

## Exclusive but Inclusive: The Norwegian Centres for Excellence (SFU) Initiative

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## ***Abstract***

### **Exclusive but Inclusive: The Norwegian Centres for Excellence (SFU) Initiative**

With the proliferation of different excellence initiatives in higher education, there is discussion about what purposes such initiatives should serve. To most, the term 'excellence' must entail someone or something standing out from the rest. It is often linked to some form of competition. However, in this paper, we explore, based on our experience with the Norwegian Centres for Excellence in Education (SFU) Initiative, how one can manage an excellence scheme so that it is foremost about inclusivity, cooperation and quality enhancement at large rather than competition and ranking.

## **Presentation**

### **Exclusive but Inclusive: The Norwegian Centres for Excellence (SFU) Initiative**

#### **Introduction**

With the proliferation of different excellence initiatives in higher education, there is discussion about what purposes such initiatives should serve. To most, the term 'excellence' must entail someone or something standing out from the rest (Elton 1998). It is often linked to some form of competition (Rostan & Vaira 2011). However, in this paper, we explore, based on our experience with the Norwegian Centres for Excellence in Education Initiative (the SFU initiative), how one can manage an excellence scheme so that it is foremost about inclusivity, cooperation and quality enhancement at large rather than competition and ranking.

We often meet the assumption that national excellence initiatives are about rewarding the best with the rest lagging further behind without the same kind of fresh resources (as Gosling and Hannan 2007 highlighted with regard to the Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning [CETLs] in the UK). Here we aim to provide another perspective and show how the SFU initiative inspires excellence in teaching and learning, and quality enhancement across the Norwegian higher education sector through an emphasis on collaboration and dissemination.

After giving a brief background of the SFU initiative, we will first discuss the term excellence and the way it is put into use in the criteria for awarding SFU status. Secondly, we will show how we have tried to manage the application process in a transparent and inclusive way and how we attempt to be a partner for the SFUs creating networks and collaboration rather than focus on formal monitoring. Thirdly, we will see how the emphasis on dissemination and collaboration makes the initiative and the centres' work about enhancing quality at large.

#### **Background<sup>1</sup>**

The SFU initiative was established in 2010. The main aim is to stimulate teaching and learning excellence, as well as research and knowledge-based development of educational activities at bachelor and master levels (NOKUT 2016).

The SFU initiative is managed by NOKUT, an independent quality agency under the Ministry of Education and Research. The national prestige initiative is a parallel to Centres of Excellence in Research and Research-based Innovation.

Calls for bids for SFU status are open to all disciplines, and the intention is to issue a call for new centres every three years. SFU status is awarded for five years, with the possibility of prolongation for another five years, subject to an interim evaluation.

The centres gaining this status receive up to NOK 8 million, around 870 000 Euros, annually as top funding. In addition to receiving status and funding, the centres cooperate closely with NOKUT and constitute a national network of Centres for Excellence.

An educational community that is awarded status as an SFU must be excellent in terms of three core criteria:

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about the SFU initiative and the centres, see [www.nokut.no/en/services/the-centres-for-excellence-in-education-initiative-sfu/](http://www.nokut.no/en/services/the-centres-for-excellence-in-education-initiative-sfu/) and NOKUT (2016).

1. Documented excellence in existing provision
2. A centre plan outlining plans for innovation and enhancement
3. A plan for dissemination.

## Excellence and the SFU criteria

### Understanding excellence

It has been discussed whether excellence can be defined, measured and seen as a universal size (Fitzmaurice 2010 in Gunn & Fisk 2013), or is relative and context-dependent (Skelton 2005; 2007; Gunn & Fisk 2013). To NOKUT excellence is relative and contextual in the sense that it is historically contingent, dependent on context and changes over time (see also Andersen Helseth et al. 2017).

Excellence in the SFU initiative is therefore considered in processual and developmental terms and is a continuous enhancement process. We find excellence in education to be the result of continuous effort, but with a goal that is dynamic. What was excellent two years ago is not necessarily the same as what is excellent today (Bråten & Børshheim 2016; Gosling & Hannan 2007), especially given the pace of changes in today's society (Abbas et al. 2016). Excellence is a "process of growth, development and flourishing; it is not just an endpoint (Nixon 2007, p. 22)". There is no simple way of pinpointing exactly what excellence is, and with the SFU initiative, we want to keep the definition broad so that all disciplines and knowledge cultures might find their way into it (Jensen et al. 2012; Lindblom-Ylanne et al. 2006).

As we have argued before (Andersen Helseth et al. 2017; Bråten & Børshheim 2016), in Norway, we have chosen the term "Centres for Excellence in *Education*", and not "Teaching" nor "Learning", to highlight a broad approach to learning and factors that influence student learning. Education comprises both learning, teaching and teacher dimensions as well as support services, educational management, design of programmes, learning environment and many other factors that influence the student learning experience. It is hence dependent on a multi-level and multi-actor effort.

Many awards, prizes and excellence schemes focus on charismatic individuals making an extraordinary effort (Gunn & Fisk 2013). In the SFU initiative, the underlying theory of change<sup>2</sup> has been to create communities of practice (Wenger 1998). This is done in order to focus on cultural change and more collegial and scholarly approaches to teaching and learning. We want to build communities of practice from within (Andersson et al. 2017; Trowler 2015; Mårtensson 2014; Gibbs 2013; Roxå et al. 2011). The SFU programme with its criteria, measures and modus operandi have tried to foster this.

As Trowler (2015) points out, every innovation and change programme should be underpinned by an explicit theory of change. Most schemes, however, do not have any. In the SFU initiative, as for most excellence schemes, this change theory was for a long time tacit, implicit and unchallenged. This paper (among others, c.f. Andersen Helseth et al. 2017; Bråten & Børshheim 2016) is one way of making it more explicit. We will illustrate below how our understanding of excellence and other elements in the SFU initiative emphasize enhancement, building communities, collaboration, more inclusion and belonging for staff and students. This is a way of fostering cultural change. We start by looking closer into the criteria for receiving status as a Centre for Excellence and the contextual approach.

### Criteria

The contextual approach to excellence in the SFU initiative is manifested in several ways, first in the criteria to become an SFU. The way the criteria is devised will influence whether a call for applications is open to a large number of possible successful bidders or whether it is in fact only a small number of people or

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<sup>2</sup> According to Levy and Cox (2016), a theory of change is a predictive assumption about the relationship between desired outcomes of a change initiative and the actions and enablers that may produce those changes.

institutions that will qualify, for instance limited to specific academic disciplines. This can be seen along a spectrum ranging from “low fidelity” to “high fidelity” (Saunders 2009 in Land & Gordon 2015).

Our open approach can be termed as “low fidelity”<sup>3</sup>. Low fidelity approaches are characterized by allowing applicants considerable freedom in how they argue their case, as compared to high fidelity models where all criteria must be met and where the degree of prescription is much stronger (Land & Gordon 2015, p. 16). High levels of trust of local practice when it comes to teaching excellence is a known characteristic of the Norwegian (and Scandinavian) context (Land & Gordon 2015, p. 11). Context is an important notion in low fidelity models.

As part of the three main criteria for awarding status as SFU applicants need to demonstrate excellence in existing provision. This is a necessary but not sufficient condition. The SFU bidders hence have to document that they ‘stand out from the rest’ as compared to other provision within the same subject/discipline area, both nationally and internationally. This can be regarded as competitive and exclusive. It is however, up to the bidders to define and argue their case for excellence. In order to do this, they must have knowledge of their own strengths and weaknesses as well as knowledge of how other institutions are working with teaching and learning, and relate this to research. Their claims for excellence must be supported by evidence (Little & Lock 2011, p. 135), but the applicants are free to choose the kinds of evidence they want to provide. Through the need for comparing oneself with others, the initiative fosters research-led developments and we have seen how these processes have led to cooperation (more on this below).

There are no fixed parameters that the bidders for SFU status have to meet, rather there are questions to be answered, given in the guidance document (NOKUT 2016). These questions can be answered according to the discourse and knowledge around excellence at the time and put stronger emphasis on the enhancement and distance travelled than fixed metrics. The institutions and programmes themselves define their focus and demonstrate their excellence according to their own documentation, metrics and ability. The documentation can then be dependent upon the mission and vision of the institutions applying, their teaching philosophy, the discipline and other contexts. In this way local needs and enhancement is brought to the fore, rather than a narrow focus on being better than others on certain (quantitative) indicators. This is, in our opinion, a way of stimulating excellence in an inclusive way.

This openness may be seen to cause issues with comparability in the assessment of applications (see Gosling & Hannan 2007 for a discussion on this relating to the CETL scheme in the UK). What is important in the SFU initiative, however, is that the case for excellence is in strong correspondence with the proposed centre’s mission, vision and projects. This corresponds to Skelton’s statement that any claim for excellence must be relative to the goals being pursued (Skelton 2005). Furthermore, it means that the SFU initiative can adapt to institutional and disciplinary differences in excellence (Abbas et al. 2016), and can in this way be seen as inclusive. In external evaluations, Norwegian institutions highlight this as important for the relevance of the SFU initiative (Carlsten & Aamodt 2013; Carlsten & Vabø 2015).

Based on excellence in existing provision, the institutions and academic environments themselves define the centre plan and with that, the enhancement projects that they want to take on. This means that even though the SFU initiative can be described as ‘top-down’ in the sense that it was initiated from and is managed and coordinated from the national level, it is open to the needs, challenges and desires of teachers and leaders locally. At the same time as the SFU initiative is ‘top-down’, it can therefore also be described as ‘bottom-up’ (Førland & Bråten 2018). The latest government white paper underlines how the SFUs are to be defined locally (Meld. St. 16 [2016-2017], p. 84). This is in line with the high level of trust of local practice that is common in the Scandinavian context, as mentioned above.

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<sup>3</sup> That said, the pilot phase was limited to teacher education and in the first open call the Ministry of Education and Research wanted a centre within the health and social services. We as managers, however, have argued for completely open calls and not to use an excellence scheme to prioritize political areas nor to lift certain disciplines or programmes. We want quality, innovation and dissemination alone to be the criteria. The 2016 call was open to all disciplines.

The bottom-up approach is also reflected in how the criteria and the initiative from the outset have been developed, and later revised, with the sector. Another important and distinctive feature is how the initiative (with the centres as key actors) is feeding back its experiences, results and research to NOKUT and the Ministry of Education and Research. This informs policy and is used to improve quality assurance measures and stimulate enhancement in the sector (Førland & Bråten 2018). This speaks to inclusivity both in developing the initiative and policy. This feedback-loop has also stimulated and facilitated horizontal cooperation and inclusivity between the centres, institutions and the national level, being inclusive and allowing for contextual variation (Carlsten & Vabø 2015). The result has been the strategic alliance and synergies that Tsui (2015) emphasised in order to increase impact and address issues of scalability and sustainability.

There are also specific elements within the criteria we would argue are inclusive. One example is that the centres need to encourage student engagement and ownership of learning. This criterion has changed the discourse around student engagement and their involvement not only in their own learning, but also in designing programmes and courses as well as shaping the academic community. It has strengthened the cooperation between students and staff, increasing students power and ownership of education making them more a partner and change agent as we have seen proposed by Ashwin and McVitty (2015), Healey et al. (2014), Bovill (2017) among others<sup>4</sup>.

To conclude, it can be argued that a higher degree of prescription would result in a lower number of potential successful bidders, making the scheme more exclusive than inclusive. A low fidelity approach like the one we have taken in the SFU initiative, on the other hand, opens the initiative up to a larger number of academic communities and is therefore more inclusive in its outset. Such flexibility ensures fair and equitable treatment (Land & Gordon 2015, p. 15-16). Furthermore, allowing considerable freedom in defining the centre plan based on local needs and emphasising student engagement can also be seen as inclusive traits.

### *Yet still exclusive?*

Despite what we find to be a low fidelity approach to the criteria opening up the SFU initiative to all institutional categories and disciplines, the centres awarded are to a large extent concentrated at Norway's largest institutions (5 centres) or at specialized and high-profile institutions within the arts (2 centres). The trend was similar in the UK with the CETL scheme (Lawson 2016). The low number of Norwegian centres may mean that this is merely a coincidence, but it is still worth looking into whether there are mechanisms in the application process that favour such institutions at the expense of others (e.g. university colleges), hence making the initiative more exclusive than intended.

One plausible explanation in the Norwegian setting is that the successful academic communities are more experienced when it comes to writing bids for research funding and have capitalized on this expertise. During the assessment of the bids, we have also seen university colleges that had the educational strength to put forward excellent bids, but lacked the confidence to submit a bid on their own and instead became a subordinate in a bid from a university.

While the binary system of universities and university colleges has diluted, university colleges have traditionally had more focus on teaching, professional practice and applied science, while the universities' strength have been research. This could entail that, in fact, university colleges would have an advantage when it came to excellence in education. However, the emphasis on research-based teaching in the criteria (see NOKUT 2016; Bråten & Børsheim 2016; Andersen Helseth et al. 2017) may have been a disadvantage for some of the smaller/more professionally oriented university colleges, if interpreted in a strict sense.

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4 Examples from the Centres for Excellence in the SFU Magazine: [https://www.nokut.no/siteassets/sfu/sfu-magasinet/sfu\\_magasinet\\_02.17\\_en.pdf](https://www.nokut.no/siteassets/sfu/sfu-magasinet/sfu_magasinet_02.17_en.pdf)

Seen in a practice-based and Scholarship of Teaching and Learning perspective, on the other hand, as we would argue, this should not be a hindrance.

It is more likely that the university colleges struggled with *documenting* their excellent practices. It is however important to underline that even though the university colleges have struggled with documenting these excellent practices; it does not mean that they do not exist.

Another factor that may benefit larger institutions/universities could be the need for funds. The centres receive funding from the initiative as *top funding*, meaning that the institution(s) needs to put in a substantial, if not greater, sum itself. This is a good way of securing top-level support at the institution, but puts pressure on the institutions' funds. A bigger institution with substantial funding would be in a better place to support ambitious bids for SFU status.

To keep the inclusive take on the initiative, these potential factors hindering smaller/professionally oriented institutions from achieving centre status should be further explored. However, with the recent mergers in Norway and the academic drift for the higher education institutions wanting to become universities this might be less of a challenge in the future.

## Managing in an inclusive way

We want the inclusive understanding of excellence described above to also be reflected in the management of the initiative. NOKUT aims at being a partner in development for the bidders and the centres. In the following, we attempt to show some examples on how the application process is designed in a transparent and developmental way, and how our focus is on being a partner for the centres pushing for more collaboration and dissemination rather than conduct formal monitoring.

### The application process

It is generally agreed that the selection procedure should be fully transparent (Land & Gordon 2015, p. 15). We have set up the application process for SFU status accordingly. It is designed to be developmental for all applicants and not only rewarding for those who receive centre status.

One example is how all applicants receive written feedback on strengths and weaknesses. NOKUT and the expert committees appointed to assess applications put great effort into writing feedback that can be used by the applicants – in not only the next call for SFU applications or the further development of applications in stage two of the application process, but in the day-to-day enhancement activities regardless of the result of the application process.

All the feedback as well as the bids are publicly available. This transparency makes it possible for the public to examine the application process ensuring equal and fair treatment. In addition, it means that prospective bidders as well as others looking for good practice may use the feedback and bids in their work. This is testimony to an inclusive initiative that intends to stimulate quality enhancement at large.

Another example is that we arrange seminars and dialogue meetings for the unsuccessful bidders. They get to meet the expert panel and NOKUT to discuss and reflect on how to move forward after the application process. The application process is demanding and not getting the status is of course disappointing. We aim to support these communities and to motivate to their enhancement processes. We also have seminars and workshops for potential bidders when we issue new calls.

Most applicants have worked on their application for quite some time before the call for bids is issued. During this time and during the time between the call is issued and the deadline for applications, many of them are in contact with NOKUT on several occasions. Our goal is to go a long way in order to support them,



giving the guidance they need, holding presentations and hosting seminars and so on. In the spirit of collaboration and in light of the centres' mandate of dissemination (see below), we also encourage the existing centres to support the prospective applicants and they do this to a very large degree.

One sign that the application process is indeed developmental (and with that, inclusive) is that several institutions have started local enhancement initiatives based on the SFU process either to position themselves for a call or based on feedback they have gotten through the process. One example of this is the university NTNU and how they developed their Top Teaching Initiative<sup>5</sup> (see also Ramberg 2016). Another example is how some applicants have started a centre in line with the proposed SFU even if unsuccessful in receiving SFU status (c.f. Interact<sup>6</sup>; iEarth<sup>7</sup>; TRANSark<sup>8</sup>). Some have also refigured their SFU application and received status when applying for the second time, such as the centres CCSE, Excited and MatRIC.

External evaluations back the claim. They show that also the applicants who do not achieve SFU status regard the application process as developmental and rewarding (Carlsten & Vabø 2015; Carlsten & Aamodt 2013), a point which was also highlighted in the latest government white paper (Meld. St. 16 [2016-2017], p. 92). This is in accordance with the aim of the initiative – enhancing quality at large, and can be seen as an inclusive trait.

### Follow-up of the centres

In the follow-up of the centres, NOKUT put more emphasis on sharing experiences and practice, facilitating dialogue and enhancement, and less on formal monitoring mechanisms. We stimulate projects and networks between the centres as well as with other academic communities. In this section, we will consider the more formal follow-up and look into examples of dissemination and collaboration further below.

In the formal follow-up of the centres, NOKUT has tried to have a light-touch reporting and monitoring arrangement. We have focused on being a partner in development and a facilitator for sharing experiences between the centres.

In response to the annual reporting, for instance, each centre has gotten written feedback or taken part in discussions in dialogue meetings. We have also arranged for the centres to meet and comment on each other's annual reports to learn from each other and spark dialogue around what it means to be an SFU.

A centre gets the status for five years. This status is prolonged for another five-year period if the centre is successful in an interim evaluation. Even though one of the main purposes of the interim evaluations is to decide on further funding, the process is designed to be developmental regardless of the results. The overarching aim is hence to support the centres (and the initiative) in reaching their goals and to enhance their contribution to the quality of teaching and learning in higher education. Interim evaluations are conducted by international experts in higher education and in the subject areas of the centre, as well as a student representative from Norway and expert in Norwegian higher education. The interim evaluation involves assessment of the centres self-evaluation of phase 1, feedback from the panel, visits to the centres, an action plan for the second phase and the possibility of getting feedback on the plan. All documents are made publicly available. These formal reports and the dissemination of such results is a small part of the dissemination within the initiative. Below, we will show how dissemination is crucial in the initiative's inclusive approach.

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5 <https://www.ntnu.edu/teaching-excellence>

6 <https://interact.hioa.no/>

7 <https://www.uib.no/en/geo/116482/iearth>

8 <https://www.ntnu.edu/transark>



## Dissemination and collaboration is key

As we have seen, a central aim of the SFU initiative is to facilitate culture change. We want the centres activities, results and impact to go beyond discipline lines and contribute to enhancing quality in education at large – in other words being inclusive. Furthermore, we saw how NOKUT has chosen what can be called a low fidelity approach. The risk of low fidelity approaches is that the enhancement activity remains very context-specific, e.g. contained to a specific discipline (Land & Gordon 2015, p. 17) – that is the opposite of what the SFU initiative intends. To achieve sectoral change, changed practices and cultures beyond the centres are needed and that is why dissemination is such an important feature of the criteria, as for many other contextual enhancement activities (Land & Gordon 2016, p. 15).

So what do we mean by dissemination, and how does this relate to enhancement, increased collaboration and culture change? With this, we intend to show how the SFUs are centres *for* excellence rather than *of* excellence.

### The concept of dissemination

Hinton et al. (2011, p. 6) define dissemination as

*“(...) the planned process of understanding potential adopters and engaging with them throughout the life of the project, to facilitate commitment to sustained change”.*

Inherent in the concept is hence an anticipation for sustained change within other communities than the centres and the host institutions, which is also the case for the SFU initiative. To reiterate Lawson (2016, p. 140):

*“To be worthy of the name, SFUs need to have an outward focus – they should be making a change, at the very least across Norway.”*

Interacting with other academic communities, engaging them throughout the whole project and not only in the end is emphasised in Hinton et al.’s definition of dissemination. Dissemination is regarded as an ongoing two-way process of exchanging ideas and collaboration that is beneficial to all, and hence facilitate enhancement at large (McKenzie et al. 2005). Collaboration is hence an inherent part of a dissemination, which speaks to an inclusive approach.

The centres should aim for dissemination *for action* (Harmsworth & Turpin 2000; Lawson 2016) rather than simply telling others what they have learnt or how they excel compared to others. The centre is not only the “sender” of a message, being excellent in everything, teaching others and helping others. Change is not only something that should happen “out there”. Interaction means others provide valuable input and advice to the Centres as well. This is visible in the name of the initiative – Centres *for* Excellence and not Centres *of* Excellence. As Lawson (2016, p. 140) puts it:

*“A key characteristic for a successful SFU is humility: an acceptance that all new ideas do not necessarily originate here, that there are other excellent teachers elsewhere.”*

We do not want other communities just to adopt and copy the SFUs practices, but rather to learn from them and then adjust and adapt the practices and ideas to their own context. This speaks to the initiative’s contextual approach as well as inclusivity in itself.

To enable others to learn from the SFUs and hence contribute to quality enhancement at large, we emphasize what can be called “the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)” (c.f. Boyer 1990). This is a form of pedagogical research, but one where academics in other disciplines seek to examine and understand teaching and learning in their own classrooms and through their own observations and analysis (Gale 2007, p. 36). Such scholarly inquiry can be seen as vital to teaching excellence (Gale 2007). We find it

also to be central in an inclusive dissemination strategy, which aims at including others from the outset, rather than keeping ideas, development and results to an exclusive few.

### *Increased collaboration*

Learning from the CETL scheme in the UK, we saw that feedback and facilitating networks between the centres were something that the centres had missed and that the evaluations of the initiative point to in order to facilitate sustainable impact beyond the host institutions (Lawson 2016; SQW 2011; Centre for Study in Education and Training 2008). One of the major criticism of the CETL initiative was that the managing body did not take on a strategic coordinating role in supporting collaboration and networking between the CETLs. Based on this, we have sought to build a “community of practice” (c.f. Wenger 1998) between the different SFUs, in addition to emphasizing dissemination more broadly as described above. We have set up a network with regular meetings with all the centres to facilitate sharing of experiences and dissemination of results as well as to stimulate collaboration for innovation.

We see how this have resulted in more subject-related collaboration, such as the centres bioCEED (from biology) and MatRIC (from mathematics) collaborating on providing mathematics courses for biology students, but also more “surprising” and innovative collaboration such as the centres CEMPE (from music performance) and bioCEED on the quality of work placements.

Together the centres’ voice is stronger and they succeed to a greater extent when it comes to influencing others, both at the practitioner and policy level. We believe that taking on the role of a partner rather than focussing on formal monitoring, as previously mentioned, enables us to create and support such a community of practice. This community of practice is part of making the SFU initiative more than the sum of its parts, contributing to quality enhancement at large.

This does of course not mean that issues of scaling (c.f. Gunn & Fisk 2013; Land & Gordon 2015) have been completely sorted. And one could also argue that such a network or community of practice consisting of only the centres is in fact an exclusive trait – an “elite club” for the chosen few. However, external evaluations of the SFU initiative show increased collaboration not just between the centres, but also across institutions involved and outside of the programme. Within institutions, there has been an increase in cooperation between teaching staff, between teaching staff and administrative staff, between staff and students and between teaching staff and pedagogical units (Carlsten & Vabø 2015). The initiative has also led to more cooperation in anchoring strategies and enhancement initiatives with senior management (ibid; Kottman et al. 2016). Between institutions, the increase in cooperation can be explained by, among other things, different institutions creating a consortium to apply for centre status or cooperation due to the requirement for dissemination (Carlsten & Vabø 2015).

This is a testimony to excellence as a multi-actor and the multi-level endeavour (Bråten & Børsheim 2016; Hénard & Roseveare 2012; Elton 1998) and shows how the SFU initiative is inclusive in the sense of fostering collaboration more than competition. Professional relationships and inter-professional collaboration, in particular, may be said to be representative of excellence (Gunn & Fisk 2013 p. 38; Nixon 2007, p. 26-27). We believe that the focus on knowing what others do and what works, a result of the emphasis on dissemination, SoTL and cooperation, is one of the main reasons the initiative has led to increased cooperation within and between institutions, adding to the inclusiveness of the initiative.

### **Enhancing quality at large**

Excellence as an aim for higher education is not new and has been one of the core values historically. However, the meaning, content, values and goals have changed. For many, excellence now often has a connotation of competitive pressure, as we see in rankings, and is affiliated with prestige and reputation

(Rostan & Vaira 2011). Even though there is still contention around the definition and desirability of teaching excellence, we want to argue that excellence is not only about competition. Excellence schemes such as the SFU initiative can be a tool for driving culture change, enhancement and cooperation.

External evaluations and commissioned research show that the initiative is making a difference (Carlsten & Vabø 2015; Carlsten & Aamodt 2013; Kottmann et al. 2016). It is also highlighted in the recent white paper (Meld. St. 16 [2016-2017]). The initiative inspires excellence and quality enhancement across the sector through rewarding and stimulating a small number of academic communities providing excellent education. The centres have solid plans for how to be centres *for* excellence disseminating knowledge and cooperating with others. The initiative has stimulated collaboration within institutions and across institutions and have brought together institutions and academic communities that complement each other. It has also stimulated international cooperation.

Excellence can in this way drive collaboration, dissemination and enhancement and be beneficial for higher education as a whole, hence be inclusive. As Skelton (2017) points out, excellence is an important concept that gets us thinking about the core of what we try to achieve in higher education. We should consider how to re-appropriate the excellence concept for positive ends and raise critical questions about the purpose of higher education as well as systematic approaches to change agency (Trowler 2015).

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## Resources from the initiative and centres

SFU (NOKUT): <https://www.nokut.no/en/services/the-centres-for-excellence-in-education-initiative-sfu/>

The 8 SFUs and their web sites:

- bioCEED – Centre for Excellence in Biology Education: <https://bioceed.w.uib.no/>
- CCSE – Center for Computing in Science Education: <https://www.mn.uio.no/ccse/english/>
- CEFIMA – Centre of Excellence in Film and Interactive Media Arts: <https://www.filmskolen.no/en/prosjekter/cefima-1/about-cefima>
- CEMPE – Centre of Excellence in Music Performance Education: <https://nmh.no/en/research/ceampe>
- Engage – Centre for Engaged Education through Entrepreneurship: <https://www.ntnu.edu/engage>
- Excited – Centre for Excellent IT Education: <https://www.ntnu.edu/excited>
- MatRIC – Centre for Research, Innovation and Coordination of Mathematics Teaching: <https://www.matric.no/>
- ProTed – Centre for Professional Learning in Teacher Education: <https://www.uv.uio.no/proted/english/>