

Quality Assurance in Norwegian Distance Education – the Background of NADE’s Quality Standards with Reference to some European Initiatives

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Introduction

This year The Standing Committee for Quality of the Norwegian Association for Distance Education (NADE) presented the 3rd revised edition of its “Quality Standards” (NADE 2000). The first version was developed in 1993 directly related to legal changes concerning quality and control of independent distance teaching institutions where a strict governmental control rooted in the “Correspondence School Act” was replaced by responsibility of the institutions to assure the quality of courses and study programmes when state regulation of non governmental distance education was included in the “Adult Education Act”.

This article will account for the experiences and areas of concern that brought about the amendment and how NADE and member institutions have approached the challenge of assuring and developing quality in distance education. The article also includes some references to some other European initiatives concerning systems evaluation and quality work.

In many areas of the society - in industry, public administration and the service sector - we have witnessed a rapidly growing interest in and emphasis on matters of quality in recent years. In industry, quality control is a well-known phenomenon, i.e. manufactured goods are inspected and then either approved or rejected on the basis of well-defined specifications. A high percentage of errors mean that production is not cost-effective. Thus, quality control gives rise to a need for quality assurance - i.e. routines and systems that can ensure that the manufactured goods meet the specified quality standards.

A firm that can document an effective quality assurance system will be more easily able to inspire confidence as a supplier of goods. This is one of the reasons why national and international standards for quality assurance have been drafted. The international standards do not define the products' quality, but describe the requirements that ought to be made of the firms' quality systems. The quality specifications are set by the individual firm, or jointly by the firm and a contract partner.

The standards that exist have been developed in connection with production-oriented industry. However, they are also being increasingly employed in service-oriented activities and are being revised and supplemented with these activities in mind. Often the use of quality standards is combined with ideas about total quality management. Total quality management is usually associated with an extensive effort to focus the whole organisation and its mode of operation on the users' needs, with a continuous monitoring and improvement of the quality of the organisation's performance. Since 1986/87 the series of 'International Standards (ISO 9000 series) have been an important starting point to higher quality. The success of ISO in industry shows that there is a big demand for internationally agreed standards.

Concept clarification

Quality is most often defined '*fitness for purpose*' related to the needs of the user/customer (Juran 1988), which indicates that quality depends upon a subject's view of what is the purpose of that phenomenon. In education the customer is not easily identified. The government pays, the immediate user is the student, secondary users are employers etc. Quality, thus, is a value judgement interpreted by different stakeholders, government, teachers, administrators, students, employers etc. On the other hand, to assure and assess quality we must have a clear notion of what it is. Another definition could be that the '*product comply with defined requirements*'. Consequently, purpose and requirements, then, should be defined by the significant stakeholders. Birnbaum (1989) has stressed this diversity and pointed out three dimensions of quality in higher education: *the meritocratic* (the institution's conformity to professional and scholarly norms with the academic profession as reference group), *the social* (the degree to which the institutions satisfies the needs of important collective constituents) and *the individualistic* (the contribution the institution makes to the personal growth of students (from Van Vucht & Westerheijden 1993).

Some other important concepts are '*quality control*', '*quality assurance*', '*quality management*' and '*quality assessment*'. Quality control is defined in technical environments as: 'the operational techniques and activities that are used to fulfil the requirements for quality' (ISO 8402). Van Vucht & Westerheijden (ibid.) add that concerning higher education the term also includes the state control strategy concerning quality in higher education. Quality assurance is "all those planned and systematic actions necessary to provide adequate confidence..." Quality management is defined as 'that aspect of the overall management function that determines and implements the quality policy'. The ISO document defines '*quality audit*', while Van Vucht and Westerheijden (ibid.) recommend the term '*quality assessment*' as a better term in the field of higher education and is taken to mean 'a systematic examination to determine whether quality activities comply with planned arrangements and whether the product (the educational process) is implemented effectively and is suitable for achieving objectives' (Ibid. p. 12).

Credibility and Quality Control in Independent Distance Education

In the education system, distance education - for as long as it has existed -has been a relatively marginal phenomenon. Thus, all over the world spokesmen for distance education have had to battle the whole time to get it recognized as an equivalent form of education. Even the big, state distance education institutions that were established during the 70'ies and 80'ies in Europe and other parts of the world have encountered the same scepticism from traditional academic milieu and have had to fight a continuous battle for recognition.

The private correspondence schools have usually been even more subject to suspicion from the established education system and from the authorities. This scepticism has partly been based on the sheer fact that the schools were privately owned, but may also have been a result of some private schools conducting pedagogical and business practices that rightly could be criticised. There is no doubt that credibility of distance education also are challenged by the hype interest in distance education resulting from new providers entering the arena as a result of the present technological developments and public attention, specifically in applying the Internet and WWW for education. Rumble (2001) states that "*one of the problems facing distance education at this time is a concern that new providers are more interested in profit than quality service.*" According to Rumble (ibid.) "...successful operators will need to adopt service management approaches to deliver a quality product".

It should also be mentioned that the other side of the coin is that in many ways negative attitudes towards distance education are changing and it has become accepted among educational and political leaders. In this author's view committee reports and development work aiming at increasing quality in traditional educational institutions take up ideas from distance education philosophies and practices, such as 'service management attitudes', 'focus on individual student needs', 'flexible delivery solutions' and 'emphasis on writing' and 'process evaluation' (see e. g. the 'Mjøs Committee for higher education' in Norway (KUF 2000)). Another example of distance education gaining esteem is that distance education institutions have competed well in situations where quality control also might imply some comparative implications. Keegan (2000) mentions the British Higher Education Quality Assurance Agency's (see <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/>) ranking the Open University as number 10 of more than 100 universities in quality as an example that external quality control may work in favour of distance education. As Keegan (ibid.) puts it: *"It comes as somewhat of a surprise that up to 100 of these universities choose to challenge the Open University in the distance education market, often with small departments staffed with part-time consultants, when their full-time professorial staff failed to match the academic excellence of the Open University with their ordinary students."*

Traditionally attempts have been made to solve the problem of quality in distance education in various ways.

The Law of the Market

Some have found it most appropriate to let the market punish those who do not measure up. Here the idea is that in the long run, quality will pay off, and substandard measures and institutions will disappear of their own accord. This reasoning is, in our opinion, basically correct, but one problem is simply that individual distance students scattered over a large area, have little or no contact with each other. This problem is of specific concern when more and more institutions offer their courses globally on the Internet. Thus, it is possible to earn money by taking advantage of people's credulity without giving the customers much opportunity to hold the seller responsible. Even incidental and short-lived ventures of this sort, whether nationally or internationally, can have a destructive effect on the general reputation of distance education.

Agreed Association Standards

Thus, the valid institutions have usually been interested in measures that can assure a certain level of quality. It has often been an important factor when organisations are formed that they should help set standards for education and business practices. Thus, in many cases correspondence school organisations have prepared guidelines for "good correspondence school practices" in the form of a Code of Ethics. It has also been common that new members had to be accepted by the remaining members and that departures from agreed standards could lead to exclusion from the organisation. This applies to both national and international organisations.

The Norwegian Association for Distance Education (NADE) was established in 1968. In the first charter the compilation and enforcement of rules for good correspondence school practices were listed as one of the aims of the association. These rules were immediately drawn up.

NADE's rules for good correspondence school practices were relatively concise. In addition to requiring loyalty within the organisation and respect for the authorities' decisions, they included provisions relating to the minimum amount of information that should be provided in school

catalogues and provisions regarding responsible advertising and sales methods. They also stipulated that the institutions should make use of competent professionals as course authors and teachers, monitor their work, and conscientiously follow the students' progress and motivate them to complete their studies with good grades.

Given that we in Norway have had quality control through state accreditation of all correspondence courses, NADE's rules have been more important ethically and commercially than pedagogically.

Voluntary Accreditation

Some organisations have gone a step further by establishing accrediting schemes and separate institutions for accreditation of schools and curricula. The best known of these is the National Home Study Council in the USA, which established its Accrediting Commission in 1955. This was approved as an accrediting body by the federal government in 1959 (Allen 1969). In the Netherlands a foundation for the inspection of correspondence schools was established in collaboration between the correspondence schools and the authorities as early as 1947. It was converted into a public, independent inspection scheme in 1973 (Kaiser 1973, Karow 1980). In Great Britain they also got a semi-public, voluntary scheme for accreditation when the Council for the Accreditation of Correspondence Colleges was established in 1969. In this instance the authorities have gradually withdrawn, so that the CACC (undated) is now an independent, non-profit institution.

The idea of establishing supranational accreditation schemes has been aired now and then, but has not gained sufficient approval. One possible international scheme was discussed within the International Council for Correspondence Education (ICCE) at the close of the 1960's (Allen 1969). In recent years the political integration of Europe has made it more opportune to consider a solution at the European level, and it has thus been advocated that a European accreditation scheme patterned on the national schemes be established (see e.g. Ingham 1991).

Legislation

The third solution, which has been chosen in a number of countries, is quality control through government legislation.

Since the last world war many countries have regulated distance education, usually by means of special laws for this type of education. Norway was the first to do so in 1948. Other countries that have followed suit include Italy, Denmark, Belgium, Spain, West Germany, France and the Netherlands (Ingham 1991, Weinstock et al. 1976.)

One common feature of most of this legislation is that it defines private distance education as a separate area. It does not concern itself with distance education from public institutions, and it usually does not tie in with legislation relating to other kinds of private schools. In most cases the main aim seems to be to safeguard consumer interests - thus, this is explicitly stated in the German Gesetz zum Schutz der Teilnehmer am Fernunterricht (Act of 1976 relating to the protection of the student in distance education). The German law had the same intention as the Norwegian state regulations: *"In Norway state control was introduced to protect customers from being exploited by owners of correspondence schools"* (Skår 1981). It is reflected in provisions relating to contract terms and sales methods, but most laws also include provisions that are supposed to help assure the professional and pedagogical quality of the courses that are offered. The policy instruments here may include the accreditation of the individual courses and curricula, qualifications requirements for teachers and administrative personnel and inspection

schemes. In many cases separate institutions or bodies have been established to exercise the state control (Karow & Sorm 1975).

There may be reason to question how successful the regulation of private distance education has been. To be sure, it is possible to point to the positive experiences of many countries (see e.g. Presswood 1972, Kaiser 1973, Skår 1981, Ljoså 1981, Ljoså 1991, Wenting 1991 and Vennemann 1991). In particular legislation seems to have an immediate effect in getting some substandard activities removed, at any rate in the cases where the control is obligatory. Public inspections usually also lead to an improvement in quality at most institutions, but some negative experiences have also been reported. Some argue that an emphasis on minimum standards may result in a mediocre level of quality. It can also have a negative effect if the requirements introduced are too detailed. Quality appraisals and pedagogical attitudes keep evolving, and rules and criteria can easily lag behind the development of pedagogy and technology and becoming barriers for progress in the field. In our opinion, that was really the case in Norway.

Traditions for Evaluation and Quality Improvement Work in Distance Education

In university circles one can hear playful self-criticism to the effect that “a university is an institution that does research on everything, except its own activities.” We shall not state any opinion about this statement, but it may well be correct that systematic evaluation of the quality of the education in the traditional educational system until recently have not had the greatest attention, neither in Norway nor in other countries. This lack of interest in the quality of teaching is discussed in a recent article by Anderson (2000) when the author is discussing conditions for change in academic institutions: “... *Do we have standards of excellence, training of new members, established means of professional communications? Again, certainly within the discipline, but not with the professions of teaching.*”

At the same time, it is correct from our standpoint, to point out that the evaluation of education has played an important role in the activities of most modern distance education institutions.

There are many reasons why the evaluation of education or programmes has been taken seriously in distance education circles (Rekkedal 1992). Some of them are:

- The way distance education has been organised, there are fewer possibilities for direct feedback from students to those responsible for the education. This means that those who plan, develop and implement the education have to formalise their work with the aim of providing information about how the education works. This is not as necessary in systems where the teachers, who are often responsible for both planning and execution, are in continuous contact with their students.
- Distance education is normally organised in a system characterized by a division of labour among a number of “expert groups”. Formalised knowledge about this process thus becomes more necessary in order for the information to affect system changes.
- Distance education is often initiated on the basis of defined political resolutions and objectives concerning looking after needs in the society, e.g. increasing the availability of education for defined groups. Thus, the evaluation of results will be desirable in order to determine the extent to which the political intentions are realized.

- Distance education is an area characterized by new developments, both as regards pedagogical solutions, media and technology utilisation, and organisation. Various models and systems are tried out, and information is needed about their effects and effectiveness.

- In many situations distance education has been developed in a tradition of systems thinking and educational technology. In this tradition systematic feedback, evaluation and revision and/or further development all play an important role.

- We can probably also add, as discussed above, that both public and private distance education have had a need to develop and 'demonstrate' quality because in some situations they are battling with a perception of being only second-rate. As mentioned in the introduction, this is not just limited to private institutions.

Thus, it is typical that most large distance education institutions have established separate departments or institutes for research and evaluation, or have formalised their quality improvement and quality assurance work in other ways as soon as they were established. Examples of this are Britain's Open University with its Institute of Educational Technology and *FernUniversität* in Germany with its *Zentrales Institut für Fernstudienforschung* (Central Institute for Distance Education Research) and *Zenter für Fernstudienentwicklung* (Centre for Distance Education Development) and many other distance education universities established later in Europe and other parts of the world (see e.g. Schuemer 1991, Rathore & Schuemer 1998).

Norwegian distance education institutions, such as NKI, have also carried out systematic research and evaluation work on their own practices for many years.

In connection with the Norwegian initiatives concerning distance education development through '*The Norwegian Agency for Flexible Learning in Higher Education*' (SOFF) demands for systematic evaluation and sharing of experiences of the projects are greatly emphasised (SOFF 1991, 2000).

Concerning quality work in business and industry, there has been an increasing emphasis on requiring that those responsible for the processes also should take responsibility for quality control and quality development. This should also be the case in education. One example of this position is Mary Thorpe's (1990) book on evaluation of open learning and distance education emphasizing the necessity of letting the practitioners take an active role in the evaluation processes. Thus, the book becomes a kind of manual for 'practitioner-based' evaluation. In this context the practitioners include all of those who are involved in the courses that are offered: administrators, marketing experts, professional staff, teachers, tutors, textbook authors, office personnel and receptionists. The idea is mainly that if the evaluation is really to have a positive impact on the improvement of quality in the educational system, the practitioners must understand the importance of taking part in the evaluation processes. The results of the evaluation processes have two main target groups - the practitioners themselves and current and future students. Just as with quality assurance in general, Thorpe argues that the evaluation of education ought to be carried out as a group activity that brings together personnel from various parts and levels of the organisation.

Quality management and quality assurance in European higher education

In spite of the statement above on possible lack of interest among many academics to focus on teaching quality, since the early 1980's the concept of quality has been a central focus of attention in the debate of higher education and in higher education policy making. The question was for instance addressed by a committee reporting to the Commission of the European Communities (Van Vucht & Westerheijden) in 1993).

The report pointed out some factors that explain the necessity of attention to quality in higher education:

- Societal concern about the increase of public expenditure in general and consequently the necessity of defining priority of education relative to other socially desirable activities.
- The expansion of the higher education system and rapid growth in the student body (e.g. in Norway the number of students in higher education has grown from well below 100.000 to more than 160.000 in five years).
- Increased openness in most sectors of the modern societies. Higher education institutions must show the society at large what they are doing and how well they are doing it.
- Increased international mobility of teachers, researchers and students and internationalisation of the European labour market. There is a growing need to be able to assess the equivalence of qualifications, standards and credits.
- Extrinsic values of higher education, the service higher education provide to society, have come into focus, relative to the intrinsic values, such as search for truth and pursuit of knowledge (Ibid.).

Similar viewpoint was put forward by Franke-Wikberg (1992), when describing some general trends in quality and evaluation in Western Europe. She stressed that there are only two general models of evaluating the quality of education, '*product-oriented aiming at control of quality*' and '*process-oriented evaluation aiming at quality improvements*' and showed how emphasis has changed between these main models over time. According to Franke-Wikberg (ibid.) product evaluation dominated in the era of instructional technology in the 60s, gave way for more process oriented models in the 70', but seems to have revived in the late 80s and 90s.

Van Vucht and Westerheijden (1993) summarise the general trends of the new methods of quality management in higher education stressing that the focus is *the process of teaching*, and that the *aims* are both institutional quality improvement and accountability towards the society:

- Nationally there is *an agent* responsible for managing the system at a *meta-level*. This agent should be a co-ordinator, acting independently from the government politics and policies and not having to impose a specific approach on the institution.
- *Self evaluation* is a common element in the 'new' quality management systems (see Thorpe's arguments specifically in distance education).
- A third common element is the mechanism of *peer review* and visits on site by external experts. In our connection it is emphasised that in quality management systems with a European dimension international experts should be included in the review committee.
- *Reporting* the results and experiences is another important element. The report should not have the function of judging or ranking institutions. The aim should be to help the institution to improve its programmes.

- There should not be established any *direct* relationships between quality review reports and funding.

One example of a national body with responsibility for quality work and quality assurance is the British Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. It is an independent body funded by the universities “to promote and support continuous improvement in the quality and standards of provision”. An example of instituted collaboration on quality assurance on the European level is EQUIS (European Quality Improvement System), which aims to increase the standards of Management training in Europe. It is based on a voluntary membership and a positive result of institutional evaluation gives a formal ‘quality accreditation’. Procedures are in accordance with the principles presented above. In Norway quality in higher education has been in the focus for many years. This is exemplified by teaching and research of centres of university pedagogy (specifically at the University of Oslo), committee work (Studiekvalitetsutvalget 1990) and the following national evaluations (Jordell 1992). Also the recent ‘Mjøse Committee’ proposes a number of measures for development and assurance of quality in higher education. It places the responsibility with the institutions, while Norgesnettrådet is proposed as the national body for quality assurance (KUF 2000).

Quality management systems in distance education

In the following we shall present four examples of *Quality Systems*” developed specifically for distance education. The two first systems were developed by European organisations, the third have been developed by the ‘Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education’ in the UK (QAA 1999), while the fourth represents our own system or ‘Quality Standards for Distance Education’ developed by NADE as support for the members’ own quality assurance work.

SATURN Quality Working Group: SATURN Quality Guide for Open and Distance Learning (1992)

AECS: Quality Guide (1994)

QAA: Guidelines on the Quality Assurance of Distance Learning (1999)

NADE /Norwegian Association for Distance Education: NADE's Quality Standards for Distance Education (2001) (Ljoså & Rekkedal 1993).

All four projects with resulting documents take their starting point in general views of quality management from business and industry and make an effort to integrate these with the specific aspects of education and specifically open and distance learning. None of the documents actually recommend direct application of ISO standards, but look at these standards as possible guidelines. All documents stress ‘*self appraisal*’, regular and systematic review of the organisation’s activities and results, as one main method to discern strengths and weaknesses as the basis for continuous improvements.

SATURN Quality Guide

SATURN was a European association of distance teaching universities, industry and commerce, in equal partnership. The association’s Quality Working Group developed a first version of a *Quality Guide* published in 1992. The guide defines quality and links it with other quality initiatives. The guide was constructed to highlight actions and processes involved in the provision of open and distance learning and was based on a model defining ‘*key areas*’ which are focused on from the standpoints of different ‘*participant roles*’ (information providers, developers, deliverers, corporate customers and learners). For each of the key areas there is a ‘*checklist*’ listing appropriate ‘*action*’ in the form of ‘*checklist questions*’.

The checklist presupposes that the organisation has formulated a '*quality policy*' and gives some key questions to be answered on this point. Further, the guide presents these key areas:

- Quality policy
- Price/cost
- Problem and needs analysis
- Specification of outcomes
- Specification of product/service
- Records and control
- Review and evaluation
- Improvement
- Information provision
- References
- Context and integration

The general code of practice checklist points out the responsibilities of both '*providers*' and '*users*' concerning '*quality policy*', '*information*', '*specification of outcomes*', '*products, services and delivery specification*' and '*evaluation and improvements*'. The idea is that the users, corporate customers and learners also must take responsibility for the quality in education.

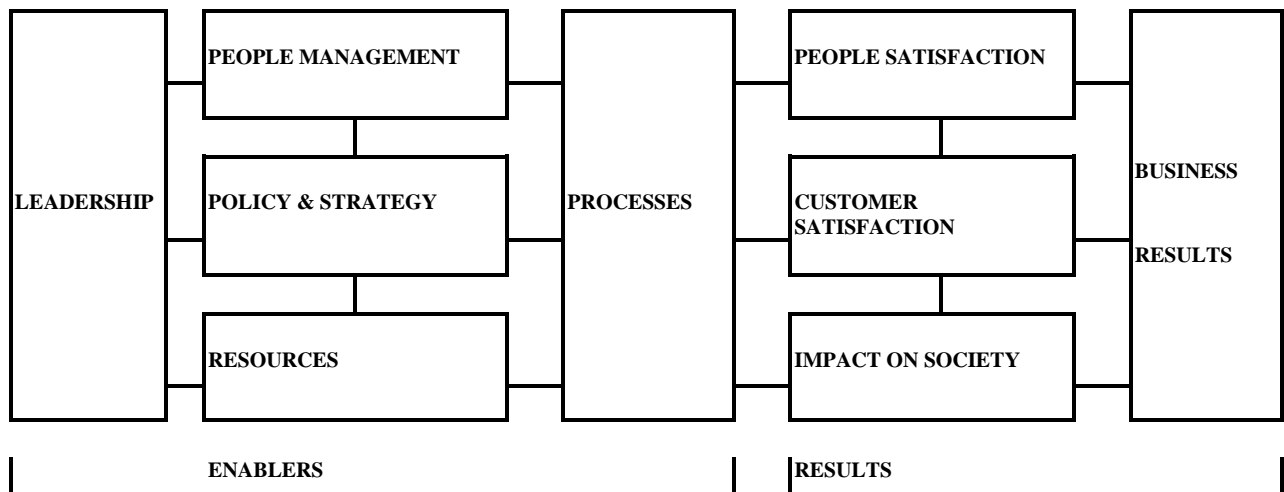
The detailed checklists describe actions that the different participants or roles should carry out *before training, during training and after training*.

AECS Quality Guide

The guide was developed by the *AECS Research and Development Committee*. The aims of the project was to:

- offer a sound base for quality assessment and improvement for private distance education institutions
- to give a satisfactory quality guarantee for distance education, especially for European small and medium sized enterprises
- to improve the status and image of private correspondence schools in Europe

The theoretical foundation for the work was taken from '*The Total Quality Management System*' provided from the European Foundation for Quality Management (1992). In this model the processes are the means by which the organisation harness and releases the talents of its people to produce results. These processes and the people are the '*enablers*' which provide the '*results*'. Graphically the model is presented like this:



“Essentially the model tells us that:
Customer satisfaction, People (employees) Satisfaction and Impact on Society
 are achieved through
Leadership driving
Policy and Strategy, People Management, Resources and Processes,
 leading ultimately to excellence in
Business Results” (EFQM 1992 p 3).

“Each of the nine elements shown in the model is a criterion that can be used to appraise the organisation's progress towards Total Quality Management. The Results aspects are concerned with *what* the organisation has achieved and is achieving. The Enablers are concerned with *how* are being achieved. The objective of the comprehensive quality management self-appraisal and self-improvement programme is to regularly review each of these nine criteria and, thereafter, to adopt relevant improvement strategies” (ibid. p 3).

The AECS guide describes the relevant areas for distance education within each of the elements and defines how each area might be handled in the organisation. In this connection 4 stages or levels can be defined:

Stage 1. Short-term orientation

Stage 2. Formulated product requirements

Stage 3. Effective use of internal expertise

Stage 4. Continuous improvement and interaction with the environment

The guide has specifically defined the ‘*core processes*’ of a distance teaching institutions as:

Pre-enrolment Practises

Enrolment and Contract Practises

Product management Practises

Tutorial Practises

Counselling Practises

Examinations

Face-to-face teaching

Tele-teaching
Other Practises

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education: Guidelines on the Quality Assurance of Distance Learning

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education published '*Guidelines on the Quality Assurance of Distance Learning*' in 1999. The reason was that more and more higher education institutions had started to offer distance learning programmes – both nationally and internationally. These developments were seen to face the institutions with new challenges - and possible problems (ref. the citation of Keegan (2000) above). The aims of the guidelines for quality were: *"to help institutions check the soundness of their arrangements for these aspects (...the ways in which they 'manage' teaching and learning to ensure the quality of provision and security of academic standards as they need to be. ...) when the programmes of study are offered through distance learning."* (QAA 1999, p. 2).

The QAA guidelines are organised under 6 areas which should be specifically attended and focussed upon when programmes are offered as distance study:

Guideline 1: System design – the development of an integrated approach

Guideline 2: The establishment of academic standards and quality in programme design, approval and review procedures

Guideline 3: The assurance of quality and standards in the management of programme delivery

Guideline 4: Student development and support

Guideline 5: Student communication and representation

Guideline 6: Student assessment

For each area/guideline some main '*precepts*' are presented together with some more concrete advice on measures and activities.

In this author's view the QAA guidelines have much in common with the NADE quality standards.

Guidelines for Quality Standards in the Norwegian Association for Distance Education

After the public regulation of distance education in independent institutions was integrated into the Norwegian Adult Education Act, effective 1 January 1993, the responsibility for ensuring the quality of the learning material, the teaching and the practical implementation of the study programmes was delegated to the individually approved distance education institutions (Ot. prp. 1948, 1991-92). NADE was requested by the Ministry to prepare guidelines for quality standards in distance education.

The previous accreditation scheme was strongly focused on accreditation of the individual printed course materials on the basis of a subject related and pedagogical as well as an evaluation of gender equality. In addition, an individual school was accredited i.e. on the basis of requirements as to the competence of its staff. The Correspondence School Council conducted inspections of the schools: their marketing, pedagogical practices and other factors that were deemed important to the students. When the amendment was passed, it was specified

that the evaluation of quality should have a broader basis. In the documents related to the bill this has been expressed as follows:

- Quality assurance, follow up and control should be concerned with the total educational programme (learning material, teaching, guidance and follow up), and not to just part of the course material as is currently the case.
- A course or an educational programme should be implemented according to a syllabus that is determined and described beforehand.
- Requirements must also be made of the marketing. Since the schools' own advertisements and course descriptions are often the only information that the prospective students have when they register for a course, it is important that these advertisements are realistic and truthful.
- The studies should normally be open to everyone, and the advertising ought to occur in a way that complies with this principle (Ot. prp 1991-92).

NADE's Standing Committee on Quality

In the autumn of 1992 a working group appointed by NADE's executive board carried out an introductory study of this matter. NADE's Standing Committee on Quality, which was established by the executive board on 18 December 1992, has continued this work. The main points in the Standing Committee on Quality's mandate are formulated as follows:

NADE's Standing Committee on Quality is supposed to be the association's expert body in quality matters. It is supposed to work on matters involving quality criteria, quality standards, and quality assurance and improvement in distance education. The committee can offer opinions to the executive board, propose measures, and, when requested by the board, take responsibility for implementing measures aimed at promoting quality improvement work among the association's members. The committee submits an annual report concerning its activities to the executive board.

In consultation with the Ministry of Education, Research and Church Affairs and NADE's executive board, the Standing Committee on Quality is supposed to formulate and update criteria and guidelines for quality and quality assurance in accredited, independent distance education institutions. The committee is supposed to function as the association's liaison body and adviser to the ministry in matters concerning quality and quality assurance. Based on the criteria and guidelines, the committee can advise the ministry in individual cases.

NADE's executive board on an individual basis appoints the members of the committee. The committee as a whole should have a broad and versatile expertise in matters concerning distance education. The executive board appoints the committee's chairman. NADE provides a secretary to the committee.

Goals and Main Tasks

The Standing Committee on Quality is supposed to assist the individual member institutions in taking care of their responsibility to provide quality distance education and to furnish the ministry with a general basis for evaluating whether the quality assurance at the independent distance education institutions is satisfactory. The committee is supposed to promote an awareness of quality that is based on requirements for professional-pedagogical, ethical and organisational aspects of these institutions' activities.

The following main tasks should be attended to:

1 The committee should prepare recommended quality criteria and/or standards for the most important constituents of a distance education institution's products and services. The standards ought to be relatively general or take the form of examples of what is generally regarded as good practice - and not be formulated as detailed rules.

2 The committee should call attention to areas where an accredited institution ought to document and report its quality assurance measures. If necessary, it can offer a simple recommendation with examples. Whereas the first point concerns the products, this point concerns the processes that are to give rise to quality products.

3 The committee ought to take the initiative to regularly discuss quality matters that come under NADE's jurisdiction at conferences, at joint training measures and in information pertaining to research and development work. Under this point the committee ought to aim at generating understanding of and enthusiasm for quality improvements in the association's member institutions. NADE ought to encourage the ministry to support activities of this kind.

4. The committee is supposed to offer opinions in cases that are referred to it by the executive board.

It should be noted that NADE's Standing Committee on Quality is meant to be neither an accrediting body nor an inspection body equivalent to the former Correspondence School Council.

The Quality Standards' Function

The individual distance education institutions differ greatly among themselves in purpose, type of activity, resources and size. It is therefore difficult to devise quality standards that are equally applicable in spite of these differences. NADE's standards are supposed to be recommendations and must give the individual institution sufficient freedom to define quality requirements on the basis of its own circumstances and possibilities. At the same time they must establish certain minimum requirements that are expected to be met if the institution is to be able to maintain a justifiable level of quality.

The quality standards have both an internal and an external function. Internally at the individual institution, they are supposed to serve as guidelines for the institution's own quality improvement work. They should not relieve the institution of the responsibility for defining its own quality improvement policy and quality goals, nor should they prescribe in detail how the quality improvement work should be carried out. However, they should help the institutions become more aware of their responsibility for quality in various areas, serve as an aid in the institutions' self-evaluation and define the agreed standards of NADE, which an accredited institution is expected to meet.

In this context the previous rules for good correspondence school practice (NFF undated) are insufficient. As previously mentioned, they are very concise and general and do not go into any detail about quality standards or criteria. Though the new guidelines must also be relatively general, there is a need for a greater degree of detail and specification.

By establishing more specific standards, they also automatically acquire an external function, and thereby contribute to the specification of quality standards that are relevant for distance

education under the direction of other institutions besides the independent ones. This applies to the members that are under a different jurisdiction (e.g. the universities), and also in principle to institutions that are not members of NADE. In this way we hope that NADE's quality standards can have an impact on the quality of Norwegian distance education in general.

Moreover, the standards should provide information and guidance to the ministry in its evaluation of the independent institutions in connection with accreditation and any complaints that may arise. When the ministry is to evaluate the accreditation of institutions, the decision must be made on the basis of a comprehensive evaluation. That means that individual departures from the guidelines for quality standards must be acceptable without doing away with the accreditation altogether. The ministry must also consider how well the standards suit the activities of the individual institutions. Thus, the ministry must employ the standards in a concrete evaluation of the individual institution's special features in dialogue with the institution itself.

Structure

The working group and the committee have approached the quality improvement and quality assurance work from different angles and have considered quality requirements, evaluation systems, checklists, etc., which have been utilised in different contexts. We did not want to bind the institutions to a particular method of approach in their quality improvement work (e.g. based on ISO standards). There ought to be room for some diversity of thought and approach without forgoing the necessity of establishing certain common quality standards.

We chose to take our point of departure in a matrix of problem areas for evaluation that is described in a report from Lund University (Nilsson 1992). The report describes a model for the evaluation of a professional field or an institution. One step in this model is the institution's self-evaluation, and the model designates nine areas for this self-evaluation. The areas are determined by a matrix in which one evaluates students, teachers/courses and the organisation in terms of conditions and constraints, processes and results, respectively. This yields a total of nine boxes, whereas the institution itself determines which questions should be evaluated for each area.

During the work with the quality standards, we altered this matrix so that it is better adapted to distance education. We have divided the distance education institutions' activities into four main categories. Each of these main categories is again divided into four phases. These are combined in a matrix of 16 elements, which we have called *quality areas*. For each of these quality areas certain *factors* have been specified, which can or ought to enter into the institution's evaluation of its own quality. These factors may be more or less important for different institutions and types of activities. In some cases other factors besides those included here may also be relevant.

	Conditions and Constraints	Implementation	Results	Follow Up
Information and Counselling	1 External constraints Organisation Partners	2 Channels Content	3 Student Body Other results	4 Evaluation Customer reactions
Course Development	5 External constraints Organisation Target group Staff Partners	6 Supervision, cooperation Follow up and guidance of authors Choice of media Formative evaluation	7 Course description Material meeting requirements Teaching aids	8 Evaluation Customer reactions Updating and/or revision
Course Delivery	9 External constraints Organisation Students Materials Teachers Partners	10 Two-way-contact Teaching and guidance Exams and tests	11 Students' achievement of goals Course completion Learning results	12 Evaluation Customer reactions
Organisation	13 External constraints Organisation Partners	14 Management Communication Future orientation	15 Achievement of goals Financial results Repute	16 Evaluation Reporting

Figure 1. The Matrix of Quality Areas and Quality Factors

The quality standards that have been specified are grouped and numbered according to areas and factors that have been included in the matrix. Although a factor may be important for quality, it is not always possible or desirable to define general quality standards that are linked to that factor. Hence, quality standards have not been specified for all of the factors, and the number of standards also varies a great deal among the different areas. (Appendix 1 gives as an example **Quality Area 6: Course development - Implementation** with factors and quality standards.)

Sometimes expressions like *'shall'* or *'must'* are used in the quality standards. In these cases the standard is meant to express a requirement that an approved institution is expected to meet. These standards have therefore been printed in bolder type. On the other hand, when the expression *'ought'* or *'should'* is used, it means that the standard is not regarded as an absolute

requirement. In a comprehensive evaluation of an institution's quality, however, the extent to which the institution meets all of the quality standards that are relevant to its activities will be a significant factor.

The Use of the Standards in the Individual Institutions

NADE's quality standards are recommended standards, and in most cases they are formulated rather generally so that they can be applied in very different institutions. We have not tried to formulate precise specifications of quality in the different areas. In an actual institution it is obviously possible and desirable to go further with the specifications than we have gone here. The individual institution must therefore specify its own quality requirements and quality assurance and improvement systems. In that sense NADE's quality standards should be regarded as a point of departure and a guideline for the institutions' quality improvement work.

Starting with the NADE standards, the institution ought to go through the sixteen quality areas with an eye to its own activities. First the specified quality improvement factors ought to be evaluated. How relevant are they to the activities? Have any factors been overlooked? Thereafter, the individual quality standards can be considered. If they are relevant to its activities, the institution will often be able to formulate the requirement more concretely and specifically in relation to its own organisation and way of working. It will also be possible to define requirements for aspects of the quality of the activities that NADE's general standards do not touch upon.

The institution ought to also evaluate the organisation of quality improvement measures and systems and/or routines for quality assurance. Many of them will choose to formulate a comprehensive quality assurance system with comprehensive documentation where a single person is responsible for the system. NADE's quality standards do not make any specific requirements about how the quality improvement work should be organised and documented internally in an organisation. Nevertheless, this is a very important aspect of the institution's quality improvement policy.

The institutions will be subject to some external requirements for documentation, primarily in connection with reporting to and supervision by the Ministry of Education, Research and Church Affairs. It will be an advantage for both the institution itself and the ministry if quality improvement measures and quality assurance can be documented in a well-arranged and easily accessible form. However, more specific rules for this have not been devised.

Based on these comments from member institution and exchange of experiences, the Standing Committee on Quality has through two revisions (1996 and 2001) revised the standards into their current version. As NADE the recent years has got a growing membership of public institutions, these have through membership in the Quality Committee also had some influence on the revised Quality Standards. Although public institutions are organised under other laws and regulations than the private institutions, also public institution members of NADE have to adhere to the quality standards.

Conclusion

If we consider the historical development of forms of quality assurance and quality control of distance education in Norway, we may perhaps conclude that the new scheme attempts to combine different solutions and find a balance among many different policy instruments. Since 1948 Norway has had a strict regulation of independent distance education. It has been

forbidden to market correspondence school education without state accreditation of each individual course that is offered. In practice, however, this prohibition has not been strictly enforced in recent years. The amendments of 1993 meant that private commercial distance education is now permissible without state accreditation. At the same time, the state accreditation of courses was phased out.

What remains of the previous regulation is the state accreditation of institutions. This accreditation is simultaneously tied to the possibility of receiving government grants so that only accredited schools have the right to economic assistance for their activities. Accredited schools must submit a report on their activities, and the Ministry has the authority to conduct inspections.

As a supplement to this 'mild' form of quality control by the authorities, the development of agreed NADE standards as a basis for the institutions' own quality assurance is being supported. Over the years a significant mutual trust has developed between the authorities and the independent institutions with their joint body, NADE. This is the basis that allows this form of coordination between voluntary and statutory schemes to function.

In addition to the literature referred to in the bibliography, this article draws on the following previous monographs, articles and conference papers:

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Appendix 1. Example from NADE's quality standards

Quality Area 6:

COURSE DEVELOPMENT - IMPLEMENTATION

Quality Factors:

- 6.1 Supervision, Management and Cooperation
- 6.2 Follow Up and Guidance of Authors
- 6.3 Choice of Media and Learning Material
 - choice of media
 - use of existing learning material
- 6.3 Adapting to different study situations
- 6.5 Evaluation of Product under Development
 - subject related
 - methodological and/or pedagogical
 - linguistic
 - with respect to equal status between gender
 - with respect to target groups
 - with respect to different study situations

Quality Standards

- 6.1.1 The project manager *must* make the participants in the development project aware of the conditions and constraints that have been specified for the project.
- 6.1.2 The project manager should see that the development work follows a fixed plan with respect to time, resource input and other conditions. He/she should also report departures from this plan and implement corrective measures.
- 6.2.1 The institution *must* make relevant competence requirements of authors, consultants and others who are brought into the development process.
- 6.2.2 In accordance with Norwegian law and contract legislation, the institution ought to have clear agreements with and contractual obligations to authors, consultants and others.
- 6.2.3 The institution *must* give authors, consultants and others necessary guidance and training regarding aspects of distance education in order to assure quality in their work.
- 6.3.1 The institution *should* be able to justify the choice of media and use of existing learning material on the basis of the programme's goals and the students' needs and qualifications.
- 6.3.2 The application of learning materials developed for other purposes should always be based on analyses of course objectives, participant qualifications and needs.
- 6.4.1 The project manager *must* make certain that the project defines the form of study and the study situation and takes this into account when developing the course.
- 6.5.1 The institution ought to evaluate course material during the development process. The following factors ought to be considered:
 - subject content and level
 - methodological and pedagogical arrangements
 - adaptation to expected students (target groups)
 - linguistic formulation and utilisation of the medium/media
 - equality and gender considerations
 - adaption to different study situations

The material *must* be evaluated by at least one person who is qualified in the subject matter in addition to the author before it is put into production.