

The Practices of Quality Management in Norwegian higher education – collaboration and control in study programme design and delivery

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, higher education institutions have been encouraged to develop their own internal management systems as a response to perceived quality challenges in the sector. These quality management systems have often been found to mainly reflect external accountability requirements, with less focus on coherent study programme development. In this paper, findings of a study on quality management practices in study programme delivery in Norwegian higher education institutions will be discussed. The study examined how coordination and control of quality work with respect to educational activities take place. The main findings show that a majority of institutions has established formal advisory bodies with a quality management mandate, contributing to more coherent thinking, even though the division of labour between these bodies and formal decision-making structures often is unclear. The study also shows a high level of diversity in the collaboration practices among different actors involved in quality management work, indicating that quality management practices are adapted to local needs. The paper discusses the implications of these findings for the future organizing of quality work in the sector.

Keywords: Leadership, higher education quality, quality management practices

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Introduction

Formal quality management (QM) was first introduced in US higher education in the mid-1980s (Birnbaum 2000, Cruickshank 2003). Initially QM triggered considerable interest among higher education institutions, generating many forms of action, before it seems to have fallen out of fashion in the mid-1990s. Nonetheless, a range of QM practices related to the control and coordination of study programmes has been institutionalized albeit under quite different labels (Birnbaum & Deshotels 1999, Massy 2003, Sarrico 2010). The current situation is that, regardless of the actual label, numerous higher education institutions throughout the world have introduced their own QM systems (Seymour 1991, Cruickshank 2003, Strydom et al 2004, Pratasavitskaya & Stensaker 2010, Manatos et al. 2017).

In Europe, QM in higher education can be said to have followed a different trajectory than in most regions of the world, in the sense that QM practices mainly emerged as a consequence of the Bologna process, and the establishment of national systems for external quality assurance (Stensaker 2007). Hence, it was external policy measures from national authorities rather than internal initiatives which led to the build-up of institutional QM systems (Brookes & Becket 2007). Often the aim has been to assure and improve teaching and learning, although external accountability requirements have been found to be an important driver for establishing such systems (Gosling & D`Andrea 2001, Stensaker 2008). A consequence is that many quality management systems have prioritized external reporting and other requirements, and therefore have been less integrated and linked to the core institutional activities in teaching and learning (Harvey 1995). An oft-found implication has been the de-coupling of quality management from other decision-making issues, causing complaints that quality management is driving bureaucracy more than providing value to teachers and students (Watty 2006, Stensaker 2008, Cardoso et al. 2016). However, as QM systems have become more established in European higher education, one could expect this to have implications for how these systems are designed, how they are linked to formal decision-making procedures and processes, and consequently, their impact on educational practices.

One of the aims of the underlying research project¹ was to investigate how QM systems function within higher education institutions in Norway. For this purpose, a survey was conducted among study programme leaders at a range of Norwegian universities and colleges,

¹ For more information, see the project's website: <http://www.qnhe.no/>

to investigate if quality management can be seen as an integral part of the leadership role in study programmes. We would argue that Norway is a particularly relevant case within the European context, as the country has demonstrated an eagerness to implement Bologna-related issues. In addition, Norwegian higher education has been exposed to similar reform and change processes, as have higher education systems and institutions in many European countries. As part of the national implementation of the Bologna process (Gornitzka 2006), Norway introduced a new bachelor-master structure in all higher education institutions in 2003, and established a national system of quality assessment requiring each institution to establish its own QM system (Stensaker et al. 2011). Since 2004, an important task for the national quality assessment agency, NOKUT, has been to conduct regular evaluations of these institutional systems, and institutions not meeting the national standards set for such QM systems have faced negative consequences with respect to the institutional freedom to offer new or to change existing study programmes.

The existence of such consequences has led to considerable institutional attention being directed at the QM systems and their functioning, not least by the institutional leadership (Stensaker et al. 2011). However, as all new routines and systems tend to mature and develop over time (Birnbaum 2000), it is of interest to study how institutional QM systems are currently functioning, especially at the study programme level. Hence, in this paper we address the following questions with respect to Norwegian higher education institutions:

- What are the main bodies and decision-making structures associated with QM at the study programme level?
- What are the main characteristics of the collaboration patterns within the established QM practices?
- What is the perceived impact of the way QM is organized at the study programme level?

A framework for analysing QM practices at the study programme level

Following the generally agreed upon premise that quality is a multi-dimensional concept (Seymour 1991, Harvey & Green 1993, Harvey & Knight 1996), it is not surprising that ‘quality management’ (QM) is often seen as a quite comprehensive term that encompasses policies, concepts, approaches, ideas, systems, and processes designed for ensuring the systematic maintenance and enhancement of quality within a higher education institution

(Csizmadia 2006. Hence, QM addresses both process and structure, and is usually seen as a broad improvement and governance tool at all relevant organizational levels (Law 2010). Brennan & Shah (2000) have accordingly suggested that QM in higher education incorporates several dimensions, and that individual systems may be dominated by some of these dimensions, which they have identified as ‘academic’, ‘managerial’, ‘pedagogic’ and ‘employment’ focuses. An academic focus implies a QM approach in which professorial authority and academic values are emphasized, attention is directed at the content of the study programmes and study programmes are coupled to disciplinary characteristics (Cardoso et al. 2016). A managerial focus instead prioritizes acquiring what is considered to be important information about key performance goals, and standardized management practices, making sure that the process of delivery is coordinated and controlled (Teeroovengadum et al. 2016). A pedagogic focus implies an orientation towards the teaching, instruction and learning processes, how teaching skills and methods are utilised and applied, and it emphasizes staff training and systematic development of competencies (Knight 2006). Finally, an employment focus is associated with QM systems that are more outcome-oriented, especially towards labour market needs and societal relevance. This perspective will also emphasize how student expectations regarding future employment match current and future labour market trends (Popli 2005). These different focuses can in many ways be seen as reflecting the greater professionalization and specialization of responsibilities in many European higher education institutions as a number of specific positions and roles have been developed to take care of academic content, programme management, staff development and employability issues (Stensaker 2008).

When using the framework provided by Brennan & Shah to analyse the academic literature on QM in higher education, Pratasavitskaya & Stensaker (2010) found that this literature can be characterized as conceptually heterogeneous and multidisciplinary, making it difficult to identify more archetypical models of quality management (see also Bilen 2010). Still, many authors have argued strongly for more holistic and integrated approaches to quality management (Shrikanthan & Dalrymple 2002, 2005; D’Andrea & Gosling 2005; Kleijnen et al. 2014), although empirical studies from a range of countries and institutions have suggested that many quality management systems, at least in earlier years, tended to be characterized by having a more managerial and an employment oriented focus (Harvey 1995, 1998; Barrow 1999; Ottewill & Macfarlane 2004; Brunetto & Farr-Wharton 2005; Popli 2005; Rosa et al.

2006; Law 2010; Talib et al. 2011; Soria-Garcia & Martinez-Lorente 2014; Teeroovengadum et al. 2016). However, in more recent overviews of the QM literature, Manatos et al. (2017) and Mora et al. (2017) have argued that QM systems seem to move towards becoming more integrated in the general governance of higher education institutions, and that there is a trend towards more comprehensive QM systems – at least according to what is reported in international journals (see also Sarrico 2010). Still, as Manatos et al. (2017) note, a problem with much of the current literature is that it is often quite theoretical, focusing more on the normative design – that is, formal ambitions and objectives – than on the actual functioning of existing QM systems in practice.

In the background of the developments described above, a number of expectations can be outlined with respect to how QM practices play out at the study programme level. First, and following the many reforms taking place in higher education aimed at strengthening vertical organizational integration and professionalizing leadership at all relevant organizational levels, one can expect QM to be an activity characterized by strong leadership involvement – even at the study programme level - and a less dominant role for academic staff. Furthermore, given the argument that all systems and routines tend to mature and develop over time (Birnbaum 2000), it is of interest to identify whether the pleas for more ‘comprehensive’ QM systems have been reflected in the collaborative practices associated with quality management. Thus, our second expectation is that we would also find the organization of QM to be more integrated and streamlined at the study programme level. These two expectations are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and might appear in a range of combinations. It follows from these expectations that QM systems that are more open to managerial influence, more streamlined and more integrated will reduce the influence of traditional collegiate bodies and processes, although such bodies might also find a place within a new ‘comprehensive’ structure.

However, given the many dimensions covered by modern QM systems, and the fact that new professionals take on more specialized responsibilities, one can formulate a third alternative: expectation, in the sense that increased specialisation and professionalization of roles and responsibilities will lead to more fragmentation and less coordination of QM activities in higher education institutions.

Empirical setting, data and methods

Partly as a result of the Bologna process, most study programmes in Norway are organized as bachelor, master and PhD programmes (3+2+3). Normally, these programmes contain different modules providing ECTS credits, and the programmes usually contain both mandatory modules and optional modules students can choose from. The governance of the study programmes may vary from institution to institution, but in universities it is quite normal to have a programme board or a similar collegiate body that is responsible for the design, the content, and the organization of the programme. The day-to-day responsibility for the programme is often delegated to a programme leader who is elected at some institutions, while appointed at others. It is not uncommon for the teachers responsible for each module in the programme to be given some discretion and decision-making power over practical issues related to their module. On the administrative side, each programme normally has a designated person assigned to handle practical issues, and to support the study programme leader. Every higher education institution in Norway is also expected to have a quality assurance/quality management system in operation, and there are expectations that this system should collect and analyse data at the study programme level, and also provide relevant feedback for improving the quality of the program. Hence, one of the responsibilities of those in charge of individual study programmes is to provide input to and act on feedback from this system.

This paper builds on a survey of leaders of study programmes at higher education institutions in Norway, conducted in winter 2015/16 (December to March). ‘Study programme leader’ is not a formal title in Norwegian higher education and thus there is no formal list of people holding that position. At the same time, staff with a leadership role at the study programme level are important actors in the higher education system, not least when it comes to providing input to the mandatory institutional quality management systems. In order to be able to conduct the survey, we had to create a list of respondents, which was done by contacting all public higher education institutions and getting an authorized list of all staff members who had the academic responsibility for one or more study programmes at the institution. The number of study programmes at an institution varied with institutional size: from 2 to 120 programmes. The final list of respondents consisted of 1,010 names and addresses, and as 551 surveys were returned, the overall response rate was 54.6 per cent. However, since the survey’s formal target group population could not be fully identified, it is not possible to calculate possible biases. However, as all public institutions were included in the sample, and

the responses reflect the institutional diversity in Norwegian higher education, one can still argue that the results present a representative picture.

In the analyses reported in this paper, we have only looked at aggregated data for the whole higher education sector, and minor variations in response rates between large and small institutions are therefore not problematic. The survey focused on a range of themes, with a special section devoted to issues of how quality assurance was organized and managed at the study programme level. The data from this particular section form the basis for this paper.

Results

As indicated in the introduction, the paper addresses three research questions: the first about key bodies and decision-making structures associated with QM at the study programme level; the second about patterns of collaboration in QM practices; and the third about the perceived impact of the way QM is organized at the study programme level.

Respondents were asked to indicate the most important institutional forums for discussing study programme quality. The results are presented in Figure 1 and show the perceptions of the importance of different kinds of forums. Most respondents (61 per cent) indicated that local forums, such as the Programme Board, the Department Board and various collegial fora, are considered the more important when it comes to discussing the quality of study programmes. The Programme Board is the most commonly-mentioned forum for discussing study programme quality, and this forum is commonly made up of the academic staff in charge of courses in the programme. However, almost 30 per cent respondents also indicated that Central Institutional Boards are of importance, but this is to some degree related to the size of the institution, as smaller institutions have fewer governing levels and may also have study programmes which are governed at a level above the department level. Three-quarters of respondents indicated that they were a member of only one forum for quality management at the study programme level.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

One idea behind the development and offering of study programmes is that they should contribute to creating a more holistic or integrative approach to studies in general, and that indirectly, this is also expected to contribute to study programme quality. Figure 2 shows that in general, study programme leaders agree that the Programme Board, various collegial fora,

as well Central Boards contribute to a holistic way of thinking about study programmes (between 69 and 78 per cent). The Department Board seems to be of less importance in this respect, and this might be linked to some programmes reaching across or beyond single departments. This may also signify that the Department Board is of less importance in an institution in which education is organised in study programmes which are governed by individual academics.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

When asked if a forum's mandate is clearly defined, a similar pattern comes across, as the Department Board seem to have a less clearly defined mandate with regard to issues of quality in study programmes. However, a great majority of respondents who consider Central Boards to be the most important (75 per cent), and two-thirds of respondents who consider Programme Boards to be the most important, state that the forum's mandate is clearly defined. This indicates that there might be a difference in governance practices between institutions which use different kinds of forums. However, a further exploration of these patterns would require a qualitative approach, comparing how institutions use their governance bodies for discussions on study programme quality.

Another aspect which has implications for how study programme leaders work is the degree of constraint or pressure different levels of leadership at institutions put on them. Figure 3 displays how the three levels of leadership, from department via faculty to institution leadership are felt to influence the work study programme leaders do. Most programmes are governed at the department level, and this is also the level with respect to which the constraints are felt to be strongest. Around 39 per cent of study programme leaders stated that the department leadership influences what they do to a considerable extent, and an additional 49 per cent state that this happens to some degree. Hence, in total, almost nine out of ten programme leaders stated that department leadership puts constraints on their work.

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

Patterns of collaborative and perceived impact of quality management processes

In order to work with quality assurance of a study programme, study programme leaders have to collaborate with a range of actors. Asked about their three most important collaborators, the most frequently mentioned partners were Head of Department, Course Coordinator and teaching staff, which were mentioned by about half of respondents, and study administration and Programme Board, which were mentioned by a third of respondents. In this setting, it is important to remember that the Course Coordinator is usually a member of the teaching staff, but with special responsibility for a course. Additionally, half of the study programme leaders also mentioned students as important actors to interact with in managing the programme.

An analysis of the responses indicates a variety of combinations in collaborative patterns among study programme leaders, and the 19 most frequently mentioned combinations (see Table 1) represent only two-thirds of all responses. However, there are also internal patterns, as the first four combinations all comprise four actors: Head of Department, Course Coordinator, teaching staff and students. Together these combinations cover 30 per cent of the responses. This further strengthens the impression that the Head of Department, Course Coordinator and teaching staff are key actors in the processes of quality assurance of study programmes, indicating that the managerial-collegial aspects are important in QM practices related to study programmes.

Five of the following six combinations in Table 1 cover combinations of study administration and either Course Coordinator or teaching staff, with the latter two being partly overlapping categories. Hence, it seems as if the administrative-collegial aspects of study programme quality work also have some standing. What is interesting about Table 1 is the relatively low importance attributed to the Program Board, or the formal structures for quality management in general.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Discussion and reflections

We started this paper by pointing out that QM was initially developed in a rather administrative fashion in higher education institutions. At the same time, more recent research has suggested a trend towards more 'coherent' and 'integrated' models being developed (see Sarrico 2010, Manatos et al. 2017), although we have less knowledge concerning what this might imply in practice. Based on a survey among academic staff having a leadership role at the study programme level at Norwegian universities and colleges, we have shed more light on how quality management practices are currently developing.

While we expected that quality management practices were influenced by a substantial leadership involvement at various levels in the universities and colleges, the data suggest that the organization of QM and the decision-making structures on educational matters are more collegial in their set-up, and less hierarchical and streamlined than expected. When asked about where the most important discussions of quality at the study programme level are taking place, most of our respondents mentioned a range of collegiate bodies, and bodies in which there is a mixed representation of staff and students. Interestingly, very few of these bodies carry the label 'quality' as part of their name, which may indicate either a scepticism towards this label, or an incorporation of 'quality issues' in existing and quite well-established bodies at the study programme level (see also Birnbaum 2000). Most respondents (60 per cent) agreed that the mandate of these bodies is clearly defined, with 40 per cent either taking the opposite view or having no opinion on this matter. A similar pattern can be observed with respect to the issue of the division of labour between collegiate bodies and the departmental leadership in the area of QM. While the majority perceive a clear division of labour and responsibility between the collegiate bodies and the department, a large minority (45 per cent) is either indecisive or disagrees on this issue. When asked about the extent to which the leadership at different levels in their institution influences the work and determination of priorities at the study programme level, most respondents stated that such influence is most often articulated from the department level. However, one-third of our respondents were of the opinion that institutional or faculty/school leadership is also having an impact on work and priority setting at the study programme level.

If we turn to patterns of collaboration, our data disclose considerable variations indicating that institutional traditions and characteristics are important in shaping the ways in which people and groups collaborate. However, within this rather diverse picture, it is still possible to identify some collaborative patterns that seem to occur more frequently than others. First, there is a pattern consisting of managerial – collegial collaboration, also including students. Second, there is another pattern consisting of more systematic administrative – collegial collaboration where students are less involved. While we expected to find considerable collaboration of study programme leaders with management and administration, relatively few of such collaborative patterns have been reported. When asked about the impact of existing QM organizing, about two-thirds of the respondents indicated that more coherent thinking on issues related to quality is the most important outcome.

In general, it can be argued that the results speak against some of the expectations outlined earlier, not least concerning the managerial and leadership influence on quality management practices. Given the US origins of the QM concept (Barrow 1999; Birnbaum 2000; Cruickshank 2003), it is hardly surprising that comparatively speaking, more collegial and mixed representation bodies are considered to be so important in Norway. While a number of these bodies seems to have unclear mandates and an unclear division of labour and responsibility in relation to other decision-making bodies, the majority of our respondents saw them as vital for driving more coherent thinking with respect to quality issues. This may indicate that what some have labelled as a trend towards more integrated and coherent QM systems (Manatos et al., 2017), is taking place through ways of organizing that are rather familiar within Norwegian higher education institutions (Gornitzka et al. 2017). The fact that the bodies regarded as important for discussing quality issues tend to carry names and labels that do not include the term 'quality' is a further indication that the concept of quality management might be on its way to being co-opted into the practices surrounding teaching and learning, at least in Norwegian higher education.

The strong collegial, and partly student, presence in the collaboration patterns indicated may also be interpreted as a signal of a possible on-going translation and adaptation of QM into existing ways of organizing quality work at the study programme level. The lack of frequent collaboration between management/leadership and the administration is particularly interesting though, and might suggest that the 'integration' of QM is far from complete, but alternatively, that our expectation about increased specialisation and professionalization indeed drive some fragmentation in the organization of QM.

Birnbaum (2000) has suggested that the arrival of management concepts in higher education could have diverse effects, and that they carry the potential of having a negative impact if they are not translated to the sector in a thoughtful and critical way. While the introduction of the first generation of QM systems in European higher education was coinciding with attempts to have stronger institutional centralization and more administrative professionalization (Stensaker 2008), the findings presented in this paper suggest a more nuanced picture, at least concerning Norwegian higher education. The tendencies we have noted concerning possible co-optation of the practices associated with QM may, of course, lead to new puzzles for future research. For example, is there currently a translation of QM taking place in higher education institutions, implying a transformation of the control agenda associated with this concept, or

are traditional academic practices associated with improving the quality of teaching and learning actually being incrementally transformed without those involved noticing it? A possibly relevant perspective in this research is the impact of ‘path-dependency’, given the continuous strength of collegial and non-executive foundations in the governance structures of Norwegian higher education institutions, compared to the strength of these in other European higher education systems (Gornitzka et al. 2017).

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Figures & Tables

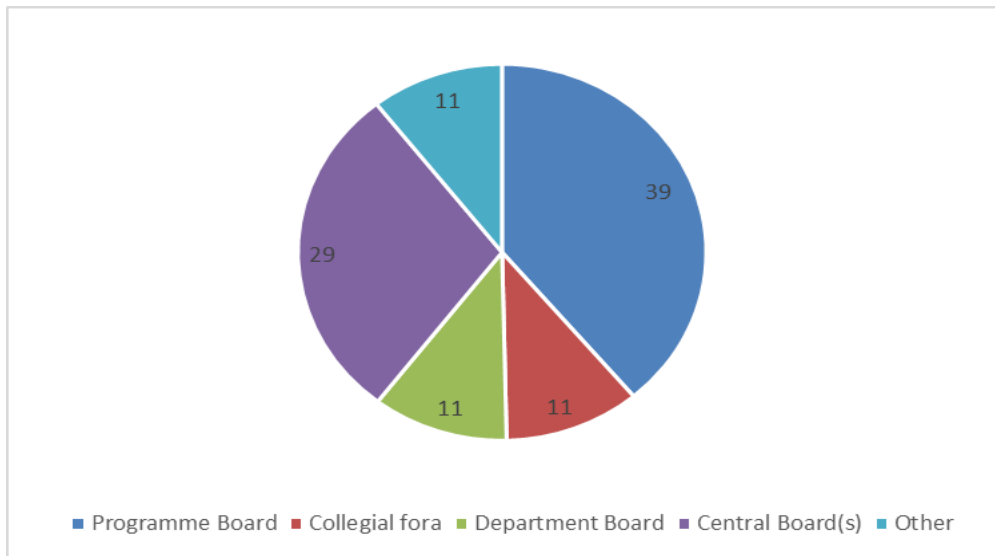


Figure 1: Importance of different forums in study programme quality

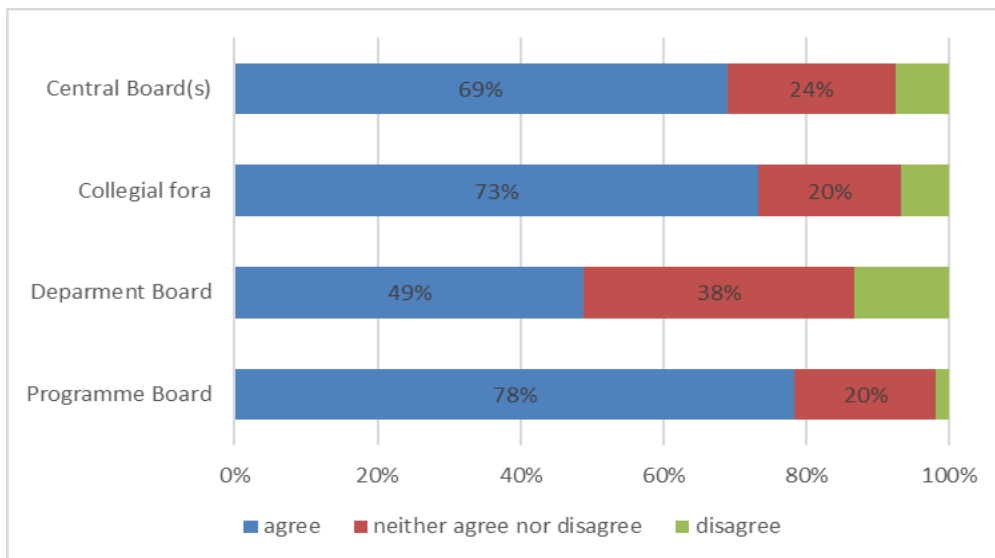


Figure 2: The forum contributes to a holistic way of thinking about study programmes, by type of forum

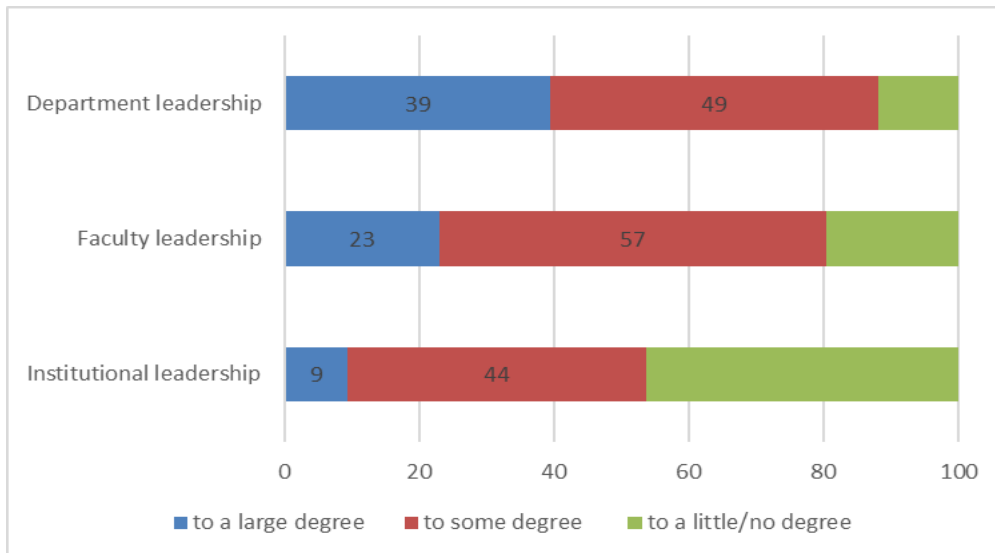


Figure 3: Perceived level of pressure on study programme leaders by institutional leadership (departmental, faculty or institutional)

Table 1: Collaborative patterns for study programme leaders

	Number of cases	Cumulative percentage
Head of Department, Course Coordinator, students	45	10 %
Head of Department, teaching staff, students	36	18 %
Head of Department, teaching staff, Course Coordinator	28	25 %
Course Coordinator, teaching staff, students	22	30 %
Head of Department, Course Coordinator, study admin	18	34 %
Head of Department, Programme Board, teaching staff	17	38 %
Teaching staff, students, study admin	13	41 %
Course Coordinator, teaching staff, study admin	13	44 %
Head of Department, teaching staff, study admin	13	47 %
Head of Department, Programme Board, study admin	13	50 %
Course Coordinator, students, study admin	12	52 %
Programme board, Course Coordinator, students	12	55 %
Head of Department, students, study admin	9	57 %
Head of Department, Programme Board, study admin	9	59 %
Vice Dean, teaching staff, students	9	61 %
Vice Dean, Course Coordinator, teaching staff	8	63 %
Head of Department, Programme Board, students	7	65 %
Vice Dean, teaching staff, study admin	7	66 %
Vice Dean, Head of Department, Course Coordinator	7	68 %