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This paper discusses the current move towards a higher education excellence scheme. Based on several empirical studies we have undertaken on excellence- and quality arrangements in a European context the past 10 years, we take a meta-approach to the field in this paper. We examine the premises on which the trend of quality arrangements develop, and discuss how shared questions in policy work on excellence and equity in national contexts merge with universities' local strategies.

Theoretical perspectives

As has been emphasized in academic work on dimensions of appraisal in the Center of Excellence in Research scheme, the term "excellence has become a watchword for goal setting and assessment in science and technology policy". In the field of higher education, the concept has also been used broadly in its commonsense meaning for a longer period of time. With the excellence arrangement being implemented in the field of education, we find little analytical work available concerning details, operationalizations and systematization on the dimensions of value present in academic evaluators' use of the excellence concept. This paper aims to highlight and discuss some empirical findings that may be a step on the way towards such an analytical foundation.

Review for desktop

As a backdrop for the desktop study, we consult our own previous studies on the Bologna Processes in European countries, as well as relevant publications on the European research arena. The review of substantial theories enables a look at new measures in a historical perspective. As such we present our identification of shared questions in excellence models categorized in an analytical framework that allows for insights into continuation or disruptive tendencies in higher education governance. As such, the outcome of what is considered new in the current excellence-approaches is mirrored against what has been there before in strategic approaches to work on quality and equity.

As noted above, a common denominator in these studies is the challenge of developing criteria for distinguishing excellence from indicators on quality and equity in higher education. Our research questions focus on comparisons and contrast of indicator-based criteria for documenting existing educational quality. We examine how different countries implement national policy related to excellence in education, and how institutions develop procedures and guidelines for meeting innovation-based criteria in their strategies to enhance quality and equity.

Data/sample

Our discussion rests on empirical results from several qualitative studies of quality development in European higher education. We also provide analyses from two recent studies on the prestige arrangement Centers of Excellence in Higher Education (COEE) in Norway 2008-2015. The methodological approach in the qualitative studies is based on a theory-stakeholder evaluation model developed to handle complex considerations in implementation processes in modern public administration. Data have been collected from policy documents, hearings, committee reviews, application forms and in-depth interviews with 15 different agents central to the establishment of different excellence schemes. The semi-structured instruments used for the research interviews in Norway were aligned with instruments used in other similar European studies (cf. review). As such we include a discussion of codes as these were considered crucial in the operationalization of the notion of excellence.

Preliminary findings

While the notion of excellence in modern educational administration signals attention to knowledge coordination and dissemination, as well as a link between quality assurance and quality development, this has been assessed as a main challenge in European higher education the past decade. Examining the relationship between teaching, learning and research in higher education, we find a challenge the added value of such attempts (cf. our review mentioned above). This is not only the case in Norway, but we find it evident that the new Norwegian pilot scheme may be seen as an interesting case for illustrating the challenges in a European context. The introduction of a prestige arrangement to remedy the situation in Norway may therefore be understood as part of the ongoing international discourse on how to ensure high quality and transferable practices in higher education.

Policy impact

Our results show how criteria for excellence are adjusted within higher education governance according to political demands and academic progress in different nations. The contribution of this paper is therefore a new take on "what is new" within the excellence discussions in higher education in a European context, and a discussion of the premises for researching the observed changes.

Based on empirical studies on educational quality arrangements, we illustrate how excellence is a concept subject to divergent opinions. We provide examples of how the concept of excellence converge between contexts, and how it may form a contrast to quality as a commonly "democratized" concept: Is excellence in education for a selected elite, or is it an integrated part of the work on quality for all? Our paper presents new data and analyses on different excellence arrangements, including Centers of excellence, honors programs and teaching academies, and provide new insights into how such arrangements contribute to the discussion of equity in higher education.