

# Regional Cooperation in Quality Assurance of Higher Education among Nordic: A Case Study of NOQA

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**Abstract** - Promoted by internationalization and European integration of higher education, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Iceland establish the Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education (NOQA for short) for regional cooperation in quality assurance of higher education. They promoted mutual trust and development of quality assurance of higher education in the Nordic countries by holding annual meetings, implementing cooperation projects and sharing research results. Therefore, it will be important for China to improve quality assurance system of higher education by learning from NOQA and strengthening regional cooperation and exchanges.

**Index Terms** - Nordic, Higher Education, Quality Assurance, Regional Cooperation

## 1. Background of Regional Cooperation in NOQA

In recent years, promoted by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Bologna Process, processes of internationalization and European integration of higher education are continually accelerating. Correspondingly, international cooperation and communication are growing in frequency in the field of quality assurance in higher education. Under such circumstances, the Nordic countries have made positive results by building Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education (NOQA for short) and strengthening regional cooperation and communication.

Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Ireland have built regional cooperation organization and mechanism of quality assurance in higher education and promoted establishment and perfection of NOQA system by actively promoting internationalization and European integration of higher education. Specially, the background and reasons are as follows:

### A. *Promotion and Influence of Relative International Organizations*

Promoted by UNESCO, the International Network of Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education (INQAAHE for short) was established in 1991, it creates a good platform for international cooperation and communication of quality assurance in higher education. In 1995, higher education was included in the category of international service trade by WTO, so the process of higher educational internationalization is greatly accelerating. The process of European integration of quality assurance in higher education is also speeding up by establishing the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA for short) in 2000. In 2002, 2004

and 2007, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO for short) has consecutively held Global Forums on international quality assurance, qualification and accreditation, which lead various parts of the world to develop regional convention and regional organization on quality assurance in higher education, and facilitate international communication and regional cooperation of quality assurance in higher education. It is in this international background and situation of public opinion that NOQA network has emerged.

### B. *Promotion of Bologna Process*

As is known to all, 29 European countries held a conference in Bologna in 1999 to build “the European Higher Educational Area”. They proposed a reform plan of European higher education, determined a Europe-wide common framework in higher education, and integrated European Union higher educational resources, such that the attraction of European higher education can be improved around the world. The Bologna Process established a cooperative principle for European higher educational quality evaluation and assurance, made qualifications framework, standards and quality assurance system for the European Higher Educational Area. As memberships of the Bologna Process, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Ireland are seeking actively for their positions in the European higher educational area. They can access voice in European educational area to a certain degree only by regional cooperation and resource integration.

### C. *Demands of Internationalization of Nordic Higher Education*

Under the influence of UNESCO, WTO and Bologna Process, the Nordic countries actively promoted the international exchanges and cooperation in higher education. In 1988, the Nordic countries launched the “NORDPLUS” lifelong learning project to promote regional cooperation of Nordic education. Later, they are increasingly leaning towards moving outside and facing the world in order to learn from each other, strengthen competitiveness and enhance reputation. On the one hand, they attracted a lot of international students with free higher education system and advanced academic resources; on the other hand, Nordic governments and universities encourage domestic students to study abroad by adopting positive funding policies. Higher educational internationalization impels the Nordic countries to have to search for regional cooperation, regulate quality of higher

education, and build a European or even internationalized framework for national quality assurance in higher education.

#### *D. Influence of Nordic Geopolitical and Cultural Factor*

Quality assurance in Nordic higher education faces similar problems and challenges because of Nordic geography and similar cultural background. On the other hand, since the condition and environment of higher education is different, their assessment approaches and agencies have different characteristics. Therefore, the Nordic countries establish and perfect their quality assurance system in higher education by building NOQA, enhancing collaboration, exchanging experience, seeking agreement while shelving differences, reaching an understanding and sharing results.

## **2. Network of Regional Cooperation in Quality Assurance in Nordic Higher Education**

Regional cooperation in Nordic quality assurance in higher education dates back to the early 90s in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since 1992, the agencies of quality assurance in higher education in the Nordic countries holds annual meetings to exchange quality assessment experiences in higher education, and discuss latest developments of quality assurance in higher education. It was only in 2003 that the assurance partnership officially became a regional cooperation organization that is NOQA, Launched by the Nordic countries including Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Ireland. NOQA becomes a network platform by which the Nordic countries can used to spread information of quality assurance in higher education, exchange assessment experience and develop project cooperation. Its primary aim is to create a mutual understanding mechanism to reach a consensus for different viewpoints or perspectives on quality assurance in higher education among the Nordic countries. There are 6 organizations in NOQA, including The Accreditation Council Denmark, Danish Evaluation Institute, Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council, Iceland Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education, and Swedish National Agency for Higher Education.

The primary cooperation of NOQA is to hold annual meetings for discussion latest developments and internationalization process of quality assurance in higher education among the Nordic countries. The NOQA annual meeting takes place in member states alternately. The rotating presiding country as the official representative of NOQA takes care of all matters until the end of the annual meeting. The main content of the NOQA annual meeting includes: (1) Report of National Agency of Quality assurance in higher education. It includes the latest developments and reforming measures of quality assurance in higher education in that year. (2) Special Topic Discussion. For example, audit approach of Norwegian academy, Danish evaluation models and Students' learning quality, Swedish assessment information publication approach, audit of Nordic academy, national quality framework and learning quality, results of Bergen conference on Bologna Process---Quality assurance standards of NOQA

and challenges and countermeasures faced by the countries, European dimension and Nordic dimension of future quality assurance, challenges and opportunities brought by university ranking and external quality assurance, and so on. (3) Establishing and Planning Cooperative Project. Every annual meeting audits and summarizes research production of annual cooperative projects in the form of workshops; it also discusses project selecting, project team members and project research targets and proposals for the next year. (4) Constructing NOQA Network Organization. The 2005 annual conference stated that NOQA is a loose origination network in the main form of annual meetings and cooperative projects. NOQA should strengthen employee development plan in order to build a more cohesive network. Before the conference of ENQA, the quality assurance agency of Nordic higher education should hold an agenda meeting to reach a consensus and discuss NOQA's website construction, and so on. From a perspective of cooperation and study between countries, the 2005 annual conference discussed NOQA's future action plan, which includes annual meeting arrangement, the use of NOQA research report, the opening of symposiums, brand building and so on. (5) Other Business. For example, the 2004 annual conference elected Swedish Sigbrit Franke as the Nordic representative to speak at the members conference of ENQA; the 2006 annual conference reported research development of Nordic Ministerial Committee project "Nordic National Quality Assurance System"; the 2007 annual conference discussed the spirit of the Council of Ministers at London about the Bologna process, and so on. In a word, NOQA exchanges Nordic experiences, discusses cooperative projects and plans future development through annual meetings to vigorously promote the internationalization of quality assurance in Nordic higher education and its system's construction and development.

Another cooperative way of NOQA is to launch cooperative projects, share research findings and publish research reports. Every year NOQA annual meeting reviews and decides cooperative projects and their implementation plans. Since the establishment of NOQA, the Nordic quality assurance in higher education agency has already completed many cooperative projects' research and obtained a series of important achievements, which mainly include: (1) Student Involvement in Quality Assessments of Higher Education in the Nordic Countries. This project summarized the assessment mechanism of student involvement in the Nordic countries and its experiences from different aspects of student involvement, such as formulation of assessment program, academic self-assessment, external assessment team, site interview, provision of assessment information, assessment following-on work, and so on. Its research production has had a significant influence on higher educational area of the Nordic countries or even the whole Europe and promoted establishment and perfection of mechanism of student involvement in Bologna process. (2) A Comparative Analysis of Systematic Quality Work in Nordic Higher Education Institutions. This project selected one college each in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden to

summarize their academic quality management experience from quality strategy and system, student involvement, external stakeholders' union, data application and information management, quality assurance follow-up mechanism and international dimension, such that Nordic higher educational agency can be promoted to establish systematic quality work. (3) European Standards and Guidelines in a Nordic Perspective. This project aimed to propose how the Nordic countries apply new European standards for quality and program in colleges and universities from reality of Nordic quality assurance agency and through deeply discussion on the standards and guides of European quality assurance proposed by ENQA in Bergen ministerial meeting of Bologna process. (4) Quality Audit in the Nordic Countries. This project compared and analyzed academic audit experience in Nordic five countries from quality assurance in higher education agency and its responsibilities, quality standard, audit results and methods, findings and feedback, advantage, challenge and future development. (5) Learning outcomes: Common framework - different approaches to evaluating learning outcomes in the Nordic countries. This project compared and analyzed the learning quality of higher educational agency and quality assurance agency in the Nordic countries, summarized experience of learning quality judgment of quality assurance in higher education agency in Denmark and Norway,. It also proposed several suggestions on applying learning quality judgments in academic quality audit and learning project evaluation in the future for the Nordic countries. (6) Site visits as an evaluation method. The result compared and analyzed the aim, preparation, implementation and the use of survey data of field visits of Nordic academies, discussed the difference of methods of field visits in the Nordic countries. In a word, the publication of these annual cooperative projects' research findings and reports becomes an important channel to conduct cooperation, reaches an understanding and learns from each other among Nordic quality assurance agencies in higher education.

### **3. Results and Enlightenment of Regional Cooperation in Nordic Quality Assurance in Higher Education**

The regional cooperation in the area of quality assurance in higher education has been continuing for nearly twenty years in the Nordic countries. Whatever the establishment of NOQA network organization, or annual meeting, or research of cooperative projects all has been obtained good achievements. It is one of the important channels to improve our quality assurance in higher education system by learning Nordic experiences, strengthening regional cooperation and international communication.

#### **A. To Participate in Internationalized Process and Enter into the World**

The need of internationalization of Nordic higher education is the main reason for the Nordic countries to establish regional cooperation mechanism in the process of quality assurance in higher education. In order to join in Europe and enter into the world, the Nordic countries devoted to broad

academic cooperation and exchange in region, European integration and internationalization. In view of the actual situation of Nordic higher education, they apply common framework of European higher educational system, guarantee quality criterion of European higher education, establish European credit transfer system, promote the turnover of teachers, students and academic staff in Northern Europe, Europe or even the whole world. In recent years, China has increasing higher education exchange and cooperation with many countries in the world, the internationalization process is also accelerating. China's higher educational agency should put European Bologna process as reference, learn Nordic experiences, positively participate in internationalized process of quality assurance in higher education in order to promote universities' level and quality, regulate degree education quality, further international mutual recognition of credits and degree, therefore China's higher education can be comparable with the education level of global universities.

#### **B. To Strengthen Regional Cooperation and Seek Common Ground while Reserving Differences**

The assessment methods and agencies of Nordic higher educational quality have distinctive features and advantages; they also have different views and perspectives in quality assurance in higher education. Therefore, it is important for the Nordic countries to make regional cooperation in quality assurance in higher education to strengthen cooperation, prompt communication, seek common ground, reach an understanding and consensus. Though Asia-Pacific region has lots of countries, the social wealth is relatively poor and social systems, language cultures and ethnic customs varies, higher education has a big difference, and regional cooperation faces relatively difficult for quality assurance in higher education, but as early as December 1983, UNESCO international conference built "Mutual Recognition Regional Convention about Higher Educational Attainment, Diploma and Degree in Asian-Pacific region", which laid a good foundation for quality assurance in higher education in Asian-Pacific region. In order to strengthen the international cooperation of quality assurance in higher education among Asian-Pacific countries, the Asia-Pacific quality assurance network (APQN) was established in 2004, and "Quality assurance in higher education Principle in Asia-Pacific Region" was formally announced in March 2008. All these provide relatively uniform quality management standards and principles mutually agreed by various countries for higher educational quality management in Asian-Pacific region. China's higher educational department should play a key role as a big or even powerful country in higher education in APQN, strengthen the cooperation and communication of many Asia-Pacific nations in assessment procedures and higher educational methods, formulation and application of assessment standards, criteria and treatment of relationship between stakeholders, seek common ground and learn from each, so as to improve quality assurance systems and assessment mechanisms in China's higher education.

### C. To Promote Geopolitical Cooperation and Create Good Prospect

Based on similar geographical relations and cultural traditions, the Nordic countries started to carry out regional cooperation and communication of quality assurance in higher education in the early 1990s, which powerfully promote internationalization and European integration of quality assurance in higher education in this area. Taiwan Strait and Mainland of China have the same ethnicity, same clan, same character and same language; so their higher educational systems have the same origin although now a brief separation because of some history reasons. If the political disputes are taken away, China has more social and cultural foundations for higher educational integration than Nordic five countries. Although the higher educational circles in Taiwan Strait and Mainland China have begun exchanges and cooperation since the 1980s, in general there are many general exchanges and little material high-level cooperation; Mainland China has more cooperation with Hong Kong and Macao than with Taiwan. Under the background of globalization and gradual formation of China's economic circle, their higher educational system and its quality assurance will definitely move toward integration in the future. The higher educational department in Mainland China should use Bologna process and Nordic experiences for reference, strengthen mutual trust, establish a regional cooperative organization, conduct regular, institutionalized high-end cooperation and exchanges in academic cooperation, course construction, development and utilization of educational resources, mutual recognition of credits and degree, establishment of quality monitoring and assurance system and turnover of teachers and students, then

the integration of quality assurance in higher education can be fulfilled in the future.

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