Experiences from the Norwegian Centre for International Cooperation in Higher Education

Perspectives and Lessons Learned in Programmes with the Developing Countries

Paper presented at the NUFFIC Expert Meeting in The Hague, May 24-25, 2005

"A Changing Landscape: Making support to tertiary education and research in developing countries more effective"

By

Kurt Løvschal
Senior Advisor
Norwegian Centre for International Cooperation in Higher Education

1. About SIU

The Norwegian Centre for International Cooperation in Higher Education (SIU) is an administrative agency under the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research (UFD), with its own Board of Directors.

SIU was established as of January 1, 2004 based on the Centre for International University Cooperation, created in 1991 by the Norwegian Council of Universities (UHR).

SIU is a knowledge and service organisation with the mission of promoting and facilitating cooperation, standardisation, mobility, and the overcoming of cultural barriers to communication and exchange within the realm of higher education on an international level. The Centre is charged with the important task of coordinating national measures according to official Norwegian policy within the field of internationalisation.

The Centre is Norway's official agency for international programmes and measures related to higher education. It is commissioned by several national and international public organisations to administer programmes within all levels of education.

In addition to programme administration, SIU is responsible for promoting Norway as an education and research nation, as well as providing information and advisory services within the field of internationalisation in education.

SIU is funded through contracts and grants from:
- Ministry of Education and Research (UFD)
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs (UD)
- Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad)
- The Nordic Council of Ministers
- Commission of the European Community

SIU is located in Bergen, Norway.

2. SIU's perspective and lessons learned in programmes with the developing countries

Throughout its relatively short period of existence (SIU was founded in 1991) and up until 1 January 2004, SIU has enjoyed close ties with the body that represents Norwegian universities and university colleges: The Norwegian Council for Higher Education. Since January however, SIU's status has been that of an administrative agency with its mandate determined by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research. In its new role, SIU will be keen to preserve its close ties and partnership with the Norwegian institutions, because SIU's primary task is to contribute to the internationalisation of higher education and assist the various institutions in this respect. Successful development of new programmes, and the management of existing programmes, can only be achieved through close co-operation between the Norwegian institutions and SIU.

SIU will support the original and fundamental NUFU idea that funds made available under the NUFU programme in support of cooperation between institutions in Norway and the South should be used to assist projects which are selected and prioritised by the respective institutions, with particular priority given to development and competence building schemes promoted by institutions and researchers in the South.

Through the NUFU and Norad Fellowship programme boards, SIU has been, and still is, engaged in crucially important dialogue with the Norwegian higher education sector. SIU recommends an organisation in which designated programme boards are made up of specialist scholars who are familiar with Norwegian education, research and higher education institutions.

However, for the continuation of the NUFU and fellowship programmes, fundamental thinking and mature policies will be needed to provide the required rationale for coordinating /differentiating between the two programmes supported by Norad: NUFU and NFP, and particularly the Quota Fellowship Scheme which provides support for postgraduate students from developing countries and the former Eastern Europe to attend Norwegian courses at Master and PhD levels.

SIU fully supports official Norwegian policy which promotes assistance to secondary, technical and higher education. This has remained the Norwegian authorities' principal policy in recent years, even if other donor countries have shifted their support towards basic education.

SIU believes that the model for inter-institutional cooperation chosen for the NUFU programme, the Norad Fellowship Programme, the North-South collaboration in Teacher Education, and the South Africa Fellowship Programme, is the best model for providing cooperation and support for higher education in developing countries.

The academic and institutional co-operation on which the four abovementioned programmes are based should in SIU's opinion be neither changed nor adapted to allow for a market system in which the Norwegian institutions primarily take on the role of messenger and consultant.

3. Cooperation programmes managed by SIU

SIU has since 1991 managed programmes in higher education and research in the developing countries through the NUFU programme and since 1998 through the Norad Fellowship programme. New programmes involving Norwegian institutions, the Teacher Education Programme in the South, the Pilot Programme on Student Exchange between South Africa and Norway are in the pipeline and will be introduced during 2005 through agreements between Norad and SIU. The Quota Programme offering fellowships to Master and PhD candidates from selected countries in the developing countries and countries in the former Eastern Europe and Central Asia have in 2004 been transferred from the Ministry of Education and Research to SIU and SIU will from 2005 carry out full administration of this fellowship scheme.

Please, find an introduction to the programmes, developments and lessons learned in the NUFU programme and the Norad fellowship Programme.

4. The NUFU Programme

The objective of the NUFU programme is to

Contribute towards building up expertise in developing countries through cooperation in the field of research and education between universities, university colleges and research institutions in Norway and similar institutions in the South, primarily in Africa south of the Sahara and in Norway's partner countries in Asia, Central America and the Middle East

Since its inception 12 years ago, the NUFU programme, or the NUFU partnership which it has also been called, has developed more from a support scheme involving Norwegian universities and university colleges, into a partnership programme for eligible North-South research projects.

However, as its core, the programme remains the same. Norwegian institutions join up with a partner from the South to apply for funding for a collaborative research project. This project will need to accommodate a build-up of capacity and competence at the partner institution in the South, and as part of this remit most projects include opportunities for postgraduate students to take a Master or PhD degree.

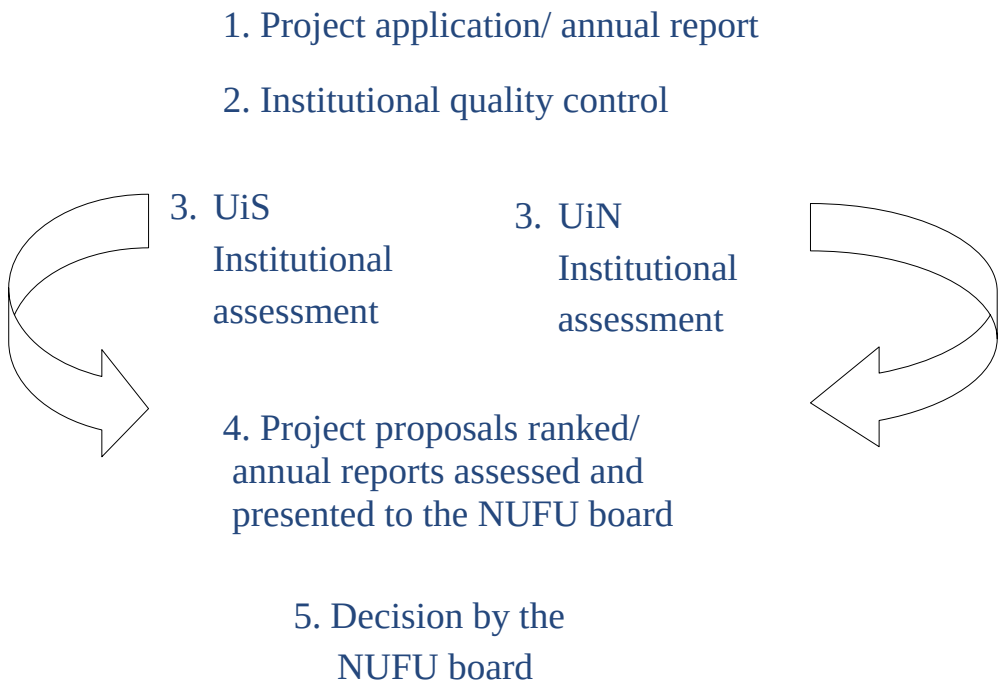
The NUFU programme changes have emerged through a natural process, partly based on SIU's experience of programme administration, partly as a result of the programme evaluations carried out in 1994 and 2000 respectively. One of the observations made during the latest evaluation round, was the need to strengthen the individual projects' institutional ownership and anchorage in the management of the South institutions, and that these institutions should be allocated a substantive role in the project selection process. Communication between the NUFU Board and SIU's administration would need to improve, and a uniform system of guidelines and procedures for the administration, monitoring and evaluation of the programme and the projects should be worked up.

SIU and the NUFU Board addressed this challenge and implemented a set of changes at the start of the programme's third five-year period, 2001-2005. These are primarily related to the South partner institutions' involvement in the project selection process and their participation in the annual assessment of each partnership project. For access to application and reporting guidelines and procedures, and to facilitate monitoring of the NUFU programme and its individual research projects, an online system has been developed which also allows for online presentation of applications and submission of annual progress reports from project managers. Information on outcomes such as publications and degrees obtained by postgraduate students from the South, is regularly updated on SIU's website.

It is characteristic of the NUFU programme developments that the measures implemented have been designed to improve cooperation standards under the programme, the communication of outcomes and, not least, to better fulfil the objective of equality between the parties.

4.1 A model for institutional assessment and for ensuring due influence from South-based partners

In 2001, NUFU drew up a model for institutional assessment of applications submitted under the programme. This model is now employed by all institutions before forwarding applications to NUFU. This means that partner institutions in Norway and the South must all conduct an assessment of the individual project's scientific merit, its relevance and quality, and its expected outcomes, seen against the institution's strategy for cooperation and competence building within research and research education. Furthermore, the institutions will need to rank their applications if more than one is submitted to NUFU, and a mathematical model has been developed for comparing the ranking of different partners. This mathematical model gives priority to applications from institutions in the South, in that their projects receive double the score (2:1) assigned to project proposals ranked by Norwegian institutions. The mathematical model is applied by the programme board to assist them in deciding which projects should be awarded support. The figure shows the model for institutional assessments of applications and reports.



4.2 Changes and developments by implementing the institutional assessment model?
The introduction of this system has introduced transparency to the NUFU assessment and selection process, while ensuring that the South is in a position to influence the project selection process. With respect to the institutional assessment of projects, the same idea has been introduced for the annual progress report submitted by each project. Progress is assessed by both the South and the North partner institutions based on the project managers' annual reports and using a template drawn up by SIU.

Under the NUFU programme's quality assurance system, the NUFU Board has recently decided that the projects' scientific merit should be appraised by external experts. The institutions will still assess each project's relevance to their own strategy for cooperation and competence building, and they will have access to the external experts' appraisal before undertaking their task.

4.3 Does the model for institutional assessment and external appraisal of scientific merit entail any disadvantages or deficiencies?
The introduction of the new model will inevitably increase the level of bureaucracy involved with the NUFU programme. Previously, institutions were free to assess their applications according to their own systems and abilities, and this institutional freedom, as well as the internal application assessment competence, will probably now be lost.

4.4 Developing the online application and reporting system
In conjunction with the development of the above-mentioned assessment system for applications and annual reports under the NUFU programme, SIU has developed a web based application and reporting system. The assessment and ranking process is carried out in-house at each institution and hardcopies are forwarded to SIU. Once the Board has made its decision, project managers work up the project details on a password protected web page. Data on participating researcher workers, on individuals who attend courses under the project, expected project outcomes and, not least, the budget figures and annual reports with accounting details on the year's application of ear-marked funds, will be accessible to South and North project managers once they have logged into the project. Budgets are updated annually based on accounting details, reported outcomes and the remaining project period, which often totals 4-5 years.

4.5 What has SIU achieved by using an online system for viewing applications and reports?
We have raise the quality of the NUFU programme by making project managers responsible for their own project data, and for annually updating their project page with respect to progress, accounting details and outcomes. At the same time, we have probably made the project managers' task easier in that data are re-used year on year in a single layout which lends itself to easy manoeuvring.

Our experience tells us that project log-ins are evenly distributed between the South and the North, which means that researchers and partner institutions in the South have access to and make use of the online system.

A new feature of this ”electronic” development, is that SIU has taken the web based reporting facility further for the 2004 annual reports, allowing the parties involved to read the academic and institutional assessments of individual projects. This ensures equal access for parties from the South and the North to examine the individual project appraisals and to study the evaluation of inter-institutional cooperation under the programme.

For SIU, this development has provided access to data which is more accurate than ever before, and we are now able to exert direct financial control on specific projects and project managers. Project outcomes such as publications and degrees are now available for perusal on the internet, and the information is regularly updated by the project managers.

The past 3-4 years of electronic developments have given SIU, the partner institutions, Norwegian Embassies and individuals, access to information about specific projects and their outcomes, and about the projects running at specific South institution in countries eligible for support under the NUFU programme. The internet provides access to all this information at www.siu.no/nufu.

We have raised the quality of the NUFU programme, yet in one way we have also increased the level of bureaucracy, particularly in that SIU has become dependent on computer maintenance and development. This was not at all unexpected; it follows from focusing on higher standards. Electronic signatures are now getting ready for implementation, as this facility is considered a natural development of online technology available under the NUFU programme.

4.6 Are there any disadvantages attached to this development?

However, one disadvantage took us by surprise: the central coordinating bodies at the various institutions, which are responsible for their respective NUFU projects, have been by-passed and in some instances even sidelined. These bodies have read-only access to applications and annual reports, and they have retained their administrative functions, but due to the technological solutions chosen, the flow of communication is now increasingly with SIU direct. Before the next NUFU programme period, SIU intends to discuss this concern, especially with the Norwegian institutions, to look for solutions that may satisfy the institutions’ need for better control and follow-up of internal NUFU activities.

5. The Norad Fellowship Programme

The objective of the Norad Fellowship Programm is

to provide scholarships for students from the South to attend Master and Diploma programmes in Norway

The NFP programme has existed for many years in Norway, and is now under evaluation. In 1998, responsibility for its management was moved from Norad to SIU, which has thus been in charge of the programme for a few years only.

5.1 NFP programme changes and developments since 1998

In 2003, the NFP programme was extended to include a separate programme for cultural education.

The most important objective for Norad's Arts and Cultural Education Programme is to strengthen awareness about one's own culture. The programme shall assist reciprocal learning between academic institutions and milieus in Norway and the South. The same year saw the introduction of 5 courses at partner institutions in the South (at the University of Eduardo Mondlane, the University of Western Cape, the University of Dar es Salaam, the University of Malawi and the University of Tribhuvan) while two new institutions the recently established University of Stavanger and Bodø University College, were included in the NFP programme.

The transfer of the NFP programme from Norad to SIU coincided with an operationalisation of the principle that the NFP programme should no longer be a Norad course, and that Norad should start buying places at the best Master courses available at Norwegian institutions. This change in programme operationalisation gave rise to considerable cutbacks, affecting both the content and the support available for specific courses.

On taking over the NFP programme, SIU immediately established a special programme board with representatives of Norwegian institutions with experience of accepting students from developing countries and of adapting their courses accordingly. This has ensured a different and more direct anchorage for the NFP programme at Norwegian institutions. Certain courses have been excluded from the NFP programme while others have been added. SIU has developed a financial control system for the programme and an electronic network for earlier NFP students.

SIU's administrative organisation and NFP programme board, have put greater emphasis on student field work in the South, to ensure thematic relevance. At the same time, changes have been made in the NFP programme's academic profile, in that the social sciences have been given a more prominent position.

SIU has enabled and introduced transparency in all decision-making systems in that all the NFP programme documents and the minutes of programme board meetings have been made freely

available on the internet. To facilitate the dissemination of information and programme outcomes, SIU has set up country-specific pages on the website. Furthermore, 2004 saw the launch of a new printed magazine, Global Knowledge.

A dedicated bibliography of Master Theses which focus on the research outcomes of the NFP programme, is drawn up every year in connection with SIU's annual report on the NFP programme.

6. New programmes in 2005

6.1 The North-South collaboration in Teacher Education

The North-South collaboration in Teacher Education will be established in a pilot phase as a programme for cooperation between teacher training institutions with the aim of contributing to strengthen of the quality of the teacher education and training in institutions in the South, securing education for all.

6.2 The Pilot Programme on Student Exchange between South Africa and Norway 2006-2007

The Programme will fund scholarships for South African students enabling them to study in Norway as part of a collaborative arrangement between a South African and a Norwegian institution. It will finance scholarships for South African students enrolled in Master Programmes at their home institution to take courses for their degree in Norway

6.3 The Quota Programme

The Norwegian government provides scholarships for students from developing countries and countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia – the Quota Programme. The objective of the Quota Programme is to promote internationalisation of higher education.