In charge? (Absent) academic leadership during external assessments

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Abstract
Evaluation literature often emphasises the involvement and interest of local academic leaders as vital conditions for organisational improvement and change during and after assessment processes. Careful planning, organising, staffing and decision-making in relation to the assessments are in particular highlighted as basic and important responsibilities for academic leaders. By studying a series of external quality assessments of educational programmes at universities and colleges in Norway, and analysing to what extent local department heads influenced the assessment processes, this article suggests that even if such basic leadership responsibilities are taken, a successful outcome of the assessment process is very much related to academic leaders’ ability to translate, interpret and give meaning to the assessment process. This result points to the significance of the cultural and symbolic sides of academic leadership during assessment processes.

Introduction
In the literature on evaluation and change in higher education, an active local academic leadership is regarded as a vital condition for the completion of a successful assessment process (Banta et al., 1993; Peterson et al., 1997). Careful planning, organising, staffing and decision-making in relation to the assessment process are especially emphasised as important leadership tasks (Kells and Kirkwood, 1979; St Pierre, 1983; Kells, 1995; Vroeljenstijn, 1995). However, due to the special characteristics of higher education institutions, such activities tend to be processes not only dominated by academic leaders, but also strongly influenced by academic staff and complex decision-making structures (March and Olsen, 1976; Weick, 1976; Birnbaum, 1980), and by academic traditions within institutions and specific disciplines (Biglan, 1973; Kolb, 1988; Becher, 1989; Tien, 1991). The possibilities local academic leaders have to use processes like assessments for strategic purposes could, therefore, in many instances be rather constrained.

By studying a series of external quality assessments of educational programmes at Norwegian universities and colleges, and by analysing the involvement and influence of a sample of department heads before, during and after the assessment processes, this article tries to identify the problems and possibilities for local academic leaders to use assessments for strategic purposes.

Data and methods
The data analysed in the article stem from 43 interviews with heads of departments who participated in a series of external quality assessments at universities and colleges in Norway. To secure diverse institutional settings, the interviews were conducted at three universities, a university college, five state colleges and one private business school. Factors influencing the selection of institutions and departments were institutional size, ownership (public/private), geographic location, department size and variations in academic fields and disciplines.

The informants worked in four different fields and disciplines represented at both universities and colleges: economics and business administration, sociology, electronic engineering and mathematics. Both “hard” and “soft” as well as “pure” and “applied” disciplines were, in other words, represented in the sample (cf. Becher, 1989). The number of interviewees in economics and business administration was 13; in sociology, six; in electronic engineering, 11; and in mathematics, 13. Each interview had a time frame of 45 to 90 minutes. An interview guide was designed to structure the interviews in an identical way (Merton et al., 1990). Some questions were, nevertheless, adjusted to fit the specific institutional context in each department.

The context of the study
Similar to other European countries, the background for the external quality assessments in Norway can be related to an expanding higher education sector, tightening public budgets and changes in the governmental steering of higher education (Westerheijden et al., 1994). Thus, Norwegian higher education policy in the early 1990s focused on the need for increased efficiency, effectiveness and quality in universities and colleges, coupled with increased delegation of responsibility from central authorities to higher education institutions (Aamodt et al., 1991). For department heads, this policy, inter alia, meant increased responsibilities and a clearer managerial role (Bleiklie, 1997). A role that could imply a break with the

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traditional collegial and flat governance structure in many academic departments (Kvåvik et al., 1989).

The subject/disciplinary assessments implemented in 1992 by the Ministry of Education were inspired by similar procedures in other European countries (cf. van Vught and Westerheijden, 1994), and were intended to support and enhance activities related to quality in a wide sense. The aims of the national assessments were, therefore, to support internal self-regulation in departments and at institutions, to improve the relation between higher education and work, to strengthen the quality of teaching, and to stimulate to a “quality climate” at universities and colleges. Assessment of research was, on the other hand, not included, and the Ministry of Education did not link the assessments to any budgetary or resource decisions, sanctions or incentives.

However, a structural reform in 1994, where 96 regional colleges were merged into 26 state colleges, created a lot of turbulence in the higher education sector. The reason for the reorganisation was again coupled to arguments about effectiveness and quality, where the intention was to reduce the number of small, specialised, single-purpose colleges and to create a smaller number of large, multipurpose, multi-disciplinary institutions. The increased size of the institutions was supposed to lead to more effective administration and improved quality in teaching and research (Skodvin, 1997). To attain the latter, a central argument by the Ministry of Education was that both universities and colleges should concentrate their activities and build on their strong academic fields, leaving other fields of study to other institutions. Not surprisingly, this led to much insecurity among academics, who worried about the destiny of their own fields. Hence, many academics clearly suspected that the external quality assessments were not only concerned about quality, but could be used to fulfill this policy initiative, either by their own institution in an effort to specialise or restructure the academic portfolio, or by the Ministry of Education, even if this was denied by the latter (Jordell et al., 1994). Accountability could, in other words, also be said to be part of the external assessments.

With this as a background, one may assert that in general there was a need for strategic thinking and an active involvement by the department heads before, during and after the assessment processes. The strategies followed by the department heads as a response to the external assessments differed nevertheless significantly from a status quo orientation that triggered resistance against and attempts to ignore the assessments, to a more future-oriented mode where the process was seen as a possibility for strategic positioning, internal change and renewal. The subsequent analysis is intended to illustrate how these different strategies were used during the assessment process and to what extent the different strategies paid off regarding the outcome of the assessments.

### Planning the assessments

The external quality assessments that were set up in Norway combined a self-evaluation process with visits from an external assessment panel. Although departments were instructed to focus on certain topics in their self-evaluations and to adjust the process to externally given objectives, they were free to take up additional topics relevant for improving the quality of their activities. Regarding the organisation of the self-evaluation, it was, however, strongly recommended that this process should be organised as an independent project and include different stakeholders during the process. Given different traditions, work-forms and potential for academic leadership in the departments, one could however expect that the planning phase would still differ considerably from one institutional setting to another.

The analysis of the planning phase also gives strong support to this assumption. There were noticeable differences between the departments in relation to how leaders influenced the assessment process in the planning phase. The analysis further suggests that these differences were often closely related to history, tradition and taken-for-granted beliefs in individual departments. This again seems to have led to certain predefined opinions by many department heads about how the assessments should be handled, and the assumed importance of them. A passive or reluctant attitude towards the assessment process must, therefore, be said to have been the rule rather than the exception at this stage. A typical example can be taken from an interview with the head of a mathematics department at a university:

> We have an academic culture in mathematics that is rather unique. There are well-established standards in our field, and our international orientation means that there is not the same need for assessments in mathematics as in other disciplines.

The statement illustrates a common problem among many department heads during the initial phase of the assessment process. Many
leaders related the assessment process to past experiences, history and to existing traditions and work-forms, rather than to the future and to challenges related to, inter alia, the development of new technology when it comes to teaching and learning or to the relevance of educational programmes to labour market needs. The result seems in many cases to be little interest in, and maybe even resistance to, the planning and set-up phase of the assessments.

An interesting contrast to leaders that only related the assessments to former history and traditions in their department, or just complied to the assessment process, can however be found if one looks at a smaller number of department heads that related the external assessment process to more strategic and future-oriented needs and purposes. A common characteristic of these leaders is that they managed to couple the assessments to local development matters rather than to focus exclusively on the accountability element of the assessment process. Redefining and translating the purposes of the assessment to such local needs seem in these cases to have created an opening for department heads to increase their influence over the assessment process. Instead of “responding to an external process” these leaders rather “defined an internal agenda”. Furthermore, the analysis shows that this “internal agenda” was used for different purposes, even if the most common were attempts to change curriculum plans and the organisation of teaching, to use the assessments to get more resources from the institution’s central administration, and to profile the department in relation to its environment. A department head in business administration had, e.g. the following intention with the assessment process:

I wanted to use the evaluation to push people internally in the department. We had, for example, just changed our curriculum and I wanted this to become more visible internally and I wanted it to be accepted externally.

The intention stated by this department head was that the external assessment panel should be used to legitimate the new curriculum, especially towards those internally who still had their doubts about it. The strategy in this case was to adjust and direct the whole self-evaluation towards the curriculum development process, and, inter alia, to explicitly ask the assessment panels concrete questions about the curriculum in the self-evaluation report. Similar examples could be given from other departments.

A distinct feature of all the more future-oriented department heads must also be their ability to give their strategies an unpolitical and uncontroversial image in their own departments. When asked, most of them also acknowledged that they were aware of the danger of challenging existing norms and values, and that they consciously tried to find local development areas that would not cause any internal turbulence.

**Organisation of the assessments**

Differences between departments and department heads are also illustrated when one looks at the local organisation of the assessments. In general, it seems that institutional, historical and disciplinary constraints on the ability of department heads to influence the organisation of the assessments often triggered traditional organisational solutions. Some of the patterns that can be identified were that in departments where a collegiate decision-making structure appears dominant, leaders had to form alliances with senior members of their department in trying to influence the organisation of the assessments, or that they had little influence regarding the organisational set-up, as illustrated by this statement from the head of a mathematics department:

The self-evaluation group was relatively small, and I did not decide who should participate in it – they almost appointed themselves.

Other examples can be given from heads of departments with a more hierarchical decision-making structure; in general they organised the assessment process all by themselves, also because there was sometimes a lack of interest by the faculty in the assessment process. The latter was often related to the fact that research was not included in the assessment.

The problems mentioned above were also pertinent to those department heads with a more future-oriented perspective of the assessments. However, compared with the others, these seem to be more aware of and willing to use the repertoire of means available to them in an assessment process. Hence, allocating some small, but not bounded resources to the self-evaluation group, limiting other responsibilities for the members of the group, giving the group administrative support and resources, and securing the group a place in the formal decision-making procedures of the department were factors that seem to be of importance independently of a given institutional context. Using this repertoire of means was, despite this, not unproblematic for the department heads, given
different characteristics and traditions in their departments. The previous efforts by the department heads to interpret, define and couple the assessment to internal needs seem, however, to have been the critical factor affecting a successful organisational set-up. One explanation for this was, e.g. that it is easier to argue for resources for internal improvement purposes than for a process with external control as a central purpose. The process of giving meaning to the assessments in the early phase seems, in other words, also to have had a positive influence on the later stages of the process.

The advantage of coupling the assessment to internal needs at an early phase is also underlined by the fact that some of the department heads who had an indefinite or reluctant attitude towards the assessment initially, changed their opinions towards the assessments during the self-evaluation phase when new information or new data came forth. Because of the time-limits, or the way the self-evaluation was organised, it was, however, very difficult for them to adjust the assessments to their newly discovered interest.

### Visits from the external assessment panel

Although the external visit was very much in the hands of the assessment panel, and that this frequently created a compliance process during the visit, the involvement of the more future-oriented department heads differed again somewhat from the rest. The most significant difference seems to be that while most department heads attended the meetings without an agenda of their own, the more future-oriented ones managed to attract the attention of the visiting panels to questions relevant for their departments. Using the self-evaluation reports to “direct” the assessment panels has already been mentioned; a point that illustrates the importance of active involvement in the self-evaluation phase. Another strategy seems to have been to use the external assessment panels as discussants on management matters at department level. By directly involving the panels in, for example, problems relating to future follow-up of the assessment, these department heads managed to “test” possible measures on the panel before implementing them at department level, and they also received indirect support for future action when some panels in addition discussed follow-up problems and potentials in their report.

### Using results from the assessments

When studying how the quality assessments were used by the department heads afterwards, a multiplicity of intentions and purposes comes forth. The interviews with the department heads indicate however that in most cases, more situational and opportunistic action than thoughtfully planned action was taken. The concurrence of events is important here; the fact that the reports from the assessments were sometimes published during institutional budgeting processes, triggered some department heads, also with some success, to use the assessments to increase their resources:

- Sociology has not actually been favoured at our institution, so I used the assessment for what it was worth. Eventually we got more money, so it was worth it. That surprised me a lot. I thought it would be much more difficult to get more money (head of a sociology department).

In other departments, resources had less importance. In electronic engineering, which is a discipline that traditionally has been favoured with a more solid resource base in Norway, the use was more related to profiling, and to improving relations to business and industry. This kind of use was, of course, very much related to how favourable the reports were for each department.

Even if the situational and opportunistic use of the assessments was successful for some department heads, it still is the more future-oriented department heads who were the most satisfied afterwards. They also tried to use the assessment results in relation to different internal and/or external purposes, but with noticeably better timing and relevance and, thus, success. In, for example, business administration, a department head coupled the assessment to local attempts to build strategic alliances with other academic departments both in Norway and abroad. The timing of the assessment was therefore adjusted to suit the decision-making agenda to potential partners, and where the assessment also contained information very relevant for building such a strategic alliance. Another example can be given from an engineering department at a college where the head wanted to improve the department’s relations to local industry and business in order to encourage future cooperation. An attempt to get an ISO certification of the department was part of the plan. The assessment was, therefore, adjusted so that information relevant for the certification was also collected as a part of the general assessment process.
In these and other cases, the planning aspect of the assessment process, and their own active involvement in the process, is again underlined by the department heads. In the ISO certification case, the department head stated that more opportunistic use of the assessment in relation to the certification process afterwards would have been impossible because of the special information needed for the certificate.

**Conclusion**

The results of this study support assumptions that institutional, historical and disciplinary differences are important for explaining the thinking and behaviour of many department heads. Differences created by institutional and departmental traditions, norms and values seem in many cases to be important constraints for the rise of a more change-oriented leadership during the assessment processes.

There are, however, indications that such constraints may be overcome by identifying areas where traditions, norms and values play a less dominant role, and where a department head can be more influential by defining or interpreting the situation herself, or where the traditions, norms and values can be used as starting points for developing a process of change and renewal. Since important characteristics differ from department to department, a basic requirement for more future-oriented leaders is, therefore, a thorough adjustment of the assessment process to central characteristics of the department in question. The symbolic role of the department heads in the process of translating, interpreting and giving meaning to the assessment process is important here, and a sign of success seems to be that the initiatives taken often had an unpolitical or uncontroversial image even if outcomes of the process in some cases were quite radical. The interviews with different department heads clearly indicate that it is in this early phase of the assessment that the legitimacy for the assessment process is created, a legitimacy that is of great value to the department heads during the whole process.

The legitimacy of the assessment process creates, among other things, a climate for planning the process in more detail, and the advantages of planning seem to be especially related to the timing of the assessment to important decision-making activities afterwards, and to securing that the assessment process focuses on, collects and analyses information relevant for decision making. Hence, the analysis indicates that high satisfaction with the process is very much related to an early translation, interpretation and definition of the assessment process, and that the leaders show commitment to their own agenda from the very early stages to the very end. Even if the analysis indicates that more status quo-oriented leadership can also pay off occasionally, the potential for a satisfactory outcome seems much greater with future-oriented leaders.

However, the majority of the department heads in this study seem not to have managed, cared for or understood the cultural and symbolic aspects of their leadership responsibilities. This result is very much in line with studies that emphasise that academic leaders often have a too narrow approach when it comes to how they may influence and change their own organisation (Birnbaum, 1988; Bensimon, 1988, Middlehurst, 1993).

Even if basic leadership responsibilities like planning, organising, staffing and decision-making are important activities during assessments, this study illustrates that the symbolic aspects of leadership during such processes are equally important. It seems indeed that “symbolic aspects (of leadership) are at the heart of the process of social influence” (Middlehurst, 1993, p. 193).

**References**


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