Chapter 6
Affirmative and Non-affirmative Dimensions in Quality Assurance: Balancing the Accountability–Improvement Dilemma as a Matter of Trust and Learning

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Abstract Today, given the build-up of national quality assurance systems, 'quality management' within higher education institutions requires critical attention. This management operates as a balance between accountability, which is outward oriented, and improvement, which covers internal pedagogical and research activities. This accountability–improvement dilemma has been intensively researched over the years, not least by focusing on how the relationship between national quality assurance agencies and individual higher education institutions can be developed with respect to mutual trust. Applying insights from non-affirmative theory, this chapter investigates external judgements of quality management at the institutional level in the Nordic context. The investigation addresses how external evaluation reports may function as a mediating tool for balancing the accountability–improvement dilemma in quality assurance. Using conceptualisations of educational and pedagogical leadership derived from non-affirmative theory, we analyse how expectations of leadership are expressed in external evaluation reports. The framework comprises dimensions of pedagogical leadership that are (1) to organise learning processes in professional learning communities, (2) to negotiate practices of quality work in the academic community, both within and across institutions, and (3) to protect professional, academic and institutional autonomy. We analyse the alignment between this conceptualisation of and the expectations of leadership expressed in external reports and add (4) trust in quality management as a fourth dimension. Balancing the accountability and improvement dilemma is not only a matter of trust between the institution and the national agencies but also within the academic community. Discussing the importance of mutual trust in quality work can add

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value to our understanding of pedagogical leadership in non-affirmative education theory.

Keywords Quality management · Higher education leadership · Pedagogical leadership · Learning processes · Quality work · Trust

Introduction

A classical debate in the field of quality assurance is whether this activity is to be understood as a controlling or reporting task demonstrating accountability to the society at large, or whether it is a process stimulating internal renewal and improvement in methods and practices resulting in the enhancement of educational delivery (Thune, 1996). From a more theoretical perspective, the relationship between accountability and improvement has been interpreted in various ways: as a dilemma, as a continuum or as a design challenge that needs to be considered and weighed against national policy ambitions and institutional autonomy (Barandiaran-Galdós et al., 2012; Brennan & Shah, 2000; Elken & Stensaker, 2018; Frederiks et al., 1994; Harvey & Green, 1993; Kis, 2005; Stensaker, 2008; Westerheijden et al., 2007). However, under the shadow of the accountability–improvement debate, a series of studies have also been undertaken with a more practice-oriented perspective aiming to identify problems and practical ways of solving this dilemma (Bollaert, 2014; Hulpiau & Waeytens, 2003; Massy, 1999; Massaro, 2010; Newton, 2000, 2002; Nair, 2013; Shah & Nair, 2013).

Nordic countries have traditionally stood out as a region in which the tensions between accountability and improvement have been conceived as being less dominant and important and where pragmatism and governance traditions characterised by dialogue and trust have created ways of accomplishing both purposes within national quality assurance systems (Danø & Stensaker, 2007; Thune, 1996). When comparing the education system and leadership in Nordic countries with those in the United Kingdom or United States, Moos (2017) determined that confidence in national institutions, state funding and trust among people are higher in Nordic countries, whereas power distance is lower. Moos also used the GINI index to illustrate that the equality level is higher in the Nordic region. When observing how new approaches to quality assurance—particularly institutional accreditation—were introduced in the Nordic context, Danø and Stensaker (2007) argued that it cannot be taken for granted that accountability and improvement can also be seamlessly balanced in the future.

In this chapter, we re-examine the approaches to accountability and improvement through an in-depth exploration of how non-affirmative education theory can provide new insights into the relationship between national quality assurance agencies and individual higher education institutions in the Nordic context. Thus, we pose the following two research questions: (1) How are issues related to accountability and improvement balanced in external evaluations of institutional quality assurance systems in the Nordic region? (2) What is the added value of non-affirmative

education theory to the understanding of how accountability and improvement play out in the Nordic context? In our investigation of these questions, we analyse how expectations of leadership are expressed in the external evaluation of quality assurance, and how they align with the conceptualisations of pedagogical leadership derived from non-affirmative education theory. This chapter ends with an attempt to unpack the concept of trust in quality work and a discussion on what non-affirmative education theory of leadership may add to the understanding of building trust in a setting characterised by governmental steering and control.

Accountability and Improvement in External Quality Assurance: Perspectives and Positions

Perspectives on how to Govern Quality

External quality assurance has had a significant impact on higher education institutions during the later decades (Westerheijden et al., 2007), although the jury is still out on whether this activity has affected teaching practices and student learning at the institutional level (Stensaker et al., 2011).

From a governmental perspective, one may identify two main positions on how quality in teaching and learning can be governed in the context of the accountability–improvement discussion. The accountability position emphasises the need to build and strengthen managerial control over quality issues at all levels. From a governmental perspective, it is then important that institutions build quality management systems dominated by formal organisational rules and routines related to the governance of educational provision (Brennan & Shah, 2000). Quality management systems could be designed in different ways but share the assumption that management is essential for ensuring coordination and control and that it should be easy to identify the people responsible for taking actions and for implementing changes (Pratasavitskaya & Stensaker, 2010). A recent review of quality management approaches has also suggested that quality management routines are increasingly being integrated into the global management structures of higher education institutions (Manatos et al., 2017). From this perspective, national quality assurance agencies can be seen as drivers of a more managerial and governed university (Frølich et al., 2013; Williams, 2012). An increased emphasis on quality management systems within the accountability position might gradually shift the core activities and tasks in managing at all levels in universities. However, whether this shift can improve core educational activities is still an open question. Within academic disciplines and professions, one can identify many competing stakeholders, beyond not only the management level but also the actual educational institution. In general, an increased number of transnational developments have been influencing the quality assurance practices of agencies and borrowing governance ideas from industries and systems outside the education sector (Moos, 2017).

The improvement in external quality assurance is rooted in the belief that governmental steering has limited impact on institutional behaviour, and that universities and colleges have certain unique features that need to be considered to create effective external quality assurance (Clark, 1998; Dill & Beerkens, 2010). This position is based on the idea that broader cultural changes are not something that can be imposed on an institution but must be fostered and enhanced through and embedded within existing internal quality cultures over time (Yorke, 2000). Management is in this position of lesser importance, and what is emphasised are approaches that could mobilise the staff and students to engage in quality assurance activities that drive systematic changes over time. This cultural approach to quality improvement has gained considerable popularity over time, not least as a response to perceptions of more bureaucratic and managerial universities appearing because of external quality assurance (Bollaert, 2014; Burnes et al., 2014). At the European level, some distinct supra-national evaluation schemes have also been developed with the intention of creating institutional quality cultures (Rosa et al., 2011).

More recently, Elken and Stensaker (2018) suggested that a third position is possible: focusing more on the mundane routines and local practices involved in institutional quality assurance, arguing for a more dynamic relationship between accountability and improvement. The emphasis on practices and routines suggests that the actual work that is related to quality is important for understanding the mechanisms of accountability and improvement and how this plays out in the day-to-day running of higher education institutions. What unites all three positions is the emphasis on how quality assurance could be a way of integrating and coordinating fragmented organisations, such as universities and colleges, which have often been described as loosely coupled systems (Weick, 1976). In a more recent review of the use and misuse of the 'loose coupling' concept, Elken and Vukasovic (2019) pointed out that multiple couplings transpire in a complex co-existence of academic and administrative steering. However, an interesting question is whether the routines and practices of quality assurance can facilitate better integration and coordination of educational organisations—or, in other terms, create tighter coupling.

Following the accountability position, quality assurance can be argued to shape institutions towards a traditional machine-bureaucratic line organisation with certain expectations of management. However, the characteristics of higher education institutions are more in line with loosely coupled systems and knowledge-intensive organisations, although it can be disputed if universities are *highly* knowledge-intensive in their nature (Greenwood, 2009). This is based on the argument that knowledge-intensive organisations are a product of structures, relationships and dynamics in the organisation, more than the quantity of knowledge they contain, the educational level of their staff or the sectorial location. Based on the insights from Argyris and Schön (1996), Greenwood (2009) further argued that to become knowledge-intensive organisations, universities must have at least some characteristics of organisational learning, such as being capable of creatively modifying their structures, changing behaviour and aligning with the environment. In this sense, improvement through quality assurance can be seen as a cybernetic process of

learning, either intentional or unintentional, or as conscious or unconscious learning by the organisation members (Huber, 1991).

To further discuss issues related to how accountability and improvement are balanced in the external evaluations of institutional quality assurance systems in the Nordic region, we find support in Pulkkinen et al.'s (2019), p. 8) description that 'the Nordic region ranks rather high internationally across a multiplicity of comparative dimensions, ranging from innovation to trust in government to educational quality to quality of life'. Following the Bologna process, there is an observable convergence in education policy across Nordic countries, and the overall governance and management structures and quality assurance systems linked to education are interesting examples. However, similar policy ideas and rhetoric have been introduced at different points in time and appear with variations, and there seems to be less convergence in actual policy implementation. For instance, performance is measured using different indicators and potentials of redistribution with somewhat different effects and can therefore be difficult to compare across Nordic countries (Kivistö et al., 2019).

Moos (2017) compared the indicators of core contemporary societal and educational values in Nordic education with core values in Anglo-American systems through the following indicators of prevailing values to illustrate Nordic similarities and US/UK differences: GINI index of inequality, confidence in national institutions, trust, power distance and state funding of schools. In addition, it is reasonable to assume that there are some similarities (as well as differences) in educational leadership across Nordic countries when it comes to low power distance and high levels of trust in others, high levels of equality and confidence in national institutions, such as quality assurance agencies. In what follows, we elaborate on the third position of quality that emphasises the *practices* of the institutions and further explore how non-affirmative educational theory (NAT) can add value to the accountability–improvement debate in the Nordic context.

Adding Insights from NAT

Elken and Stensaker (2018) argued that 'quality work' constitutes an important missing link between accountability and improvement, as these activities should not be understood as predefined and codified entities but more as iterative and dialectical processes characterised by evolution rather than stability (see also Harvey & Stensaker, 2008). Thus, quality work offers a more dialectical and dynamic perspective to understanding accountability and improvement and how these activities are shaped and evolve. Elken and Stensaker (2018) suggested that 'quality work' is about how multiple expectations regarding higher education are balanced; that a desired outcome of quality assurance is a transformation of existing ways of providing educational offerings and that changes inside higher education institutions are dependent on individual problem solvers and innovators working in a pragmatic and autonomous fashion.

While the quality work perspective is quite explicit in many aspects, it could be criticised for being more silent on the processual and contextual mechanisms required to facilitate these outcomes. The link between pedagogical initiatives and the actual improvement of educational delivery, including pedagogical leadership and the *learning processes* within the institution, needs to be investigated (Elo & Uljens, 2022). NAT can provide the necessary framework for developing the understanding of how quality work operates as a mediating mechanism between external accountability and internal pedagogical work.

NAT takes an analytic view of higher education (Benner, 2021) as a point-of-departure and assumes a non-hierarchical relation between education and other societal practices. This means that education as a societal practice is neither totally subordinate nor superordinate to external influences like politics or economy. If education were to become subordinated to external interests, this would implicate prescriptive management behaviours, focussing on efficiency alone. Again, if education were superordinated to external interests, the universities would be totally autonomous in any decisions concerning their operations. The non-hierarchical understanding implies that universities prepare students for active participation in society, not only by socialising them into existing practices but also by preparing them to contribute in innovative ways in developing various practices. In addition, a fundamental feature of higher education is its autonomy in curriculum construction based on, for example, research and labour market expectations. Such an understanding argues for the relative autonomy of educational institutions, as argued by non-affirmative education theory.

Given the relative autonomy of higher education institutions, non-affirmative education theory assumes that education leaders need to *recognise* legitimate external expectations, but the question is to what extent actants are required to *affirm* these expectations. Expectations external to the university may be interpreted as ways to summon university leaders to engage in certain forms of self-activity, which includes an assumption of the relative autonomy of the summoned actors. A similar dynamic occurs within the university. While individuals are considered as already active and self-directed subjects in their relationship with the world, others and themselves, leadership activities summon them to engage in certain self-transcending activities. However, this occurs only to the extent that the staff recognise leaders' summons and affirm them as legitimate. Such a relational understanding of educative initiatives, where summoning to self-activity directs the others' attention and invites them to self-directed action (Bildsamkeit), represents a processual and dynamic view of the subject-world relationship. This view of pedagogical leadership includes the idea that external influences are meaningful, as they provide the staff with influences that cannot be avoided, thereby operating as a type of material to handle while not determining their actions. Therefore, educational governance initiatives are both possible and necessary. In this way, policy initiatives may be considered as pedagogical interventions that are co-creating processual learning spaces. From this perspective, organisational change is conceptualised as emanating from self-transcending activity that is a result of interactions with other interested parties, existing knowledge and specific opportunities (Uljens & Ylimaki, 2015). These

arenas for interactions emanate from the interventional summonsing of the others to self-activity. When these interventions recognise, but do not affirm, external expectations, they avoid instrumental managerial pedagogical leadership. When expectations are mediated in a non-affirmative fashion, different actors exchange views and perspectives based on mutual respect and recognition of all perspectives brought to the fore. While non-affirmative pedagogical leadership recognises existing practices within universities, such leadership does not affirm these practices. Instead, these practices are challenged by summoning the actors involved. These aspects of NAT have many similarities to the improvement-oriented position for governing quality and suggest certain mechanisms conditioning the creation of quality cultures.

However, NAT does acknowledge the importance of leadership, not least pedagogical leadership, highlighting the complexity of this position as one which is not about affirmation—to make decisions—but rather to establish summons for joint exploration of opportunities (Uljens, 2018). Leadership is about acknowledging the many complexities surrounding higher education institutions while preserving the institutional and academic autonomy characterising higher education. However, neither expectations of accountability nor improvement from external assessors can meet this autonomy. This becomes even more complex in large organisations, as the number of external national and transnational stakeholders of educational programs varies across academic disciplines and professions *within* an individual higher education institution. External quality assurance at the institution level needs to consider this complex landscape of rather loosely coupled actors. The big question to be asked is regarding the role external quality assurance procedures and practices play in facilitating institutional summons, creating processes characterised by 'bildsamkeit' and allowing non-affirmative educational leadership.

In non-affirmative education theory, pedagogical leadership is argued to be crucial to fostering change and learning (Elo & Uljens, 2022). Change is perceived to occur from summons of self-activity; therefore, it is crucial to discuss how to organise learning processes in the institution. Emphasising quality work as practices, we consider that organisational learning processes occur in professional communities of reflective practitioners, and the learning space is a process of co-reflective practice (Hybertsen, 2014).

Conceptualising educational and pedagogical leadership from non-affirmative theory in relation to quality as practice, co-creating processual learning spaces is emphasised. The first two dimensions that will be applied to analyse the expectations of leadership in external auditing are as follows:

- *to organise learning processes to articulate and reflect on practice in professional learning communities*
- *to negotiate practices of quality work in the academic community—both within and across institutions*

Following the studies of quality work (Elken & Stensaker, 2018) that have emphasised practice, we argue for more in-depth investigations into what managers carrying out academic and educational leadership actually do. Alvesson et al. (2017) indicated that research in the context of higher education also follows the rather

common distinction between management and leadership. Studies of management and managerial work often focus on the complexity of the context, such as descriptions of the organisational structure and culture, in processes of reorganisation and change. Despite the extensive research on management and leadership in general, there are few studies on leadership in higher education. In a recent study of middle managers in academic institutions, Gjerde and Alvesson (2020) determined that in addition to aligning with hierarchical expectations, they also engage in countermanagement, aiming to weaken the hierarchical pressure rather than to enforce or uphold it. To describe models of educational leadership, Moos (2017) distinguished between outcome-and participatory-oriented perspectives. In this sense, pedagogical leadership is about learning-centred leadership (Moos, 2017). To articulate and reflect on, sometimes, tacit practice is an important part of learning processes, which require a certain level of trust.

With respect to the importance of mutual trust in quality management, as well as trust as a core societal and educational value in Nordic countries (Moos, 2017), we therefore elaborate further on non-affirmative theory. This theory addresses issues of power and trust in a particular way (Elo & Uljens, 2022). First, by viewing education as a major societal undertaking to promote the development of self-directed or autonomous citizens, driven by the reflected will and ability to cooperate with others, power is seen as distributed. Hence, although accepting emancipation as liberation from unreflected practices, Western higher education and non-affirmative education accept the idea of negative liberty but do not defend the idea of positive liberty, which refers to unreflectively socialising learners to predefined ways of thinking and acting. Instead, Western higher education typically defends the idea of productive liberty, which means that the students reach, for example, professional autonomy. Western higher education governance policies adhere differently to these educational aims. However, most systems accept 'freedom of research' as a foundational principle. From this perspective, the question of power in non-affirmative theory is first how it is distributed across different levels, and second, to recall that the governance of higher education institutions should not jeopardise the relative autonomy of the university, given its critical and constructive societal task.

In this light, the question of *trust* is essential. The more freedom universities are endowed with, the more they need to be trusted. In addition, from the perspective of organisational culture, trust is crucial, especially in innovative and critical education institutions. Innovation requires a climate of openness and support. Tactful leadership is necessary: co-workers are challenged but not shamed. The same holds true for all pedagogical and research processes—a climate of demanding but tactful trust is beneficial. Non-affirmative theory reminds us that an important question is how governance recognises individuals' and institutions' relative autonomy. Without protecting such autonomy, counterproductive consequences, such as affirmative leadership and teaching, will most likely occur. Affirmative leadership reduces the participants' self-active (Bildsamkeit) contribution in the process, making learning and professional development a process of normative and prescriptive socialisation. Building on pedagogical leadership as creating a learning space of co-reflective practice in professional communities of reflective practitioners, trust is crucial for change and learning.

Against this backdrop, we further develop the dimensions of pedagogical leadership as activities aimed

- *to protect professional, academic and institutional autonomy*
- *to balance power and trust in the leadership of quality work*

We discuss the alignment between this conceptualisation of pedagogical leadership and the expectations of leadership found in external reports.

The following key dimensions will be applied to analyse the external expectations of educational and pedagogical leadership in quality assurance. The aim is to further explore how accountability and improvement are played out in the Nordic context.

Research Design and Method

To investigate how expectations of educational and pedagogical leadership are expressed in the external evaluation of quality assurance, we use a descriptive and normative research design (Bryman, 2016). The design's descriptive character is based on the use of non-affirmative theory to conceptualise the pedagogical leadership of quality work in key dimensions, which is applied to analyse four institutions' external evaluation reports. In addition, the design has a normative character since the theory is applied to discuss the alignment with our theoretical dimensions of leadership, as indicated above. The research design also includes an element of comparative case studies based on the identification of descriptive categories to further develop theory (Eisenhardt, 2021) following a deviant case strategy. The unit that is defined as a case is the external quality assurance of a higher education institution, where we use the key dimensions to explore common features across Nordic countries.

Empirical Context and Cases

External quality assurance is currently a well-established activity in the Nordic region, although some countries, such as Denmark and Sweden, started out earlier than the remaining Nordic countries (Danø & Stensaker, 2007). Currently, all Nordic countries have external quality assurance systems that align with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) in quality assurance. Although the history and practices associated with external quality assurance have varied over time, the dominant procedure in the Nordic region today is based on the following requirements (Bollaert, 2014): i) all higher education institutions should have an internal quality management system, ii) there is a national evaluation system/agency regularly controlling the functioning of the systems within individual institutions and iii) institutions receive an external report from the national agency conducting the external evaluation. iv) Following this report, institutions are formally accredited

by national agencies to develop and deliver educational offerings, providing them with institutional autonomy regarding the ways in which this is done for a defined period.

In the selection of specific institutional cases to analyse, we concentrated on external reports from four large Nordic countries: Finland, Denmark, Norway and Sweden. All these countries have a national agency for the evaluation of higher education:

- The Danish Accreditation Institution
- FINEEC—The Finnish Evaluation Centre
- NOKUT—The Norwegian Agency of Quality Assurance in Education
- UKÄ—The Swedish Higher Education Authority

Four institutional evaluation reports from the last 5 years were selected from these agencies. We deliberately chose a deviant case strategy to identify common features across cases. Hence, the four cases chosen were as follows:

- Audit of the University of Helsinki (2022), the oldest and largest university in Finland with a complex internal organisational structure. The evaluation resulted in a positive accreditation of the university.
- Institutional accreditation of Aalborg University (2018), a university established in 1974 as a regional university. This university was re-accredited in 2018 after a conditioned accreditation in 2016 concluded that the internal quality management system of the university had some shortcomings. The follow-up evaluation resulted in positive accreditation.
- Audit report of University of Stavanger (2021), a former college that became a university in 2005 and received conditional accreditation concluding that the internal quality management system had some shortcomings. The follow-up evaluation resulted in positive accreditation.
- Audit of Chalmers University of Technology (2018), a specialised technical university whose history goes back to 1829. The chosen report concluded with a partial recognition of the quality management system at the university, with areas to be improved before final accreditation is given.

As the short descriptions imply, the cases cover various higher education institutions—large, small, comprehensive, specialised, old, young and some whose status has changed from college to university over the years. The reports also display different outcomes, ranging from fully positive reports to reports that have been written because of earlier negative outcomes and a report concluding with a partial negative outcome.

Data and Analysis

A thematic document analysis was conducted, where the four reports were read using the key dimensions identified in Table 6.1 as a starting point. Text excerpts

Table 6.1 Key dimensions related to accountability and improvement in quality assurance

	To organise learning processes	To negotiate practices of quality work	To protect autonomy	To balance power and trust
Country 1, evaluation report				
Country 2, evaluation report				
Country 3, evaluation report				
Country 4, evaluation report				

associated with the four dimensions in Table 6.1 were initially marked, opening for a second in-depth reading where the broader context related to the excerpts was considered. In this process, the formal lingua related to the ESGs were considered where, for example, ideas related to 'quality culture' were seen as a possible indicator for ways to 'organise learning processes' and where 'collegiality' was seen as a possible indicator for ways to 'negotiate practices of quality work'. In the data presentation, some excerpts from the reports were used as illustrations of the tone and form of the external evaluation reports. As most of the reports were written in a Scandinavian language (except the one from the University of Helsinki), the excerpts were translated into English by the authors.

Results

Organising Learning Processes

A key concept evolving along ESG development in Europe is the emphasis on quality culture (Bollaert, 2014; Harvey & Stensaker, 2008)—the idea that higher education institutions should be engaged in collective practices centred on quality improvement. This emphasis is visible in all external evaluation reports analysed, as the quote below exemplifies:

> *The review committee notices that processes for broad participation, engagement and responsibility were well described in the self-assessment—something that was confirmed during the site visit.* (UKÄ, 2018, p. 6).

However, it is not the more organic development of such quality cultures that is emphasised in the report but how quality cultures could be nurtured and almost manipulated from the institutional management. Such approaches are also acknowledged by the review committees:

> *On the other hand, the audit evidenced a reflective quality culture based on active collection of different types of data in the form of statistics, surveys, annual reviews, audits periodic evaluations etc. The university has good, perhaps too many digital tools in place to facilitate different processes. . .* (FINEEC, 2022, p. 93)

The quote also hints at the need to balance more structural approaches (digital tools) with the interactions occurring between the staff and educational leadership. A similar logic is also displayed in the following quote:

> *The review committee recommends a continued focus on the self-assessment process in the three-year cycle, and that this process functions according to its purpose, including the follow up of action plans.* (Danmarks Akkrediteringsinstitution, 2018, p. 39)

As illustrated in the quote, the emphasis on self-assessment processes, which are an integrated part of the institutional quality management system at the Danish University, is acknowledged, but again such practices should be complemented by plans and follow-up actions.

In 2015, the ESG was revised, and new dimensions were included in the external quality assurance. One of the most noticeable changes was an increased focus on student-centred teaching and the need to engage students in learning activities. In all four evaluation reports, this student-oriented perspective is brought to the fore, and various ways to engage and stimulate student participation are acknowledged and praised. One example can be found below:

> *As part of the process of strengthening student engagement and participation, the student representative body (StOr) has developed a manual aimed at helping new student representatives into their new assignments, and their new role. The review committee want to commend this work.* (NOKUT, 2021, p. 24)

In general, the external evaluation reports clearly underline the need for the institutions and the leadership within these institutions to stimulate learning processes—engage students and staff. In this sense, pedagogical leadership not only involves creating learning spaces in a professional learning community but also extending this community by including the students.

Negotiating Practices of Quality Work

The attempt to find a balance between accountability and improvement, between control and creativity and between structure and culture represents 'negotiations' among different logics within institutional quality management. There are several examples of such 'negotiations' in the external evaluation reports. A typical example is from the audit report of a Finnish university:

> *As such, the university is as creative as it can be. The audit team commends the university for also being a real learning organization.... However, the multiplication of ideas and initiatives can at times give the impression of a lack of priorities. The audit team therefore encourages the university to better exploit its potential by affirming a stronger leadership in support of an innovative culture...* (FINEEC, 2022, p. 61)

The quote displays an ambiguity expressed by the review committee between acknowledging creativity, on the one hand, and finding the need to add direction, a responsibility which the committee clearly put on the leadership, on the other hand.

As long as the leaders take responsibility and follow up on problems identified, the external review committees accept that such processes may be somewhat bureaucratic and take considerable time, as illustrated below:

> *The review committee notices that new de-centralized processes for improving the learning environment may result in a lengthy follow up of potential problems identified. . . . However, the review committee find that the university – at local level – acts when problems arise. . .* (Danmarks Akkrediteringsinstitution, 2018, p. 37)

External reviews of institutional quality management systems are, first, a procedure based on written documentation, not least stemming from the self-assessment conducted by the scrutinised university. This self-assessment may include several thousand pages of documentation, resulting in a quality assurance process that runs the danger of becoming bureaucratic and formalised. One could imagine that the site visit, as a result, plays a less important role. However, based on the external reports, one gets the impression that it is the site visit to the actual institution that is the most important process:

> *It is, based on the documentation provided, not easy for the review committee to judge whether the university has a satisfactory internal quality management system. . .Based on the design of system, the broad engagement of staff and students in the organization of it, how faculties has adapted to the system, digitalization processes and the conversations with staff and students during the site visit – our conclusion is still that the review committee trust that the system is and will be a good instrument for securing and improving the quality of the education provided.* (NOKUT, 2021, p. 14)

As the quote illustrates, the review committee in this case argues for the difficulty of arriving at a clear conclusion based on the written documentation alone. The conclusion that the institutional management system is satisfactory is only reached after talking with the staff and students at the focal university.

The reports analysed also illustrate how difficult it is to arrive at solid conclusions based on written documentation alone. Hence, the interactions between the review committee and the staff and students at the universities audited seem crucial for the conclusions:

> *This process-oriented and cyclic way of working is described in detail in the self-assessment, but was somewhat difficult to understand completely, not least with respect to division of labor, and access to, governance and control over resources. During the site visit, the review committee got a more comprehensive picture of the system and greater understanding of how the different parts were connected.* (UKÄ, 2018, p. 4)

Protecting Autonomy

In general, all external evaluation reports in this study acknowledge the importance of institutional autonomy, and most of the reports refer to institutional strategic plans and how the institutional management system is linked to these plans. However, the concept of autonomy can be interpreted in various ways, focusing on the institutions and academic staff. High institutional autonomy may not imply high individual autonomy as a default, as institutions may use their autonomy to restrict the

discretion given to academic staff. The external evaluation reports seem to be sensitive to this issue, where certain balance is sought, as illustrated in the following two quotes:

> *The University of Helsinki's educational provision is linked to and developed based on the university's strategic priority areas. . . .the bottom up processes and initiatives, such as the process for the creation of the international master's degree programmes, are generally appreciated and considered a very good way of working by staff.* (FINEEC, 2022, p. 20)

> *The university has various systems which contribute to highlight, assure, and develop pedagogical competence. . . .the responsibility for pedagogical development of teachers is linked to the line managers, and the responsibility for the design of the content belongs to the department of education.* (UKÄ, 2018, p. 10)

Both excerpts show how roles and responsibilities are distributed throughout the universities, and that the review committees acknowledge combinations of top-down and bottom-up approaches. In general, the arguments provided by academic staff are respected by the review committees, even though their purpose is basically to look for 'quality management'.

In fact, in all analysed reports, the review committees tend to be somewhat concerned that institutional quality management systems may result in 'too much management', arguing for 'slimming down' systems that are too comprehensive and too time-consuming:

> *The university has through the self-assessment process and. . . .established well functioning systems. In sum, they add value but also overlap with respect to problem identification and information. The review committee recommends that the university in its future adjustment of the reporting systems consider simplifying these processes, e.g., through digitalization.* (Danmarks Akkrediteringsinstitution, 2018, p. 39)

> *The review committee is concerned that the quality management system is too comprehensive, with too many different meetings, and arenas at various levels. This may result in too many reports, and a very complex systems for those using the system in their daily work.* (NOKUT, 2021, p. 13)

As the quotes illustrate, one could argue that the review committees are concerned that institutional autonomy can be endangered if mandatory institutional quality management systems develop into too big and complex systems, taking time and resources away from the primary activities of teaching and research.

Balancing Power and Trust

While the results so far suggest review committees aiming at finding balances between different purposes related to quality assurance, note that the external evaluation is basically a control procedure required by national authorities in each of the Nordic countries. As a negative outcome of an external evaluation that may have severe consequences for an individual institution, these processes are always embedded in a power hierarchy. That being said, and although all reports are explicit about the formal purpose of the evaluation conducted, the reports also highlight

many examples of how such power is downplayed. A relevant example is how the strengths and possible weaknesses of the quality management systems are labelled in the reports. While headings that include the word 'strengths' are visible, it is rare to find headings using the word 'weaknesses' in the reports. The norm is to use the phrase 'development areas', or similar expressions. While such details may seem unimportant, it is interesting that the reports are quite sober in their written statements and assessments. When critical comments are made, they are usually detailed and specific—often acknowledging that while some activities and procedures work well, others may have shortcomings:

> *The operations planning process ensures a university-level systematic approach to societal engagement (public engagement), which would otherwise be lacking. . . .In general, the PDCA model seems to be used well throughout the various levels of operations, but collecting and using feedback information (Check) in recognition of the developments needs of the operations (Act) could still be enhanced.* (FINEEC, 2022, p. 93)

> *In the initial accreditation of the university in 2016, the review committee evaluating the institution concluded that the quality management system was insufficient in that it was not able to identify shortcomings in the links between students and academic staff, and that the implementation of key indicators was not sufficiently solid, and that threshold values within each indicator had not been defined.* (Danmarks Akkrediteringsinstitution, 2018, p. 7)

> *In conclusion, our assessment is a conditionally recognition of the institutional quality management system. In the area of equality our assessment is that the work and systems are not satisfactory . . . .The review committee acknowledges that the university in general has a well-developed system for governance of quality management which ensures the quality of the studies offered.* (UKÄ, 2018, p. 29)

A feature in the reports that is also interesting with respect to the issue of power is how the review committees also acknowledge their own formal limitations—what they may and may not conclude or suggest in their reports. The quote below illustrates such limitations:

> *It is obvious for the review committee that the institutional quality management system at the university is delivering on all formal requirements. However, the review committee would still argue that the system has potential for improvement. The committee will provide some advice as to how the quality management system could be further developed, but these go far beyond the minimum requirements found in the act.* (NOKUT, 2021, p. 35)

As such, there is a clear tendency in all the cases analysed that the power authorised to the review committees is not something they 'show off' during the evaluation process. The reports are rather sober in their ways of arguing for both strengths and shortcomings, and critical remarks are related to specific issues that avoid sweeping generalisations.

Discussion and Reflections

This chapter posed two research questions: how accountability and improvement are balanced in the external quality assurance procedures implemented in the Nordic countries and what potential added value NAT may have for understanding how

accountability and improvement are played out in the Nordic region. We investigated the research questions through a focused analysis of four key dimensions (how learning processes are organised, how practices of quality work are negotiated, how autonomy is protected and how power and trust are balanced), which we assumed would illustrate potential challenges with respect to balancing accountability and improvement.

Although it should be underlined that the empirical study undertaken is far too limited to arrive at general conclusions, the four reports analysed from Finland, Denmark, Norway and Sweden share many similarities, even though they are linked to higher education institutions, which are very different. Based on the findings, one could argue that our small study is in line with previous studies demonstrating how accountability and improvement are quite balanced in the Nordic region (Danø & Stensaker, 2007; Mårtensson et al., 2014; Thune, 1996). We find that external evaluation reports emphasise internal learning processes, and that quality culture embedded in strong collegial ways of organising is appreciated and commenced by the external review committees. This shared perspective may also partly be related to the fact that all external committees consist mainly of Nordic academics, some of which have considerable expertise in external auditing. This composition of the external committees may have contributed to a specific Nordic practice in quality assurance and to building trust and processes of learning across institutions and countries.

It can be argued that there is still a 'governance bias' in the reports though; while quality cultures and collegiality are praised, at the end of the day, it is the organisational structures, leadership, documents and data collected, as well as how problems are followed up by the institutions, that is underlined as crucial in the reports. In this respect, the 'bias' is perhaps linked to the fact that the purpose of external evaluations is to inspect, audit and evaluate institutional management systems, where a taken-for-granted assumption is that such systems should rely on clear structures, plans and leadership (By, 2005; Williams, 2012).

The fact that we also find many examples of review committees expressing concerns that institutional management systems are becoming too comprehensive, complex and resource-demanding is perhaps the best example of how the balance between accountability and improvement is considered to be achieved in the Nordic region. There should be systems and procedures, but they need to be relevant and add value to the work universities are engaging in to improve quality. The fact that the review committees praise and criticise a particular practice in their reports is perhaps also an example of the complexity of the quality work undertaken at the institutional level (Elken & Stensaker, 2018), where the devil indeed is found in the details of designing and organising routines and actions that make sense to the staff and students. Hence, there is a tacit expectation in the report that the (educational) leadership at the institution level is responsible for making the quality management system work, as well as for making it relevant to all stakeholders, both internal and external to the institution.

Returning to the theoretical interest of the chapter—NAT—our cases do demonstrate that the elements described in this theory are visible in the descriptions of some

of the existing practices in external quality assurance. While hierarchy is perhaps not totally absent, it is downplayed in the analysed reports. Furthermore, the limitations of the power the review committees formally have are emphasised by the committees themselves in their reports, indicating that while recommendations are indeed given, it is up to the institutions to decide what to do with them. In this way, the reports invite a summoning of self-activity for the joint exploration of opportunities by the institutions, and thus, the importance of pedagogical leadership (Uljens & Ylimaki, 2015; Uljens, 2018). Acknowledging the many complexities surrounding higher education institutions while preserving the institutional and academic autonomy characterising higher education lies at the core of educational leadership. Studies of management and managerial work that focus on the complexity of the context would be interesting to address if expectations of leadership expressed in the reports are in line with what managers actually do. The finding of managers engaging in countermanagement to weaken the hierarchical pressure rather than to enforce or uphold it (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020) could be relevant to be explored further in relation to quality assurance.

Of course, one could argue that the seeming relevance of NAT for our cases is that we have investigated a region in the world where the society has some features (Moos, 2017) that match many of the assumptions specified in this theory. Hence, the question could be asked if this theoretical frame would add new insights and alternatively have less explanatory power in settings that score differently on dimensions such as equality, hierarchy and mutual trust. Given that the international reputation of external quality assurance is intertwined with accusations of bureaucracy, hierarchy and more intrusive management (Kis, 2005; Liu, 2013; Massaro, 2010; Newton, 2000, 2002; Stensaker, 2008), one might argue that the challenge with external quality assurance is not the process and practices of this initiative itself. The challenge is that we do not pay attention to the societal characteristics impacting the ways these initiatives are implemented (see also Massy, 1999). One example is the development of digital infrastructure and tools to support quality management systems that might impact the development of indicators and the quality work itself.

However, it would be problematic to assume that the Nordic region has some built-in special societal features that are only found here, making it impossible for others to find a balance between accountability and improvement in external quality assurance. The key dimensions developed from non-affirmative theory and some of the data from our small study may provide some pointers for investigating this issue further. As illustrated in our findings, the review committees paid considerable attention to the site visits, which played a critical role in the conclusions in terms of recognition and accreditation. In fact, while written documentation seemed to have been inconclusive with respect to whether some quality management systems were satisfactory, talks, interactions and discussions with the staff and students were important for the review committee in reaching their conclusions. This might have implications for how trust can be stimulated, especially within a non-affirmative theoretical perspective. First, ideas derived in the non-affirmative educational theory—including non-hierarchy and self-activity—may be dependent on specific practices and physical meetings between the actors involved. This implies that the

specific ways in which external quality assurance processes are designed and organised are extremely important for the possible outcomes of these processes (see also Bollaert, 2014). Second, being able to facilitate such a non-hierarchical dialogue is also dependent on the selection of those sitting in the review committees. Hence, while such committees are reliant on expertise and craftsmanship, one might also assume that non-hierarchical dialogues are easier to foster if such committees consist of peers with similar experiences and background as those that are evaluated. If taken further, this suggests that, from a long-term perspective, external evaluations in higher education could be conducted as benchmarking exercises between higher education institutions solely. In principle, such an approach might resemble more 'market-like' practices which could be more acceptable in other settings than the Nordic region.

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