

## **Student course evaluation documents: Constituting evaluation practice**

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### **Abstract**

Many documents are produced in evaluation processes; documentation of student evaluation can therefore be time-consuming. Nevertheless, we have little knowledge about how these documents are used. This paper is based upon analysis of documents that direct and report on internal student evaluation practice at a Norwegian university. Interviews with academics and students are used as supplementary data. We analyse how student evaluation practice is described in university documents compared to what academics and students express. The aim is to explore how documents can contribute to the constitution of evaluation practice. The study shows that the university mainly requested information about how evaluation documentation was carried out. The academics reported on challenges with evaluation practice, use and results. These reports were supposed to serve as background for educational quality reports at departments and faculty level. However, the information from programme reports was nearly absent from reports at higher organisational levels; they mainly described a well-established evaluation practice. There were misalignments between how student evaluation practice was described at different levels, in documents and in interviews. This may hinder improvements to evaluation practice and may also contribute to an understanding of student evaluation as an accountability tool more than a practice promoting learning.

### **Keywords:**

student evaluation; textual agency; quality assurance; evaluation documentation

## Introduction

Many years of research on the use of student course evaluations have shown a variety of uses—as indicators of educational quality, for enhancement of student empowerment and as tools to measure educational quality. Moreover, different stakeholders use student course evaluations differently; for example, in quality assurance, quality development, faculty personnel decision making, teacher ratings, research, institution rankings and in audit processes. The majority of research papers on student course evaluation focuses on the validity and reliability of student evaluation instruments, use of student evaluation (Richardson 2005) and practical and critical issues on student evaluation surveys (Alderman, Towers, and Bannah 2012). There are, however, few studies on what constitutes student evaluation *practice* in higher education (Saunders 2011).

In this study, we investigate how student evaluation and evaluation results feature in documents at a university and discuss how documents can contribute to the practice of evaluation. Student evaluation is understood as students' feedback on teaching, courses and programmes. The aim is to increase the understanding of student evaluation practice by exploring evaluation documents in use. Traditionally, different types of content analysis have dominated approaches to document analysis (Prior 2008). However, several scholars have emphasised that documents also 'function in the everyday world' (Prior 2008, 824), have a social role (Lund 2009) and construct organisations (Atkinson and Coffey 2011). Therefore, Prior (2003) suggests that researchers should follow documents in use. We draw upon an understanding of documents as active contributors in organisational processes and Francois Cooren's (2004) definition of textual agency. The terms 'documents' and 'texts' are used interchangeably. From a textual agency perspective, documents have mutual roles in constituting and being constituted by evaluation practice. Atkinson and Coffey (2011, 79) express similar views on documents: 'They actively construct the very organisation they purport to describe. Analysis therefore needs to focus on how organizational realities are (re)produced through textual conversation'. Contemporary organisations are major producers of documentary materials, particularly in quality assurance and evaluation. Several kinds of documents are produced as part of evaluation processes—documents meant to direct evaluation practice, such as educational policy guidelines, legal regulations and internal quality assurance procedures. Many scholars have criticised the paperwork that quality assurance processes demand and they describe this part of evaluation practice in negative terms like 'feeding the system' with reports (Anderson 2006, 168), 'feeding the beast' and

‘meaningless rituals’ (Newton 2000, 155), as time consuming administrative processes and a ‘game of managerialism’ (Ese 2019, 187) increasing the workload for academics (Kis 2005). We have however, limited knowledge about the influence all these documents have on evaluation practice. In this study, based on empirical data from a Norwegian university, we aspire to explore how evaluation documents influence the practice of evaluation. We ask the following research question: How are student evaluations documented and reported at the university and how can internal documents contribute to constitution of evaluation practice? Documents in organisational settings implicitly refer to other documents; analysis of documents must therefore ‘look beyond separate texts’ and explore how texts relate to each other, also called intertextuality (Atkinson and Coffey 2011, 86). Thus, we particularly focus on the relationship between documents at different organisational levels (intertextuality).

This paper is part of an overarching research project that explores how student evaluation is carried out and used from different perspectives. Two published papers describe student evaluation practice from the perspectives of students and academic leaders—central actors in evaluation practice on the programme level where these evaluations take place (Borch, Sandvoll, and Risør 2020). In this paper, interviews with academics and students are supplementary data when we analyse documents in order to answer the research question.

### **Student evaluation**

When student evaluation of teaching was introduced in higher education in the 1960s in America, it was voluntary and considered to be for academic use with the purpose of improving teaching (Darwin 2016). Over a relatively short period from the 1970s to the 1980s, student numbers and budgets in higher education grew rapidly and politicians therefore requested more control of how public money was spent and included evaluation in quality assurance for the purpose of control and accountability. Formal evaluation systems were established, first in America and later in Europe (Darwin 2016). When evaluation became part of formal quality assurance systems, the volume of documents involved in evaluation processes increased. Until then, student evaluation had been a voluntary instrument that teachers controlled and could use for the improvement of their own teaching (Westerheijden, Hulpiau, and Waeytens 2007).

Today student evaluation is often a mandatory part of quality assurance in higher education and evaluation results are used as a predictor of quality that universities have to take into consideration when judging educational quality. With a stronger emphasis on quality assurance in evaluation practice, evaluation has also become a management tool controlled by

management and administrators instead of academics. The shift from academic to administrative control of quality assurance processes is a recurrent debate in the sector (e.g., Anderson 2006; Biesta 2016; Elassy 2015), particularly because administrative staff and academics have a different understanding about what constitutes good educational quality (Westerheijden, Stensaker, and Rosa 2007) and because quality assurance processes take time away from what academics consider their core activities (Cardoso, Rosa, and Stensaker 2016; Newton 2002).

There is an expectation of use embedded in the concept of evaluation, including student evaluation, and a belief that evaluation will influence what is being evaluated (Højlund 2014). However, researchers have shown that evaluation use for intended purposes is comparatively low (Johnson et al. 2009; Kember, Leung, and Kwan 2002; Patton 2008; Stein et al. 2013). Evaluation use can be defined as ‘the way in which an evaluation and information from the evaluation impacts the program that is being evaluated’ (Alkin and Taut 2003, 1). Discussions and publications about evaluation use from this millennium show that many evaluators and researchers have reconceptualised their understanding of evaluation use from a focus on direct use to acknowledging that evaluations influence individuals, programmes and communities in many ways (Johnson et al. 2009). Different types of evaluation use feature in evaluation theory literature. The most common types of evaluation use are: instrumental use, conceptual use, symbolic use and process use (Johnson et al. 2009). Instrumental use refers to cases where somebody uses evaluation findings or knowledge directly; conceptual use refers to instances when ‘no direct action has been taken but when people’s understanding has been affected’ (Johnson et al. 2009, 378). Symbolic use refers to examples of use where somebody uses the mere existence of an evaluation to persuade or legitimise the appearance of evaluation more than any aspects of its results (ibid). Process use is a term created by Patton (1997, 90) and is defined as ‘Individual changes in thinking and behavior and program or organizational changes in procedures and cultures that occur among those involved in evaluation as a result of the learning that occurs during the evaluation process’.

### **Textual agency**

All documents, including student evaluation documents, can be analysed for their textual agency, that is, perceiving them as non-human actors or agents that participate in and influence organisational life. Naturally, the human role in constructing organisations is not to be underestimated. As Cooren (2004, 388) has said, ‘The textual agency approach suggests

that what constitutes an organization is a hybrid of human and non-human contributions'. Documents are created by human beings and it is expected that humans in one way or another act upon them. Texts are, from a textual agency perspective, considered to 'participate, like other agents, in the production of organizational life' (Cooren 2004, 374). Documents can thus be regarded as co-constitutive for an organisation and organisational processes—in this case, evaluation practice. Therefore, analysis of documents that regulate and describe student evaluation can help us achieve a better understanding of how evaluation practice is constituted.

Atkinson & Coffey (2011, 79) state that 'documents are "social facts" in that they are produced, shared and used in socially organised ways'. Furthermore, they (2011, 88) point to how writing something into a documentary format can transform and de-contextualise things: 'We translate events from the specific and the local and make of them "facts" and "records" which take on an independent existence. Some texts become official and can become proof of events and roles'.

### **National regulation of student evaluation and quality assurance**

In 2003, the Norwegian Ministry of Education launched an educational reform, The Quality Reform, that aimed to increase educational quality. Evaluation was articulated as a tool to increase and assure educational quality and student evaluation became a mandatory part of university's local quality assurance systems (QAS) (Lovdata 2005). In line with global trends in higher education, the focus on educational quality increased and a national agency for quality assurance in education (NOKUT) was established in 2003 (Danø and Stensaker 2007; Westerheijden, Stensaker, and Rosa 2007). The same year higher education institutions became obliged to report on educational quality and quality assurance practice to institutional boards by writing annual educational quality reports (NOKUT 2003). Since then, a high number of educational quality reports and evaluation documents has been produced, some of which are analysed and discussed in this study.

### **Contextual background and evaluation use at UiT**

How, when and why to conduct and document student evaluation is described in local quality assurance systems (QAS) at each higher education institution in Norway. QAS at UiT states that student evaluation shall give students an active role in continuous quality assurance and quality improvement. It is considered to be part of students' learning processes and to lead to greater focus on student's learning environment and the academic environments' self-

evaluation. QAS requires that different levels in the organisation document their evaluation practice and include guidelines for whose responsibility it is, when to do it and how to do it (UiT 2012). Each faculty in turn has its own internal procedures for evaluation that aim to complement QAS.

In the overarching research project, interviews with academics and students have revealed that the extent to which feedback from students is used for intended purposes varies. Student feedback conducted in dialogue-based evaluation approaches was used by academics for improving teaching and for adjustments in courses. Students expressed that these evaluative dialogues increased their awareness about their own learning processes and helped them develop their communication skills. Written evaluation methods were on the other hand used mostly for quality assurance and less for quality improvement. How student evaluation results were followed up varied across programmes (Borch, Sandvoll, and Risør 2020). There were few planned dialogues about evaluation results among colleagues and evaluation was considered a rather private practice. Student evaluation data were stored locally at the course leaders' computers and in some cases survey results shared with administrative staff. The informants requested better systems for how to follow up, discuss and share data with other stakeholders like students, teaching colleagues and leaders (Borch 2020).

## **Methods**

Student evaluation practices are documented in educational quality reports on different organisational levels as one of many indicators of educational quality. The primary empirical data in this paper are internal documents describing student evaluation practice and quality assurance at eight health profession education programmes at UiT. Interviews with academic leaders and students are supplementary data (Borch, Sandvoll, and Risør 2020). The inclusion criteria for the documents were internal documents that directed the documentation of evaluation practice at faculty and institutional level, and documents that reported on student evaluation at programme, department and faculty levels in the years 2013, 2014 and 2015. These years were chosen because they describe evaluation practice in the years prior to the supplementary data interviews in the present research project. The included documents are (1) annual documentation requirements from the university sent to the departments about how to document educational quality, including student evaluation and (2) educational quality reports at programme, department and faculty levels. The first type of document is what Cooren (2004, 383) categorised as 'directives': specific types of documents that 'can *request* someone to do something'. The second type of document can be considered 'assertives': a type of texts

that can inform, confirm, indicate, suggest and proclaim something. The included texts are documents developed for and by stakeholders within the organisation as a requirement of the quality assurance system.

Permission to include internal documents in the study and to access these from archives was granted from the department responsible for following up on quality assurance at the university (UiT). The authors of the present paper are employed at UiT, which probably made access to documents easier.

The document analysis had different purposes in the different stages of the research process, which is common in document analysis (Bowen 2009). Before including the documents in this study, several internal documents describing student evaluation were read to create an overview of how evaluation was documented and communicated at the university. These documents were board agendas, board minutes, evaluation templates, summaries of evaluation results, approvals of evaluation procedures and educational quality reports from 2003–2020 (present). The first readings of the documents describing student evaluation could be described as a superficial examination of the texts, typical for a first stage in document analysis (Bowen 2009). In this stage the first author selected the documents relevant to the research questions and for further analysis. Moreover, the full educational quality reports were read, and content describing student evaluation was marked and included. The rest of the texts were excluded.

In the next stage, the first author conducted a content analysis of the educational quality reports and the request letters in NVivo. The content of the documents was then analysed in an iterative process starting with superficial reading or skimming, followed by more thorough reading and interpretation (Bowen 2009). The data were categorised with descriptive codes in the first stage and grouped in the second stage. This was done to establish overview and meaning of what kind of data were requested from one organisational level and reported to the next level. In the next stages, the authors took a textual agency analytical approach and analysed the relationship between the documents or the intertextuality—specifically what is reported on all organisational levels and what is left out between the levels. In this paper, we discuss the intertextual relationships between documents and how they relate to evaluation practice described by the leaders on the programme level. The evaluation practice is partly described in evaluation reports and also in the interviews with the academic leaders.

As the data from the interviews are used as supplementary data, the interview method is not presented in this paper. Information about the interview methodology can be found in

(Borch, Sandvoll, and Risør 2020). Findings from the interviews add perspective regarding evaluation use at the university and are therefore shortly presented above in the section about use at UiT and will be referred to in the discussion.

A project ethical approval was granted from The Norwegian Centre for Research Data in early stages of the project period. The programmes and departments are anonymised.

## **Results**

### ***Student evaluation results and data requested from the university***

Due to QAS, each leadership of programme and department is required to document its educational quality and quality assurance in response to a request letter. These request letters are created by administrative leaders either at faculty level or institutional level and sent to administrative staff at lower organisational levels. The annual documentation requirements from the university, the number of questions and the topics regarding evaluation practice varied from year to year. The questions the department had to report on can be divided into four categories: 1) Questions describing evaluation practice, 2) Questions about compliance with QAS, 3) Questions about evaluation use and 4) Questions about challenges with evaluation practice.

#### *Questions describing evaluation practice*

The programmes and departments were asked several questions about how student evaluation was structured and practiced. These questions requested information about evaluation methods, response rates, student engagement, learning outcome focus and how systematically courses and programmes were being evaluated. One example of questions in this category is: ‘How does quality assurance approach students’ learning outcomes?’

#### *Questions about compliance with QAS*

The majority of the questions were about evaluation practice in relation to the quality assurance system. One asked directly about compliance: ‘Has implementation of feedback from programme and course evaluations been followed up and acted upon according to the procedures?’ Another question asked whether evaluation was carried out according to QAS, i.e., about student involvement.

#### *Questions about evaluation use*



The questions about evaluation use focused on how evaluation results and measures were followed up, how they were communicated to the students and whether they were aligned with the procedures. Questions in this category related to how student evaluation results were used and how measures that were described earlier were followed up on.

#### *Questions about challenges in evaluation practice*

The departments and programmes were asked to share examples of challenges in evaluation practice and how they have followed up on identified challenges from previous years.

#### ***Responses to the documentation requests in written reports***

##### *Student evaluation in documents at programme level*

Due to the faculty's internal procedures for evaluation (UiTø 2010) and the quality assurance system (UiT 2012), the programme management is required to report about strengths and weaknesses at the programme and base their reports on evaluation data from students and staff. Some programmes had not established routines to create annual educational quality reports. When programmes created their own reports, they were written by academic leaders and shared with administrative staff at the department level.

In this study, three programmes created educational quality reports annually. These reports presented evaluation results and analysis of strengths and weaknesses within the programmes and with evaluation practice. For the remaining five, either the course leaders summarised the evaluation results for themselves or the administrative staff presented the survey results in evaluation summaries. None of the texts included information about informal continuous evaluation or about evaluation practice in relation to internal procedures, and just one of them mentioned the quality assurance system. Negative and positive feedback about the evaluated courses and programmes from the students' perspectives were included in these texts. The reports and summaries from three of the programmes showed that the response rates for written evaluations were low—for some courses around 20 percent. Descriptive statistics were presented based upon the evaluation results, i.e., mean averages of satisfaction. Other identified challenges with evaluation practice were: evaluations that were not carried out because of (sick) leave by academics or administrative staff, lack of time to follow up on the evaluation results and diverging student responses. No action plan or measures were proposed in the documents.

To what extent these reports or summaries were shared within the programme varied. Some of the texts included information about evaluation results that were discussed at teacher meetings or shared with programme management.

*Student evaluation in educational quality reports at department level*

The departments' educational quality reports were written by administrative staff annually and were based upon data about educational quality from the department's programmes. All department heads at the university had to report on the same educational quality parameters and questions according to a request letter. Reports from three of eight programmes were presented at department board meetings. Department minutes showed that these reports were meant for information only and were approved without any comments.

All the departments except one structured the reports according to the questions they were asked to answer. The divergent report provided a general description of evaluation practice at the department and did not answer the questions from the faculty administration. The departments were given an opportunity to provide extra information about aspects they considered relevant for educational quality and quality assurance. Three departments provided additional information about student evaluation practice. One department included some evaluation results and suggestions for improving courses according to these evaluations. However, the same department stated that academics had little time to analyse evaluation results and that there was a need to improve how evaluation results were followed up. The additional information from the other two departments described successes and challenges with evaluation practice and educational quality with information about planned changes in evaluation practice.

Most of the questions were answered in full sentences, but limited information was provided for some of the questions and particularly to the one asking if evaluations were '(...)followed up and acted upon according to the procedures?' and to 'How does quality assurance approach students' learning outcomes?'. Two departments confirmed the former question with one word, 'yes'. The latter question was interpreted differently. One department described how they focused on students' learning outcomes in their work with curriculum design; another did not answer the question but provided information about staff members who had participated in an evaluation course. The remaining departments confirmed that evaluation practice was focused on student learning outcomes without giving any examples.

Further, another question was answered as if it had different meanings. The academics at the faculty were asked whether the implementation of feedback from programme and course evaluations had been followed up and acted upon according to the procedures. Some departments answered more generally about the implementation of the quality assurance system and not whether the evaluation results were followed up, while others answered the question directly.

The departmental reports did not describe any critical evaluation results or inadequacy of evaluation routines. How student evaluation of programmes and teaching were followed up at programme level was described for only two of the programmes.

#### *Student evaluation in educational quality reports at faculty level*

At the faculty leadership level, administrative staff members wrote educational quality reports annually. They based these reports on the quality reports from the departments as well as parameters relevant to educational quality provided by the National Education Data Register (DBH).

The quality reports differed in structure over the years. The parts describing evaluation contained an introduction text, either with excerpts from the faculty's strategy, the quality assurance system and/or the documentation requirements from the current year.

The major portion of the texts about evaluation was a descriptive overview of the variety of evaluation methods and practices at the departments. In the reports from 2013–2015, two challenges with evaluation practice were described: 1) low response rates and 2) low feedback to students about evaluation results. There were, however, no suggestions about how to follow up on these challenges, but the faculty report from the same year expressed that these challenges were 'being worked on'.

A commonality among these quality reports was that they contained information about how evaluation practice was carried out in a systematic way in compliance with the system. One year the faculty summarised the evaluation practice in three bullet points:

- Educational programmes are being evaluated systematically
- Courses are evaluated systematically
- Evaluations and feedback are followed up (UiT 2014, 21)

The faculty report from one year suggested measures for improving student evaluation practice. These measures ranged from a need to establish regular evaluation dialogues in all the programmes, arrange seminars on evaluation methods, facilitate exchanges of experiences

with evaluation and encourage staff to participate in evaluation courses. The educational quality reports included some information about evaluation use. These paragraphs stated that evaluation practice was regarded as meaningful and led to improvements in both education quality and administrative procedures that students may benefit from. There were, however, no examples of how educational quality improved based upon evaluation results. The reports simply stated that evaluation practice was established in compliance with the procedures and QAS.

The reports did not contain information about educational quality at specific programmes. Moreover, no first-hand information about student evaluation practice was collected from the student parliament or student representatives. None of the reports had separate subsections with information about teachers' self-evaluation of courses and programmes.

## **Discussion**

### *Misalignment between requested and provided information*

We expected a certain level of alignment in the description of student evaluation across the organisational levels and between requested and provided information. However, our analysis showed that this was not always the case; the texts relate and refer to each other but the content of the text was often not clearly aligned with the provided text on other levels. This may be ascribed to different understandings and roles of *writer* and *reader* in evaluation practice. Their backgrounds and different roles in evaluation processes may have led them to interpret questions differently. To illustrate, we will take a closer look at the writers on programme level and the readers on department level of the same documents.

The *writers* of the documents at programme level are academics who are directly involved in evaluation practice, responsible for carrying out and following up on student evaluation. Considering their role in evaluation practice, we would expect them to write the documents from their perspective and with first-hand information about evaluation, which they also did. They provide analytical texts about student evaluation practice, reflect on the results and what they are used for and point to weaknesses in courses and evaluation practices. Their descriptions said nothing about compliance with the quality assurance system or internal procedures, except for one report in one of the three years.

We know that the intended *readers* of the documents on the other hand, are diverse and include department board members, department heads and administrative staff. The administrative staff base their reports to the faculty leadership on information provided by the

academics. This kind of information can be considered second-order interpretations because data have been interpreted by a third party. Saunders & Williams (2005) have raised doubts about the validity of such second-order interpreted data of educational quality measures. They question the completeness of data reviewed by a third party because they may have different perceptions of what is important when judging quality. When administrative staff members write the department's educational quality report, they have to decide what information to leave out and what to present to the next level. The writer must consider and interpret which information they believe is valuable for the reader. Students, academics and administrative staff have different views on what constitutes educational quality (Dicker et al. 2019) and on the utility of student evaluation (Beran et al. 2005). It is likely that these differences will affect how they write, read and interpret texts about educational quality and student evaluation.

We would expect that the higher up in the organisation the information proceeds, the less specific the descriptions of educational quality and quality assurance would be, due to the size of the university and the programme portfolio. Nevertheless, we did expect a stronger alignment in what is being communicated about student evaluation across the organisational levels and that the voices of students and academics would be heard. After all, they can be considered main actors in student evaluation processes. Biesta (2016, 50) has criticised how the autonomy of academics has been reduced because of stronger management and control in higher education and says: 'the managerial approach to accountability has eroded opportunities for educators to take responsibility for their actions and activities'. The interviews in the overarching study showed that it is possible for academics to control greater parts of the evaluation practice but the administrative staff 'had an important role in the development of written evaluations' (Borch, Sandvoll, and Risør 2020, 97). By analysing the documents in this study, we see that the accountability and control dimensions with student evaluation are given much more attention in the reports than pedagogical aspects of evaluation practice. The administrative imprint on the reports seems strong. Below, we will discuss why we believe misalignments in texts matter from a textual agency perspective.

#### *Textual agency of internal documents*

In textual agency, texts are ascribed a capacity to act, but this action cannot happen without human activity. The included documents, both the directives (requested information) and assertives (provided information) can be understood as utterances because they are created with potential readers in mind. When these documents are acted upon by someone, new

practices or understandings may be constituted (Cooren 2004). Even when documents are not acted upon, they may constitute new practices or understandings. They may in one way or another influence our understanding of evaluation practice by presenting evaluation the way they do.

The analysis of the documents revealed that limited information was provided as response to some of the questions in the request letters. In some cases, the questions were not answered directly or as described above—they were interpreted differently. The writer might expect a certain agency to the document that the receiver of the document did not follow up on. Our analysis showed that information that could be used to improve evaluation practice ‘disappeared’ between programme and department and between department and faculty levels. Examples of such information included weaknesses in evaluation practice, such as vulnerability in evaluation systems and lack of established routines for follow up on evaluation results. In one case, sick leave meant that a programme evaluation was not carried out. In another programme, course evaluation was not sent to the students because administrative staff was on leave. At a third programme, the report expresses that academics had too little time to follow up on evaluation results. This information was not presented in the department or faculty reports. However, the reports from programme level were aligned with what some of the academic leaders expressed in our research interviews about what needs improvement within an evaluation practice (Borch, Sandvoll, and Risør 2020; Borch 2020). When educational quality reports at department and faculty levels summarise that evaluations are conducted systematically and results are followed up, they attribute different characteristics to the evaluation practice than the academics described in the interviews and in the reports from the programme level. Based upon the interviews we know that academics expected that the information they share in the reports about evaluation practice will be followed up at the next institutional level by the readers of these documents. When academics never receive feedback on the reports and see no consequences if they do not share evaluation results it seems like the documents have low agency for further action.

In these examples, there seems to be a distinction between the apparent evaluation use in the reports at department and faculty level and the actual use of evaluation described by the academics in reports from programme level and in the interviews. When these documents at department and faculty level do not communicate anything about weaknesses with the evaluation practices, barriers or limitations to use, the readers will most likely attribute trust or belief to a well-functioning evaluation practice. There is little or no information in the reports at department and faculty level that suggest that evaluation practice needs to be further

developed. Nevertheless, the reports on programme level and the academics in the interviews (Borch, Sandvoll, and Risør 2020) describe that evaluation practices contain several barriers to optimal use. When higher level reports state that evaluation is carried out in compliance with the system and thereby do not give agency to the content in the documents written by the academics at programme level, this illustrates a use of evaluation in itself: symbolic use. Symbolic use is also referred to as justificatory use, meaning that the mere existence of evaluation is given more attention than how and what it is used for. Scandinavian evaluation researchers state that symbolic use appears to be the most frequent evaluation use in modern public organisations (Højlund 2014; Vedung 2017). Further, when reporting of educational quality in higher education often comprises funneling information to higher institutional levels without getting any feedback (Kis 2005), this may strengthen academic's perception of reporting as 'meaningless rituals' (Newton 2000, 155).

Returning to our example about the *writer* and the *reader* of the same document, we can assume that the person who creates the documents expects the reader to appropriate the content of the documents and that there is an intertextuality between the documents in that they build on each other. Our analysis shows that the reader in some cases seemed to attribute 'new qualities' to the content of the documents when he/she was writing a summary of educational quality for the next level. Others might argue that this is expected to happen, as information proceeds hierarchically within the organisation—that there will be a 'reduction of complexity as information moved upward' within organisations (Dahler-Larsen 2011, 181).

#### *Evaluation use and what documents express*

Information about evaluation and evaluation use is abstracted within the organisation, but also described differently in the reports and the interviews. Certain types of evaluation use appear in the reports from programme level, particularly instrumental use—referring to direct changes as a result of evaluation—and conceptual use, meaning new understanding and insight about the courses. Another type of use is found in reports from department and faculty level: symbolic use as a justification and confirmation of the existing evaluation practice. Still, other types of uses in addition to instrumental and conceptual use were expressed in the interviews with the academics and students. They elaborated on process use, an increased awareness and learning that occurred during the evaluation process. One example relates to the evaluative dialogues in which students and academics said they became more aware of students' learning processes. In these dialogues, the students said they developed reflective and communicative skills relevant for their profession. These examples of process use were

considered meaningful and valuable for the academics and students but are nevertheless not mentioned in the reports (Borch, Sandvoll, and Risør 2020). Learning that occurs during evaluation processes is often overlooked in reports (Patton 2008). As discussed above, the reports at faculty level give an impression of a well-established evaluation practice aligned with internal guidelines and procedures. How can it be then that the academics describe an evaluation practice that is not carried out according to the evaluation system in reports and interviews? They describe results that are not shared with students, surveys that do not focus on student learning outcomes, lack of time to follow up on results, etc. This, despite educational quality reports from departments and faculty concluding that courses and programmes are learning focused, evaluated systematically and followed up. One likely explanation is that the academic and administrative staff interpret the data differently from each other. Another explanation relates to the kind of evaluation data being requested. The requested information about student evaluation practice may in itself be constitutive of and express how evaluation is understood: annual evaluation requests ask mostly about how evaluation is carried out in compliance with the system, and if evaluation results are followed up or not. There are, however, few questions about how evaluation is used and understood (from the students' perspectives) to improve courses and as part of students' learning processes. This seems to be aligned with audit practices in which evaluation is merely understood as a tool for controlling something rather than a 'learning tool'. Internal evaluations are usually used for formative purposes and as help for leaders to better understand and improve programme processes (Youker 2018). Furthermore, Youker (2018, 857) states that, 'The internal evaluation process promotes utilization of evaluation findings, reflective practice and organisational learning'.

Although formative purposes with evaluation are underscored in QAS, the reports from the departments and faculty do not mirror the formative intentions of evaluation practice. When descriptive information about evaluation practice and compliance with the system dominate the reports, the learning orientation in evaluation can easily be overshadowed. The university, nevertheless, did include one question about the focus on learning outcomes in student evaluation and one about whether student evaluation results were followed up, but the responses to these questions were very limited. The latter question was possible to respond to with 'yes' or 'no', which two departments also did by the word 'yes'. From a textual agency perspective, we regard that such questions contribute to creating an understanding of evaluation different from formative internal evaluations. They communicate an interest in accountability more than an understanding of evaluation necessary



for organisational and individual learning. Reporting seems to be approached as a ‘tick-box activity’ rather than processes that can lead to improved evaluation practice and, in the long term, improved education and courses as well.

The documents in this study are clearly constructed as a response to local and national requirements. Therefore, one could argue that documentation of evaluation exists because of a need for quality control. However, the internal procedures state that evaluation is intended to help the university identify weaknesses and strengths with courses and programmes others can learn from and serve as a basis for a report with recommendations of measures and how to improve (UiTø 2010). Analysis of the documents from programme level shows that although some of them identify weaknesses with courses and challenges with evaluation practice (i.e., low response rates), the programmes provide very few recommendations as to how to improve practice. In the educational quality reports on higher organisational levels, such information is almost absent. In other words, they do not provide any implementation plans for how to follow up and improve evaluation practice. We cannot know why this is not included in the reports, but educational researchers have claimed that internal evaluations ‘neglect to report negative findings’ (Youker 2018, 258) and therefore have a lower objectivity than external evaluations (Nevo 1998). When negative information about evaluation practice and poor educational quality are absent from the documents, they contribute to projecting an image of evaluation at the faculty different from what the academics and students describe.

Learning is the rationale for documentation routines and reporting, in that knowledge useful for improvement can be shared (Neby 2018). If such knowledge is not shared across organisational levels in documentation routines, improvement is most likely not going to happen. A rule of thumb from utilization-focused evaluation is that all evaluation reports should be written with use in mind (Patton 2008). When information that could help evaluation practice improve is not taken further to higher levels in the organisation, the documentation of evaluation can be understood as a ritual or game to legitimise the evaluation’s existence (Anderson 2006; Ese 2019). Ese (2019) described this approach to evaluation reporting as gaming the system of managerialism.

### *Concluding remarks*

Analysis of the included documents that request and report upon student evaluation practice from programmes, department and faculties shows misalignments between how student evaluation is described at different organisational levels. Moreover, evaluation use is

described differently in interviews with and documents written by academics and those created by administrative staff. Internal procedures state that the aim of evaluation is to identify strengths and weaknesses in programmes that others can learn from. However, evaluation results and negative information about evaluation practice are barely documented in texts above programme level. Results indicate that the documents do not contain any information about how students perceive educational quality or evaluation; nevertheless, they confirm that student evaluation practice exists. This finding is aligned with analysis of Norwegian institutional educational quality reports from 2005–2009, which concluded that these were descriptions of quality assurance rather than educational quality (Froestad and Haakstad 2009).

By acknowledging that documents in themselves have agency to constitute organisational processes they purport to describe, we suggest including students' and academics' perspectives in documentation of student evaluation practice. This may help balance how student evaluation is presented and understood at the university. A limitation with this study is that we do not have first-hand knowledge from the administrative staff who created most of the documents. There is a need for more research on how administrative staff understand evaluation practice and the documentation thereof.

When formative and pedagogical uses of student evaluation are almost absent in the high number of documents included in this study and in internal evaluation processes, evaluation seems to be understood merely as a ritual in quality assurance rather than a practice for quality enhancement. Furthermore, the educational quality reports at department and faculty level are projecting an image of evaluation practice that is carried out according to intentions with limited need for improvements. This is contrary to what academics expressed in reports at programme level and in interviews. The information about student evaluation at the faculty level may contribute to constituting an understanding of evaluation from the perspective of administrative staff, not students and academics, moreover as exclusively an accountability tool. We suggest establishing meaningful dialogues about educational quality and student evaluation at the university as an alternative to the existing documentation procedures that do not promote quality. Biesta (2016, 59) warns against a development where 'accountability becomes an end in itself, rather than a means for achieving other ends'. If this understanding continues to manifest itself in higher education, the original historical use of student evaluation for teaching improvement may be challenged.

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