base used in the evaluation and strategic development of the institution's portfolio of study programmes.*

These six criteria represent a clear demand for a structured approach within institutions. Internal systems need to be integrated with institutional governance and leadership, they need to be comprehensive, systematic and continuous. They should address both possible issues, but also cater to improvement. Nevertheless, the criteria leave some room for interpretation how exactly such an internal system should look like. There is considerable room for interpretation concerning questions of how an internal quality system should be integrated with the strategic work of the leadership on the one hand, and to academic improvement of educational processes on the other. In this chapter, we will explore how a set of Norwegian institutions organize their internal quality systems, and the potential dilemmas and tensions that emerge in the quality work practices.

Institutional Responses to External Quality Assurance Demands

A starting point in this chapter is that formalized internal quality systems have largely been established because of new external demands. In the literature about quality in higher education, at least three arguments for how external quality assurance demands would contribute to internal quality systems can be identified: the first is emphasizing the tension between external demands and internal academic quality evaluation; the second emphasizes a variety of practices that emerge due to these tensions; and the third emphasizes how such competing demands from different stakeholders can be balanced.

The first argument focuses on potential conflicts between formal quality assurance and academic quality evaluation. For example, Hoecht (2006) explores the issues of trust, control, professional autonomy and accountability in quality assurance. He argues that there has been a shift from informal "light-touch" quality control systems based on local practices and a significant amount of trust and professional autonomy, to a highly prescribed process of audit-based quality control. Such one-way accountability provides"rituals of verification" instead of fostering trust, it has high opportunity costs, and may well be detrimental to innovative teaching and learning (Hoecht 2006). Yet, while being a source for tensions and seemingly contradictory, it has been argued that professionalism and accountability can also co-exist (Cheng 2012).

Building on this notion of tension, the second argument emphasizes that these tensions lead to a variety of quality practices. Beerkens (2015) argues that quality assurance systems often face different and even conflicting goals and expectations from different parts of society. She observes that the traditional goals of securing minimum standards and facilitating improvements within universities and colleges are augmented with such goals as providing information to the public, supporting

inter-institutional competition and positioning institutions or higher education systems in the global competition. Moreover, the relative priority of these goals is changing constantly over time, the dynamics of QA systems should also be seen in a context of increasingly complex higher education governance (Beerkens 2015: 245). In practice, multiple quality assurance instruments are in place at the same time, creating a regulatory overlap which can contribute to ensuring quality in a complex and multi-faceted sector. However, this overlap may also create additional bureaucratic burdens to higher education institutions. Moreover, different instruments may balance out each other when they pull in different directions contributing to higher education institutions not responding as intended. In a similar vein Bendixen and Jacobsen (2017) argue that due to the increased influence of educational markets, quality of higher education has the character of an open signifier of periodic manifestations. As a result, context dependent and local interpretations of how to meet agreement regarding quality in everyday practices unfold (Bendixen and Jacobsen 2017).

A third line of argument would focus on how quality assurance practices are balanced in a number of ways. According to Bendixen and Jacobsen (2017: 26) higher education institutions have to find ways of managing ambiguous political and organizational requirements that cannot immediately be reconciled. Goff (2017) finds that rather than retrospective quality assurance and prospective quality assurance, three main approaches to quality assurance can be identified: an approach aimed at defending quality, an approach aimed at demonstrating quality, and an approach aimed at enhancing quality. Lyytinen et al. (2017) argue that there is little research on balancing the interest of higher education institutions and their external stakeholders in the context of quality assurance, and such balancing of centralized coordination and differentiated practices within disciplines can be rather complicated. Achieving endorsement from various internal and external stakeholder groups thus becomes a sign of a responsive culture in quality assurance (O'Sullivan 2017). This responsiveness is arguably needed, given the complexity of education as a basic function of universities.

These three sets of arguments are interrelated, but all illustrate that institutional responses and structures to address the extended "quality agenda" can take multiple forms. While one could question the claims made by Lyytinen et al. (2017) about the lack of research on balancing external and internal interests in quality assurance processes – this is an issue that has extensively been analysed and discussed under headings such as 'balancing accountability and improvement' – it is nevertheless true that a mismatch indeed can be found in many countries struggling to combine external demands and internal academic quality improvement practices (Brennan and Shah 2000; Beerkens 2015). However, it is also possible that such tasks can find different ways to co-exist. To examine how the external demands and internal practices are related in our case institutions, the analytical framework builds on insights from organizational behaviour when addressing various environmental demands.

Conceptualising Internal Quality Systems

The starting point for this analysis is the assumption that the characteristics of internal quality systems are both the result of external accountability demands found in the NOKUT criteria, as well as specific local organizational factors. The need to produce relevant data for quality assurance requires organizational infrastructure to produce and deliver relevant information. Being embedded in local organizational practices these systems likely obtain additional functions (Beerkens 2015). They can obtain relevance for strategic leadership tasks, where the data produced can contribute to organizational improvement; or, they can provide information for study program leaders and individual staff, who would need detailed and rich data that is relevant for local quality enhancement.[2] Overall, one can thus envisage three different functions for an internal quality system – adherence to standards, contribution to strategic institutional leadership, and enhancement of local quality processes, each representing a distinct system logic. There are different possible configurations for how the demands of the external QA system are linked to organizational processes. The question that remains concerns the conditions under which these different functions become integrated in a way that combines multiple functions; under which circumstances do such systems remain as multiple parallel systems that interact; and when would tensions between the different underlying functions lead to a dysfunctional system where meaningful organizational processes are challenged (building on the arguments of hybrid organizing, see Skelcher and Smith 2015)?

Responding to the expectations of external quality assurance demands represents a specific set of externally formalized expectations, and there is a clear sanction if the institutions fail to meet the minimum threshold set in the regulation. Having this in mind, institutions have strong incentives for compliance, where external rules are dealt with in a conscious manner in the organization (Oliver 1991, p. 153). Given that quality assurance demands represent an added layer of external demands to the institution, they would likely also lead to increased rationalisation and administrative burdens within the institutions (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Meyer et al. 1987). Thus, it is possible to expect that given the formalized expectations, if a university or college aims to comply with the demands, it would lead to expanded administrative procedures for internal quality systems. Processes of professionalization and specialisation within institutional administration (Gornitzka and Larsen 2004) contribute to how this task is managed. This would require a process of centralization of authority within the institutions and an emphasis on the role of central leadership (Brennan and Shah 2000, p. 38). From this perspective, it could be argued that there is a potential for linking such structures also to central leadership and to managerial agendas (Bollaert 2014). Given that such a quality system would focus on the standards as determined externally, the operationalisation of quality and the procedures for the quality management system within the organization would closely follow the

[2] While one can expect that such systems could also provide data to society at large, the focus in this chapter is on the internal dynamics of such systems.

definitions of the quality assurance agency, to minimize the risk of non-compliance. While this would imply that the definitions adopted within the whole system would follow external standards, it is not given that such a system would address the needs of more local and practice-near quality work of study program leaders and academic staff.

Yet, arguments can also be made for the fact that such wholesale compliance with externally determined rules would likely not be feasible and somewhat naïve to expect, given the nature and complexity of higher education institutions. Universities have historically been described as fragmented, with considerable authority at the bottom of the organization (Clark 1983). Despite increased emphasis on organizational actorhood and becoming a more complete organization (Krücken and Meier 2006; Seeber et al. 2015), attempts of creating coherent streamlined organizations in higher education have also met some substantive barriers (Maassen 2017; Whitley 2008). At the same time, when such external demands would not be perceived as legitimate and internal complexity would challenge the demands, the costs of non-compliance would remain high. As a result, it can be expected that one means to tackle this would be to maintain a formal quality monitoring system in place that remains relatively decoupled from other organizational processes. Such decoupling suggests that structures and routines can remain separate from 'production' (Meyer and Rowan 1977), that is, the quality work taking place with respect to the educational processes on the 'shop floor'. When such external standards are incommensurable with existing structures, routines and practices, such systems can also function as buffers. Having in mind the three potential functions of the internal quality system, this would suggest that systems driven forward by external QA systems would remain disconnected from both leadership and educational practice. The external demands would still be addressed at face value as they have no practical consequence for the practices, and compliance would take place in the form of window-dressing.

Yet, it is also possible that the organization would not take external expectations at face value. While the incentives to comply with the basic requirements remain, there is also ambiguity within the criteria by the QA agency of how internal quality systems should look like. Consequently, institutions have some leeway in constructing and developing their internal quality systems and how they would be integrated into their own organization and coordination structures. In this version, external expectations are filtered through considerable translation processes within the organization, where idea adoption is not only about compliance by copying external demands, but also about change and innovation (Sahlin and Wedlin 2013). For internal quality systems, this implies that a range of possible constellations emerge, as external standards become one organizing principle among several, and can thus be coupled to existing quality processes within the organization in various ways.

Having the above in mind, how higher education institutions design their internal systems and how such systems function in practice can take multiple forms. In Table 2.1 we summarize the three perspectives and their implications for how the three functions are addressed.

Table 2.1 Three perspectives on institutional quality systems and their coupling to external demands and expectations

	Compliance	Decoupled	Translation
Compliance with the expectations and specific standards of QA agency	High	High, but surface	Low
Contributing to the needs of institutional leadership	High	Low	Moderate
Addressing the needs of local academic quality enhancement processes	Low	Low	High

Internal quality systems were introduced for accountability purposes, and over time, this has led to a considerable enhancement of the professionalization of the function in the institutions. However, the three different forms have implications for structures and coordination of the system. For instance, a system which is primarily expected to represent compliance would likely be more centralized and standardized, while a translation perspective implies that the internal quality system is less determined by external demands and instead is shaped by local concerns within the institution. Further, one can expect that given the emphasis on centralization, a compliance-oriented system would also more likely be tightly coupled to institutional leadership at the central level. Regarding the needs of local academic quality enhancement processes, we can thus expect that a translation dominated quality system would be better able to contribute to this than compliance and decoupling-oriented systems.

Case Analysis of Internal Quality Systems

Taking a starting point in the three functions of the internal quality systems, we now shift focus to the four cases selected for this analysis. We will first present basic information about each of the case institutions about the formalized internal quality system, the extent to which it is oriented towards external QA standards, and how it caters to institutional leadership as well as to educational quality enhancement processes. We present the cases according to the three main functions and then reflect on the interconnectedness between these functions.

Case A

Case A has been through multiple merger processes. Earlier, the institution was characterized as a comprehensive research university, after the mergers the institution now also has a range of professionally oriented study programs previously part of the university college sector, and a complex multi-campus system which spans across considerable geographical distance. The internal quality system had also

been through a range of changes and was under discussion during the data collection for the underlying research project.

At the time, the main aim of the internal quality system was to provide a description of the systematic and strategic work with educational quality at the institution. The overarching system described the purpose, division of labour, and general framework for the system, while the individual process and routine descriptions were developed locally. As a result, the system was rather decentralized. The twofold purpose of the system was described as follows: to contribute to a culture where quality enhancement is in focus; and to identify good quality, quality issues and contribute with problem solving. The quality system identified seven different aspects of quality that it needed to address: steering, framework conditions, relevance, intake/input quality, study program quality, teaching quality, and outcome quality. As a consequence, most administrative units contributed in some manner to educational quality. Faculties and departments had considerable responsibility in this model.

In line with the decentral nature of the administrative structure of the internal quality assurance system, several respondents emphasized the need to keep quality work close to practice, while they also referred to the differences between faculties that required differentiated practices for the process on faculty level, as exemplified by this respondent:

> We have a quality assurance system that is developed and managed centrally. However, faculties have quite much freedom to organize the work in a way they find purposeful. This is because our faculties have so different size and focus. (…) the system includes considerable freedom to organize quality work towards study programs. There are some principles for when and how. I mean programs need to be evaluated within this and that period, there needs to be a system for external evaluations of study programs. So, there are some guiding principles which they need to follow. Then they can make their own procedural descriptions for how they want to do this. (Int A3)

There was also no single model for who is responsible for a study program council (*programstyret*), and the institution operated with three different options (head of department as leader of the study program council, head of department appoints a leader, or faculty employs a study leader based on the recommendation from head of department). This suggests that there was considerable diversity also regarding the authority structures and role descriptions.

Yet, a recent reorganization process also raised a question with respect to the effectiveness of this way of organizing the internal quality system, as vertical coordination was somewhat challenging. The same respondent who is quoted above later suggested that there was a need for a more centralized approach to the internal quality system, arguing for much more standardisation (IntA3). Similar opinions were also mentioned in the other interviews, including by student representatives (Int A4, A5). Thus, coordination and standardization of the internal quality system have increasingly become a concern, also because the merged institutions had different traditions and culture for working with quality.

A core delivery in the internal quality system was the annual 'education and research quality report', with a reporting format that was recently changed. The previous institutional system was described as '360 reporting' – meaning that faculties reported on all data annually. However, this was perceived as rather cumbersome and time-consuming (Int A2, A3). Consequently, the focus was shifted to reporting on selected strategic priorities which might change from year to year. In addition to this, '360 data' was also produced annually, also to identify possible issues of concern. However, not all of this data obtained a place in the printed version of the report. While there used to be separate education and research reports, more recently the education and research reports were combined, to identify possible synergies.

A recent external supervision process by NOKUT had reportedly been somewhat challenging for some of the internal units, which further stimulated the discussions of the internal quality system. One idea that was discussed in the institution is the establishment of a 'local NOKUT', that is an internal function that would mirror the external quality assurance agency and engage in independent supervision within the organization. This idea was mentioned in multiple interviews as a possible solution, while its exact mandate, structure and tasks were at the time still unresolved. One of the respondents described the idea as following:

> Much of the work now is on faculties, I think we need someone who does not control but also has responsibility. So, when NOKUT actually comes, we have it all sorted out. So, such a unit should have responsibility but also authority over the faculties. (…) We have a QA system where they follow whether programs satisfy the formal criteria. But this is very administrative. I wish we had a way to know more about the academic aspects, which at this point are more difficult to measure. But we should know more about these things. (Int A1)

From the quote, two things emerge – the establishment of a 'local NOKUT' was viewed as a means to counteract possible new external threats and avoid complicated situations. In that sense, the process was also driven by external demands by the QA agency. At the same time, there seemed to be a parallel rationale, which concerned again the wish to know more about educational quality. The paradox that remained in the suggestions is that while the aim appeared to be to get closer to academic conceptualisation of quality work, the proposed solution appeared to be quite administrative, adopting an external standardization logic. Yet, there was also active work by the leadership towards the QA agency and public authorities, for gaining leverage for their preferences regarding relevant topics for quality in higher education.

Educational quality has been high on the strategic agenda in the institution. Leadership was perceived as very engaged in issues of educational quality, and one of the slogans they used in the leadership election campaign was educational quality. As mentioned by one employee in an interview:

> We have probably never had a vice rector as active as the current one (…) Vice rector is also in the strategic educational council. (…) They have also some funding they distribute in the organization to projects that are important to focus on. So educational quality has definitely obtained more focus. (Int A3)

The establishment of a central strategic educational council was driven by the leadership and includes all vice deans, representatives from central leadership, administration, students and the university pedagogics unit. The council also obtained delegated authority to announce and distribute annual funding for projects to develop excellence in education, which created active responses within the organization (Int A6). Next to the money available, the body has limited formal authority. At the same time, the body obtained an important strategic function and has also taken up some difficult themes (e.g. closing of study programs). The council also seemed to have a rather definitional role in terms of how quality is discussed in the organization.

Leadership has been active in proposing new instruments and also evaluating their effects, and seemed to have an ambition to get somehow closer to the educational processes as there was a concern that the quality assurance system has been too instrumental and administrative.

> We think that focus in quality assurance has been more on education rather than teaching and learning processes. That it has to be on the right level, that you have a sufficient number of professors, and all that. But teaching quality has been treated somewhat 'with a cold shoulder'. (Int A1)

Given the decentralized structure, local quality enhancement processes varied substantially. In the empirical work at this institution, we conducted interviews in three faculties (Int A6–A13). The faculty level was responsible for following up the reports produced (Int A6) and study program boards retained substantial power as arenas to discuss and follow up quality processes. The administrative process of the internal QA management also brought together potential academic debates. However, given the rather decentralized structure otherwise, it was also clear that there was considerable variation in the ways in which quality processes were followed up. This concerns, for example, the extent and manner student evaluations were followed up, how the writing of the quality report was organized, how the faculties worked with external feedback and reference groups, but also the very operation of the study program councils.

The image that emerges is that quality work was rather fragmented in the organization. Yet, there also seemed to be consciousness about the fact, as considerable effort was put into developing visualisations how the different aspects of quality work were interrelated and how to achieve coherence in this system:

> If we want to take education and quality seriously there needs to be coherence and connection, and all the different parts have to work together. (…) And then we need resources to attach to this. (Int A3)

The overall view of the internal quality system was that there had been considerable strategic focus and strategic emphasis on quality had become more pronounced centrally. The interviews were also full of rather similar descriptions of what quality is, and what matters for quality, and one can find a somewhat unexpected agreement in this respect. At least to some extent, this also translated to the energy that was put

into trying to streamline the system. Yet, the solutions for the perceived issues in a structural level seemed to reflect more the external templates about quality management than that they were actually able to provide links towards the micro processes of educational quality management. Thus, vertical coordination in the organization remained an issue that was at the end of our study not yet resolved.

Case B

Case institution B was previously an independent university college, but merged with a larger university as part of the structural transformation of the Norwegian higher education landscape in recent years. In the 1990s, the college was established through a merger of engineering and nursing schools. As an independent university college, the institutional profile was closely associated with professional education programs in health and engineering. After the merger, the institution is currently one of several campuses of the larger university, enjoying some autonomy while also having to adjust to the rules and regulations of the 'new' university. As part of this process, the internal quality system has been through a range of changes.

Due to the merger process, the quality system went through quite drastic changes. Initially, the system was built up as an instrument for supporting the strategic ambitions of the college, having a strong focus on program quality and developing study programs where learning outcomes were tightly linked to teaching and learning activities, and assessment and evaluation. Hence, curriculum development was a key activity within the system, and involving both academic staff and students in this process was perceived as a vital factor for success. Administratively, the system was formally under the supervision of the pro-rector, with a very clear but simple structure for delegation and responsibility of tasks and duties.

After the merger, the internal quality assurance system changed radically, with much more emphasis on reporting and (student) evaluations (of teaching). The study program leader was required to write a report each year about how the study program was performing, but taking a more coherent perspective, there were few requirements as to the processes leading up to this report. Student involvement was emphasized in the system, although their formal role rather than their engagement seemed to be the key issue.

With respect to the administrative functioning of the internal administrative quality system – informants argued that the strategic ambitions of the quality assurance system had been the same for almost 20 years. Due to the merger in the 1990s, the focus was mainly to create and strengthen the ties between the different disciplinary and academic areas of the merged institution, and the objectives of the internal quality assurance system were closely linked to the strategic objectives of the institution. As one of the former institutional leaders of the college expressed it:

> For us the internal quality assurance system was an integration project – the aim was to create a joint identity and a common institutional culture. (Int B2)

While the system that was created earlier had a strong leadership involvement, the design of the system strongly emphasized creating what today is often described as a quality culture, with formal and informal meeting places, and opportunities for dialogue.

Somewhat paradoxically, informants admitted that while the quality assurance system had a strong strategic focus, this strategic focus did not address the specific quality challenges found within the college. As one of the key designers of the system acknowledged:

> It is unfortunate in retrospect that the system we designed, which was created after lengthy discussions, did not address the key challenge of our college – drop-out and completion of students. Initially, we saw the system as a way to integrate the institution while responding to the demands of the national quality assurance system. (Int B)

After the merger, now being part of a larger university, the reflection was that the administrative reporting had increased while the more dialogue-based arenas for informal reflection had been reduced in numbers and in significance.

Strategic quality improvement was previously perceived as a key driver behind the design of the system, where a process described as decentralized, dialogue-based and having a focus on the design and delivery of the study programs was implemented. According to the informants, the recent merger had contributed to changing the system and its characteristics. While dialogue was an important characteristic of the previous quality assurance system, it had become less important, and the informants noticed that the reporting requirements were much stronger and more detailed than before:

> Compared to what we used to do, the merger creates quite large challenges for us. Accountability and the reporting to feed into this process is much more prevalent, and these administrative processes that we managed to protect the staff from before are difficult to handle. We have much less administrative resources that the university, so the academic staff will notice the change. (Int B2)

In general, the change was described as a move away from an informal, dialogue-based, and problem-focused quality assurance system to a more formalized and accountability focused system. At the same time, the previous college had been pushing the institutional leadership at the newly merged university to clarify how local autonomy and institutional standards were to be balanced. The argument from the previous college was that considerable autonomy should be granted to both campuses and to the study programs – an argument that was seen as problematic by the central leadership of the new university.

However, according to the informants some continuity in the system is also noticeable. The emphasis on learning outcome descriptions as a key element in the quality assurance system was a key characteristic of the ‘old’ system, and over time this element has become even stronger in the new system, not least due to continuous national emphasis. Such formal learning outcomes were not seen as an element of bureaucratization, but rather a way to ease communication between teachers, administrators and those having leadership responsibilities at different levels:

> We have worked a lot to create a common vocabulary for discussing quality, and I would say we have succeeded in that (…due to the focus on learning outcomes). We did not want to have a 'commercial' quality assurance system, but a system with local ownership. Currently, we can talk about quality in similar ways across the whole campus. (Int B1)

Although the internal quality assurance system could be characterized as decentralized, local quality enhancement processes had several elements in common. One such element was the emphasis on engaging students in the quality enhancement processes. While those in charge of the quality assurance system acknowledged that it has been difficult to get the students interested and heavily involved in the processes initiative, student representatives were still quite positive as to the effect of these efforts:

> As a student representative, I do see big changes. Several of the initiatives that have been implemented has worked well, including how examination is conducted, and levelling out the work-load in the study programs. (Int B3)

One of the changes noticed as part of the recent merger was that drop-out and completion issues were stronger on the institutional agenda, and consequently, more important in the various quality initiatives taken. As one of the informants argued:

> We have recently initiated a large project on drop-out and completion where student support and supervision are a key element. This is an initiative that is a blueprint of actions and routines the university has had for years, and that is now adopted throughout the merged institution. This project seems to make a difference, not least related to completion

In general, the case illustrates how quality assurance systems may shift focus and characteristics as part of a merger process. A system that initially was designed as an identity-builder and tool for organizational integration emphasizing informal procedures, dialogue and with a high level of trust has – because of the merger - shifted into a more formal system with distinct accountability characteristics. However, the new system has also brought about a stronger problem-focus, with an emphasis on drop-out and completion, which seemed to produce results.

Case C

The third case is a relatively large institution that has been formed after a recent merger operation. At the time of the underlying study, this university college was preparing an application for becoming a university. After the merger process, it had four faculties, located on a bi-campus system that was relatively well-connected. The institution was professionally oriented in its study programs. Case C had an elaborated, detailed formal internal quality system, which could be interpreted as relatively centralized. At the same time, after the merger the faculties had become highly autonomous in the management and administration of their primary processes, and they did have a direct responsibility for developing a faculty quality management approach that should obviously fit within the overall institutional system.

An important characteristic of the quality system was its strong reporting orientation. The respondents described how data produced in the system led to many quality enhancement measures in the institution. The system was also described as rather complicated:

> we have this fantastically or awfully intricate system of details and boxes and arrows and lines and people who are supposed to deliver different kinds of reports to different deadlines. Some of these are related and overlapping, some of them ask similar things with somewhat different labels, it is almost a wild troll of a reporting system. We are now working with trying to streamline this system, to structure the internal processes a little more and perhaps assure that parts of the texts can be used in multiple reports. (Int C1)

Similar comments were made in all interviews, where another respondent called it a "mammoth" of a system that demanded a lot of energy. Yet, despite the complicated system and considerable reporting, according to the respondents, only few of these measures were ever implemented, with most being instead presented in the external accountability reports the institution produced. The same respondent continued:

> perhaps we also collect data too broadly, we do not have time to solve issues before we are already introducing new things, so we never get through the whole 'loop'. Perhaps we should focus on one thing at a time, our current system seems both too detailed and too broad at the same time. (Int C1)

Similar concerns over the unclear "quality loop" and reporting too many issues were also expressed in other interviews, where respondents emphasized that while there was continuous work with the internal reports, there was a need to structure the measures that were identified. At the same time, this dysfunctionality could also create frustration, as expressed by another respondent:

> When departments have to report and see that the same thing is still there, even if they have reported it earlier, and nothing has happened. They also cannot tell the students that the issue has been addressed, so this creates frustration and actually in itself becomes a barrier for an effective quality system. (Int C2)

The institutional quality system showed an imbalance between its external compliance and internal enhancement aims, as respondents described multiple external demands for information, including demands from the QA agency. The QA agency was not only viewed as an external partner or an agency expecting the production of specific data, but also as a barrier for internal development. Given that the QA agency was mostly in contact with the central administration, one of the respondents noted that the communication downwards could become the "game of whispers" with multiple interpretation processes.

One important circumstance was that the recent merger affected in practice the room for strategic development (in the area of quality enhancement) in the institution. In addition, also the ambition to apply on short notice after the merger for university status implied that the attention, and leadership capacity for strategic quality enhancement work inside the institution was relatively limited. Therefore, it can be argued that the institution was in the first place prioritizing the expectations of the external QA agency, and had not (yet) developed an internal translation

process that addressed in full the needs of the study program leaders and academic staff in their quality enhancement work.

In one of the four faculties a lack of coordination between the leadership and the administrative staff seemed to have been a problem regarding quality work. The role of the study committee (in Norwegian *studieutvalg*) remained rather unclear according to the respondents. A new initiative in the faculty was to hold meetings of faculty and departmental leadership and study administrations on a bi-monthly basis. However, these meetings emphasized administrative rather than strategic priorities. The respondent(s) indicated that they had arenas for collaboration with other administrative staff from other faculties (Int C2, C4), but working with faculty leadership seemed to be more dependent on individual relationships. At the same time, one of the respondents noted that there had been considerable shifts in leadership at the institution as well and the respondent interpreted this as a possible explanation for the lack of implementation of measures.

Overall, the system was much more accountability and reporting than enhancement oriented, as expressed as a common theme in the interviews. However, there also seemed to be a disconnection between administrative and academic logic in quality work:

> the way those two groups [administration and academic staff]… well there is a tradition here that administrative staff […] should keep their distance, but I believe there would be much gained if the two groups would collaborate more

There were no indications that the external accountability orientation had a negative effect per se on the quality of the study programs offered, but various respondents expressed their concerns about the relative weak links between the various governance levels of the institution with respect to the institutional management of quality work activities. The quality system seemed to work more bureaucratically than strategically because of this. At the same time, various new staff members had been appointed at central faculty level positions in the quality system, and these could be regarded as part of the efforts to strengthen the internal quality enhancement orientation of the quality system.

Case D

Case institution D is a university college with roots dating back long time ago as it was established as a teacher training college. At the time of the underlying research project the studies offered were varied and included, amongst other things, media and communication, teacher training education, social sciences, and social planning and governance.

The internal quality system was characterized by a set of clearly defined roles as well as responsibilities. Numerous bodies across the institution had a defined role in

quality assurance, such as the strategic study council, the council for learning environment, as well as councils for research quality, internationalization and employment conditions. In addition, each faculty had set up its own study quality council.

According to the internal quality assurance system, the central strategic study council had a key coordinating role, which included the responsibility for the annual educational quality reports. These reports were produced by the individual program councils, sent to the central strategic study council, which used these reports for preparing the discussions to the board of the university college. The strategic study council discussed both the quality of the educational programs at the university college as well as the educational provision of the institution, for example, which educational programs should be run. New suggestions for educational programs were discussed by the strategic study council, and it acted as an advisory body to the board.

At the faculty level, the university college had set up thematic groups for study programs as part of its internal quality system. In these thematic groups, students, the teacher responsible for the course and other teachers involved in the course met and discussed educational quality. At faculty level, the dean is responsible for the annual quality report that was sent to the rector and pro-rector and was discussed in the strategic study council. Discussions were also organized between the heads of departments and the dean. Moreover, this report was on the agenda of the faculty meeting.

Each spring and fall, evaluations of all of the courses were conducted. At this level, the study program leaders wrote reports as well on the courses and study programs. Course evaluation reports and study program reports were compiled into a quality report which was delivered to the study administration. These faculty quality reports were used as input to the quality report of the university college that the study administration presented to the strategic study council and then to the institutional board. Furthermore, each fall, as a preparation for the reporting of national statistics, completion statistics for the faculty level were prepared.

From the interviews, the impression emerges that the formal and administrative elements of the QA processes were well disseminated throughout the organization. The university college's internal quality assurance system specified roles and responsibilities in detail, as can be illustrated by the following examples:

- The director of the university college has the responsibility for the functioning of the quality assurance system and for the administrative support system related to educational quality.
- The study director has the overall responsibility for the student administrative support system at the university college.
- The study director initiates in cooperation with the faculties internal evaluations of the educational provision to ensure the educational quality. Moreover, the study director runs statistics that the faculties may use in their quality work.

Administrative routines were promoted as central to the system, but also with the aim of quality improvement. At the same time, there some tensions between this strong administrative logic and the underlining of quality work as a continuous process and dialogue. In one of the interviews this was expressed as follows:

> Well, I feel that the quality concept should be seen as a process in which one has dialogue between students, academic staff and leadership. Something which one continuously develops. I do not think one can clearly define quality. It is more about continuous work. (Int D3)

There was also an interesting acknowledgement on behalf of the administration that the quality system may seem overwhelming and too detailed, as commented in one of the interviews:

> My impression is that this is a bit too much, that maybe we have a quality system that is a bit too much. In this case, I refer to the quality reports, that they might be too detailed. On our side, we think this is important because it makes clear how the quality work should be conducted also at the level of courses. Not the least that the students are involved in the quality work because it is very important. They are the users. (Int D2)

The responsibilities and tasks related to strategic quality improvement resided with the top leadership of the university college. In this sense, there was a clear linkage to the leadership. Moreover, the linkages and the roles with leadership were anchored in the university college's central board, which had the overarching responsibility for the quality assurance system and for approving the annual report on educational quality. In addition, it was stated clearly that the rector is the main responsible person for the quality of the educational provision at the university college. The rectorate has the daily responsibility for following up the quality assurance system and for establishing and implementing measures to enhance the competence of the academic staff. There also seemed to be a strong feeling of ownership and commitment to quality work at the level of leadership. In one of the interviews it was stated that:

> We have put a lot of energy in implementing the new regulation, we put a lot of energy in the national student survey, I personally have been responsible for this. (...) This is something that is important for the leadership. (Int D3)

However, despite the formally clear linkages and descriptions of roles and responsibilities, much work seemed to be related to creating the links between the administrative procedures and leadership. As stated by the same respondent:

> Well, we have a couple of committees that seek to couple this (…) so there is a system of reporting from the students' groups to the strategic level (…) There is a kind of coupling though from the work of students to the board. But the way is long. So, we work with it all the time, and try to see what is the most efficient, how do we get valuable feedback regarding educational quality. (Int D3)

In addition, educational improvement locally and the linkages between the QA system and educational improvement processes were well ordered. The deans had the overall responsibility for the quality work and for enhancing a quality culture at

the faculties. This included the responsibility for organizing the quality work of the faculty, drafting and publishing the guidelines for the quality work and making these available to staff and students, implementing the evaluations and presenting the results to the study quality councils in faculties well as other relevant arenas. The heads of departments/study program leaders/head of studies were responsible for planning, coordination, evaluation and quality enhancement of educational programs including practice periods.

Study program leaders/head of studies prepared a short presentation of the quality work related to the program for which they were responsible to the students at the beginning of the semester. The person responsible for the course was responsible for the planning, coordination, evaluation and quality enhancement of the course. The person responsible for the course contributed to the evaluations of the programs of which the course was a part. The responsible teacher was responsible for providing research-based education, supervision and follow up, as well as contributing to the evaluation of the program and the courses. Yet in practice, the impression was that the quality work was not heartily approved by the academic staff, as expressed in one of the interviews:

> Well, we have these councils for educational quality in which teachers and students should meet in which educational quality is the theme. For these meeting there is, I do not know if I should call it an instruction, but, at least a guideline for which themes to discuss in these meetings. (Int D1)

According to the quality system, the students shared responsibility for the enhancement of educational quality at the university college. Hence, the students were represented in boards and decision making/advisory boards at the university college. They took part, for example, in student evaluations and student satisfaction surveys that the university college initiated. The role of the thematic councils was to be an arena for feedback and evaluations during study and it aimed at developing a critical attitude. From some of the interviews it might be concluded that there was a weaker understanding of how the students contributed to the strategic quality work, as noted by one student:

> I have not seen a strong priority from the leadership toward my study program. It might be accidentally, but from the university college centrally, I have not experienced anything of a strategy. It is understandable, we have other things that are more important. (Int D5)

In general, the case illustrated how quality assurance systems may become strongly routine based and formally interwoven with educational practices. This case seemed to be representative for those institutions that combine a strong compliance towards external expectations with a rather small community of academic leadership and administrative staff, which provide the basis for a strong implementation of rules and regulations. It seems as if quality assurance was an issue the leadership and the administration took care of. The impression from the interviews, although not with teachers, was that the academic side of the organization was not very substantially involved except for taking part in the formal procedures.

Concluding Remarks

Internal quality assurance can be said to have reached a stage of maturity in Norwegian higher education where the novelty and perhaps even the anxiety of establishing such systems have disappeared. In the outset of this chapter, we identified three functions/roles of internal quality assurance systems: adhering to standards, supporting strategic leadership, and local quality enhancement. We also underlined that internal quality assurance systems are established and `work` in institutions with different characteristics and history, opening for different possible ways of combining external standards and local institutional characteristics. The considerable variation between the internal quality systems in the four case institutions demonstrates structural variation, concerning whether the systems are centralized or decentralized, and how these systems cater to diverse functions. In all the institutions, independent of their formal legal status, there was consciousness of addressing external demands stemming from the national QA agency. Nevertheless, these external demands had in most instances been translated into the local context, although with varying linkages to strategic leadership and local practices. The question then becomes what kind of translations this adaptation has resulted in.

Recent mergers between institutions have stirred up the status quo, triggering substantial changes in the institutions that are going through merger processes and their aftermath. This is not surprising as new institutions need to develop new systems of quality assurance. However, since mergers result in larger and more complex institutions, internal quality systems can become an instrument for creating order and stability in this situation. Such systems can both emphasize the need to follow standards, or they can also remain decentralized, depending on the dynamics of the overall merger process. When institutions undergo more comprehensive integration processes, internal quality systems can both function as enablers and constraints in the overall merger process. Their enabling role is unique as a way to establish coherence and a systematic overview of activities, roles and responsibilities. For a newly merged organization, these functions are vital as a way to secure rapid organizational capability and functionality. However, there is a price to be paid in that the work that has been put into the internal quality assurance systems in the formerly independent institutions easily is 'nullified' (Bendixen and Jacobsen 2017), in the sense that these systems have to be re-built from scratch. By referring to the dimensions and dilemmas involved in quality work presented in Chap. 1, it is possible to argue that the quality systems examined indeed can be characterized as quite generic and formal.

However, in cases where the internal quality assurance systems had matured and become more distinct over time, it was also possible to see how such systems – and the rules and routines that follow suit – could become linked to educational practices, albeit to varying degrees and with varying strategies. In one of the institutions, this process seems to be conditioned by its small size, while other instances of linking internal quality systems to educational practices were dependent on active leaders who have kept an emphasis on strategic work with quality high on the agenda.

While a classic insight from the analysis of internal quality assurance system repeatedly underlines the role of leaders in creating these systems (Brennan and Shah 2000), our findings can be said to nuance this factor by pointing to the danger of engaged leaders emphasizing "systems" rather than local relevance.

A result of this can be a 'mammoth' of a system that becomes overcomplicated and bureaucratic, and where the quality work conducted is closely aligned with managerial agendas. Interestingly, while such systems perhaps on the outset represented a local translation of external quality assurance demands, they can nevertheless, and as a consequence of strong managerial influence, become decoupled within the organization where a formalized, hierarchical and standardized quality system obtains a life of its own. The distinction between adhering to external standards and the strategic role such systems may play within the organization are in these instances in danger of collapsing when the institutional leadership gets involved in the process. As institutional leaders ultimately are accountable for the institutional systems developed, their internal strategies often run the danger of merely reflecting national priorities and initiatives. This is not least seen when issues such as drop-out and completion become key indicators of the internal quality assurance systems. In this way, the political side of quality assurance (Beerkens 2015) ends up as dominating other functions internal quality assurance system are expected to have.

Our findings nuance the classical underlining that management involvement is key for developing well-functioning quality assurance systems (Bollaert 2014). While one could argue that managerial involvement is a necessity for such systems to be taken seriously, we also found that the quality work that is undertaken as part of the internal quality assurance systems displays the strong weight given to formal roles, routines and procedures to make the systems work, while the link to local quality enhancement of educational provision is often far less visible. The quality work conducted within these systems seems much less oriented towards discovery, the interesting practices, and the innovations that take place in the educational delivery.

From a historical perspective, and compared to other regions in Europe, Danø and Stensaker (2007) have argued that the Nordic countries have managed to uphold a relatively good balance between improvement and accountability. The design of the national quality assurance system does play an important role for how much autonomy institutions have when designing their own systems. As illustrated earlier, the criteria specified in Norway do provide institutions with considerable autonomy as to how they could design their own systems. Our study suggests that this autonomy is still captured by the national agenda through the involvement of institutional leaders. In other words, the institutional autonomy could be utilized far more that what currently is the case. This also poses a dilemma concerning redesign of internal quality systems. While changing the system (always) seems to be a tempting option, these systems also need time to mature. At the same time, this maturity also needs to be nurtured, so that these internal systems can function in a relevant manner for the specific organization. It is by no means a goal that all systems need to cater for all functions and demands, and that it would even be possible for a single

system to maximize its relevance concerning standards, leadership and local practices. Each institutional quality system needs to interact in a productive manner with other organizational structures, processes and practices – integrating the informal dimensions and specifics of quality work to the formal aspects of quality assurance. The institutional cases selected for this chapter can be seen as an indication that the capacity quality assurance systems have for paying attention to and absorbing local practices is limited, with the implication that relevant quality work taking place within the institution is not captured and utilized optimally.

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