The framework of quality enhancement at Uppsala University – an overview

Quality assurance and Quality Development at Uppsala University

A brief background to provide context to the CrEd 10-12 project

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1. Background

On 6 April 2010 the Vice-Chancellor decided on a project aiming at stimulating educational development at Uppsala University (UU), Creative Educational Development 2010-2012, CrEd 10-12[1] (UFV 2010/513). The overarching goal of the CrED project is to contribute to the realization of the policy programme Teaching and Learning at Uppsala University. The CrED project aims at shedding light on good examples of educational development and to facilitate the exchange of experiences and ideas on educational development between different parts of the University.

During the first phase of the project, 2010-2011, the disciplinary domains and faculties pursued developmental work in relation to self-prioritised themes within the framework of the guidelines for Teaching and Learning at Uppsala University. Two themes were university wide, the further development of research and teaching linkages and boundary spanning courses and study programmes.

In 2012, the results of the development activities will be presented to an international panel consisting of colleagues from the world wide Matariki network (UU and six sister universities), and yet some international experts on quality in higher education. In addition to the feedback from the international panel, there will be peer exchange between faculties sharing the lessons learned by the development activities that have been taking place.

In November 2011, the international panel was invited to a preparatory site visit. The purpose of the visit was to introduce the panel to the Swedish higher education system, UU's organization and "quality work", the work of the student unions, and the aims and design of the CrED project. The panel touched down in ongoing developmental activities, asked questions about various conditions, submitted preliminary observations, and provided feedback about the planned structure for follow-up 2012. Among other things, the panel suggested that reporting should be made, not only by the domains and faculties, but also by the central functions that contribute to educational development.

On 25 – 28 September 2012, the international panel will make its second and final visit to UU.

In the following, a brief background given in which the overall framework of quality assurance and quality development at UU is outlined. The purpose is to provide a context to the CrEd Project. This background forms part of the documentation that is sent to the panel before its visit.

[1] In Swedish: Kreativ utbildningsutveckling vid Uppsala universitet 2010-2012, KrUUt 10-12

2. Quality assurance and Quality Development at Uppsala University

The "system" for quality assurance and quality enhancement at Uppsala University (UU) can be structured into the following categories:

- University-wide policies and projects
- Monitoring of courses and study programmes
- Peer review of research
- Support for quality enhancement

The responsibility for the quality in teaching and learning (T&L) and research follows the organisation, meaning that:

- The university board and the Vice-chancellor take decisions on overall aims and strategies.
- The faculties are responsible for the quality of education and research within their own respective area.

The Vice-chancellor is advised in quality matters by the quality committee led by the Pro-Vice Chancellor. The members of the committee are practicing academic staff and students, the University Director and the heads of the Unit for Quality and Evaluation and the Division for Development of Teaching and Learning (PU), respectively.

2.1. University-wide policies and projects

2.1.1. University-wide policies

UUs *institution-wide policy on "quality work",* provides direction and guidance for quality enhancement and quality assurance at all levels, while also allowing for adjustment to local contexts and needs. The policy rests on a firm belief in the quality promoting effects of academic values and procedures, with a heavy emphasis on peer review as a quality enhancement tool, not only in research - but also in T&L and administration. The importance of clear leadership promoting "quality work" is also emphasised, as is the importance of student engagement. The policy is accompanied by an action program spanning over 3 years. Policy documents are often too many and too poorly anchored in the institution. UU policies are no exception to this rule, although efforts are made to improve the situation by making those better anchored, fewer and briefer - in short, more realistic. An inventory a few years ago revealed that UU had some 200 policies and guidelines. No one can embrace all that.
An example of a relatively well-anchored institution-wide policy is the *UU guidelines for T&L,* which have been most central to UU's quality enhancement activities since 2009. The guidelines replaced earlier guidelines, and the revision was informed by UU's own faculty's and students' experiences through an elaborate bottom-up process, as well as by the Bologna reform and the present evidence base on effective T&L. The guidelines are relatively short and concrete and responsibilities are made explicit, including the students' role and responsibilities in effective learning. Finally, it includes a strategy for implementation and follow-up of the guidelines. All in all, the guidelines gather faculty and students around a joint point of departure when discussing and improving the quality of T&L. The guidelines are structured in to the following:

- Conditions for Student's learning
- Development of Education Programmes
- Professional Development in Teaching and Learning
- The Value of Teaching Qualifications

2.1.2. University-wide projects

The institution-wide policies are increasingly complemented by university-wide projects aiming at stimulating the implementation of the policies, informing strategic decisions and stimulating cross-fertilisation of good practice across the university.
One example is the CrEd10-12, where the starting point is UU's guidelines for T&L as earlier described.
Another example of a university-wide project is the self-initiated overall evaluation of research quality, the Quality and Renewal exercise (Q&R), which has been carried out twice - in 2007 and in 2011. The objective of the Q&R was to identify strong areas of research, as well as promising emerging constellations of researchers. The evaluation was carried out by 25 different expert panels with in total 200 experts from some 20 countries, in combination with detailed bibliometric data. In 2011, the foreign experts who carried out the assessment gave 90 research groups the grade "world leading" and 140 groups the grade "of high international standard".

2.2. Quality assurance and Quality Development

For research, the most important way of ensuring high quality is, as expected, the traditional *academic system of peer review* in relation to application for funding, publication, defence of doctoral dissertations, recruitment, promotion etc. Strategic collaborations, a living seminar culture and active participation in national and international conferences are other important elements in safeguarding the quality of research. This "quality work" is normally performed within the different discipline communities, and is seldom coordinated across the University. The Quality and Renewal exercise (see 2.1.2) is UUs first university-wide approach to the evaluation of research quality.

2.3. Monitoring of Courses and Study Programmes

UU's *systematic monitoring of courses and programmes* includes follow-up on all study programmes (including main fields of study) by course evaluations and by surveys that are distributed to alumni a couple of years after graduation. The latter generates useful knowledge of the match, or mismatch, between programmes and the requirements of work-life. Other tools are employed on a needs basis, e.g., employer surveys, graduate exit surveys and themed evaluations (see Appendix 1 for an overview of UU's evaluation system).

Evaluations of all main fields of study and study programmes are carried out by the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education - in addition to UUs own monitoring. Internal and external evaluations are carefully coordinated not to cause too much burden.
UUs policy stresses the importance of keeping "quality work" cost-effective. Unless there is a readiness for true change, monitoring will only mean paperwork and a waste of resources. This also means that the total number of evaluations and the volume of reporting should be kept at a constructive minimum – avoiding information overload and costly administration. Instead, initiatives that have the potential to bring on change should be prioritised. We constantly have to remind ourselves of 'closing the loop'. All knowledge that is generated by evaluations should be subjected to analysis and - if deemed necessary - followed by action.

Also, while monitoring quality by evaluations is a helpful tool, it has to be combined with a trust in staff. Most staff wants to be skilful professionals and engage in the continuous enhancement of our programmes on a daily basis.

2.3. Support for quality enhancement

Continuing education for staff is a vital element in the *support for "quality work"* at UU. If effective, it means that individuals will improve their practice in accordance with the present evidence base – and potentially influence their colleagues and contribute to wider change. The central support for quality enhancement is mainly carried out by:

- *The Division for Development of Teaching and Learning* (PU) providing opportunities for professional development of teachers in T&L.
- *The Office for Leadership and Organisational Development* providing support related to leadership, individual, group and organisational development pertaining to both research and T&L
- *Uppsala Learning Lab* disseminating knowledge about how IT can be used in T&L and in research projects.
- *The Unit for Quality and Evaluation* coordinating the quality work at UU and providing results from university-wide evaluations as a basis for further development, and general support in quality enhancement initiatives.

The support units reach out via seminars, courses, individual/group consultations, and departmental visits, and their activities are often complemented by offerings at the faculty level, for example, courses in discipline specific didactics. Another important dimension of these learning activities is that staff from different parts of the university meets and share experiences and ideas. Far too often, different faculties work in separate from each other. An important part of the "quality work" is to build bridges between these islands within the university.

3. The present national context

Recent changes in the Swedish higher education area call for Swedish HEIs to be more proactive and display a stronger ownership of their quality work. As a means of increasing the HEIs autonomy, the government has recently decreased the regulation of Swedish HEIs. In line with this ideology, the government has emphasised that the responsibility for having necessary prerequisites and processes in place rests fully with the HEIs, as long as the results are satisfactory.
This is reflected in the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education's new evaluation system. In their evaluations, the Agency is not at all allowed to consider the processes that lead up to the results, or to intentionally contribute to quality enhancement. This development makes it even more important that the Swedish HEIs maintain and strengthen their own means of ensuring quality development. A no matter what, universities have to navigate steadily irrespective of the environment. We must - and want to - adapt but in a sensible and empowered manner.

4. Some reflections

We find that attending to the quality of T&L and research is a balancing act. Universities have to meet *external demands* which vary according to current politics, general societal trends and employer needs. At the same time, they have to keep their integrity and defend the *academic core values* that are inherent to high academic quality - not for themselves but for the benefit of society in the longer run. These values include:

- Autonomy – independence of political authority and economic power
- Teaching and research inseparable
- Freedom in research and training
- Attainment of universal knowledge - transcending geographical, cultural and political frontiers

We should of course always be apt to change. That is why universities have survived through the centuries - because we have changed. But we should never give up our academic values – the very basis for our contribution to society.

Another balancing act pertains to the *internal balance between top-down and bottom-up initiatives*. Quality enhancement strategies have to attend to the need for university-wide coordination and synergies on the one hand, and constructive variation within the university on the other hand.

Staff and students are our university's biggest asset, and a deep *trust* in their willingness to be professional and committed should be the corner stone of the quality system. Monitoring of the quality is needed, but it should be framed as a scholarly approach to professional learning and development, not as a control system based on a shame and blame-approach.

Nevertheless, quality is sometimes below standards, i.e. *professional responsibility is sometimes lacking*, and the leadership at different levels has to have a readiness and support in dealing promptly in such cases.

Further, we should not give in completely to the audit society. Internal evaluations should again, be framed as institutional research, i.e. efforts to understand our university and how to develop it. *Internal evaluations have to be rationed*. They should be carefully designed, not too many and readily acted upon.

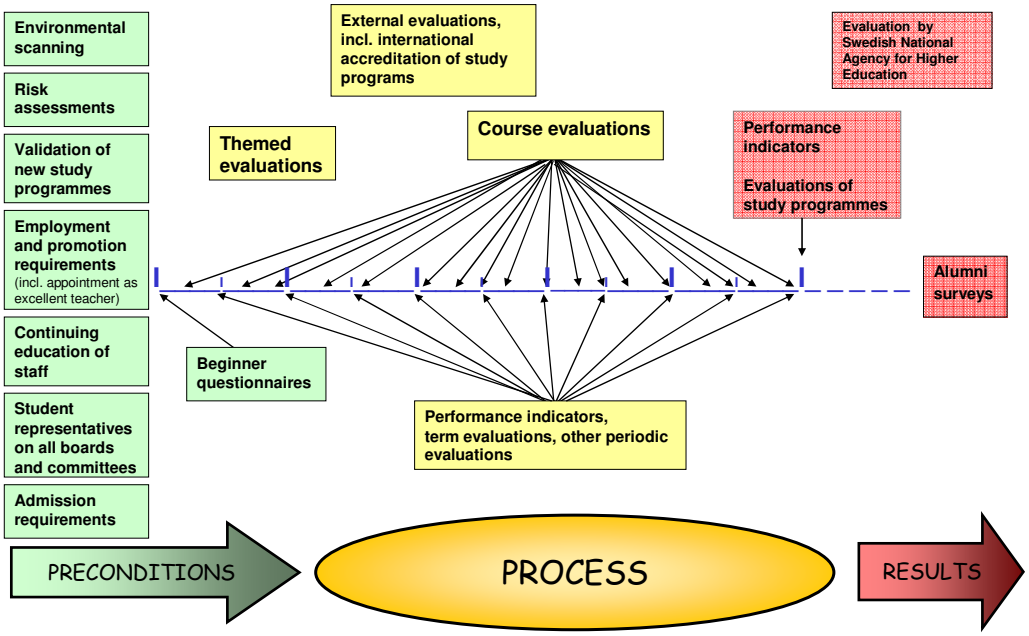
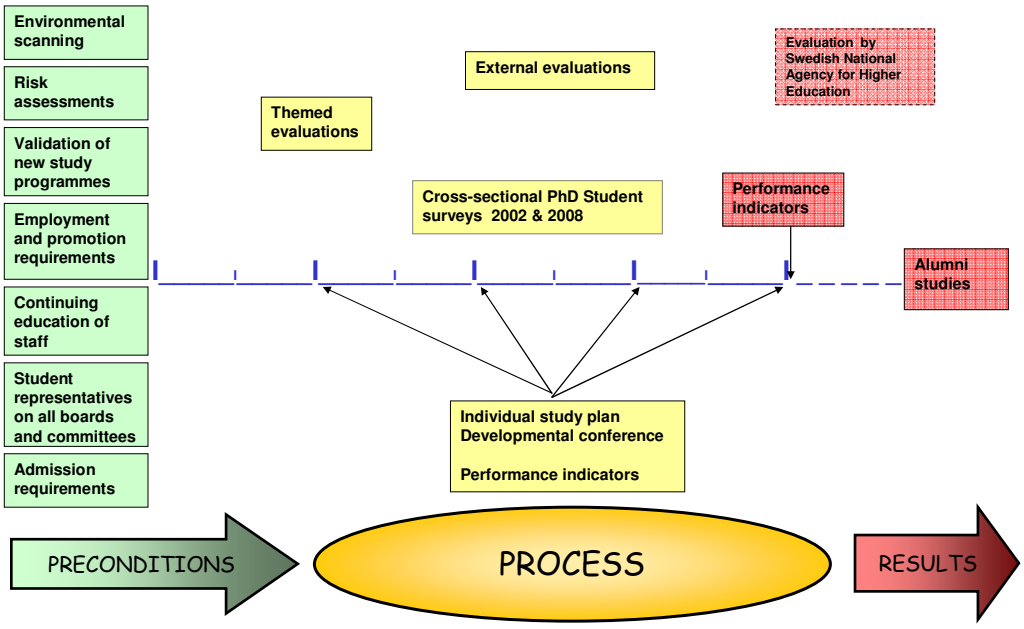
We also find that *cross-fertilization across the university* is an underexploited source for development. We are trying to build bridges and CrED 2010-2012 - is an example of such an effort. It is, however, a challenging and slow process.

As is obvious by the above examples, *peer review and exchange of good practice* are important elements in UUs quality work. The institution-wide policies and projects, Q&R 2007 and 2011 and CrED 2010-2012, are built on this very idea, as is the central support for "quality work". In order to remain successful in the stiffening international competition, exchange with other universities - in and outside Sweden - with regard to issues on "quality work" is essential. A clear tendency is that critical friends are sought internationally. Another concrete example of peer-exchange is the national benchmarking exercise between UU, Lund University and the University of Gothenburg with regard to the Swedish Masters Degree. Together we decided to improve our understanding of this new, Bologna-induced element in Swedish higher education to support further development of the Masters Programmes at our universities.

So, do we manage the delicate balance between internal ownership vs. external demand, and top-down steering vs. bottom-up initiatives, in our “quality work”? Hopefully our awareness of the values at stake is increasing, supporting us in making the wisest possible trade-off between conflicting aims on our way in to the future.
We would highly appreciate any exchange of experiences and advice from our international colleagues in these matters, as well as in important issues that we have overlooked.

Appendix. Uppsala University's evaluation system

UUs evaluation system – first and second-cycle studies



UUs evaluation system – third-cycle studies