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Higher Education in Norway – Fifty years of development

Norway's first university - the University of Oslo - was founded in 1811, three years before the country's independence from Denmark. By 1938 there were 4 200 students at the university, the total number of students in the country then being 5 600, as specialised institutions for agriculture, veterinary medicine, dentistry, theology, technology and business studies had been established. The University of Bergen was founded in 1948, but as late as in 1956, the total number of students at Norwegian higher education institutions was not higher than it had been in 1938, i.e. 5 600.

The expansion started in 1957, the year of *Sputnik*. In 1960 the number of students in Norway had reached 9 600, a 70 % increase over four years and no indication of a flattening out. The increased demand for places at universities could not be explained only by a higher number of candidates from the relevant age groups and a response to growing employment options. In Norway, as in many other countries, it was probably also a result of the population's higher social and cultural expectations.

There was now a need for planning higher education development, by the authorities and in the institutions. On the national scene, a commission was set up, chaired by State Secretary Per Kleppe from the Ministry of Finance. The 1961 report from this commission estimated a need for 30 000 study places by 1970, but deemed such an expansion unrealistic and advised Government to build a "normal capacity" of 18 000 by 1970. This was followed up by a White Paper in 1962 and approval by Parliament (Stortinget) the next year.

By 1970 there were more than 30 000 students in Norway and still no indication of flattening out. The next national commission, appointed already in 1965 with Kristan Ottosen, founding father of student services in Norway, as Chair, was given a much wider mandate than its predecessor,

- to propose ways and means for better use of study time and capacity;
- to consider alternatives to the university institutions for lower level education;
- to consider alternatives to the traditional long university studies;
- to estimate capacity needs in a long term perspective.

In the period 1966-70, the Ottosen Commission produced five reports, the first one estimating a need for 100 000 study places by 1985. The next one proposed a three-cycle main structure for university degrees, the first two cycles of 4 years and 2 years duration respectively. Life-long learning was also introduced in higher education. The third report advocating a system of regional state colleges for professional training and short cycle higher education courses was an immediate success and the first regional colleges began operations in 1969. New teaching methods were proposed, focusing on what we 40 years later would call learning outcomes and competences. Contents and quality of study programmes should be an institutional responsibility. A credit system should simplify transfer between institutions (including transfers from colleges to universities). The social dimension of higher education was introduced: All qualified applicants should have the possibility for higher education, irrespective of socio-economic conditions.

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The follow-up of the total Ottosen package came in a White Paper to Parliament in 1973. However, a change of government resulted in a withdrawal of that document and the production of a new one and finally a full discussion in Parliament in 1975. By then many proposals of the Ottosen Commission had already been realised by the Ministry of Education and by the higher education institutions themselves. The Commission's estimate of 100 000 study places was reduced to 80 000 by Government and Parliament. (Again, it turned out later that the estimate of the Commission had been the right one.) Traditional training of teachers, nurses and other groups was upgraded to higher education, but it took another twenty years to merge the small professional schools with the new regional colleges. Still a binary higher education system was the outcome. Additional White Papers were produced under new governments in the mid 1980s, the main purpose to adjust the capacity estimate back to the 100 000 of the Ottosen Commission, now with approximately 50 000 study places in the university sector and another 50 000 in the college sector.

After that, it was time for a new national commission. This commission, chaired by Professor Gudmund Hernes, later Minister of Education and Research, gave its recommendations to the Government in 1988. It was followed up by a White Paper to Parliament in 1991. The policy drawn up by Hernes in the White Paper was based on a binary system of interacting institutions ("Network Norway") with a university sector and a college sector, each institution being under Ministerial supervision of its educational programmes. As a national system of higher education, it was more centralised than what the university sector had previously experienced.

However, the follow-up of the Hernes Commission brought many improvements to Norwegian higher education: With Network Norway, transfer of credits and recognition of previous learning became necessities, institutional cooperation was stimulated, and organised doctoral programmes were introduced for the third cycle. Quality of teaching and research came into focus. Internationalisation was to be an external dimension of Norwegian higher education. On one occasion Minister Hernes told students: Do your country a favour – leave!

A continued expansion of the higher education system was necessary to cope with the rapidly increasing number of young students queuing for admission. By 1997, the student count was over 170 000. Then, the number of young students started to decline. So did the budgets of higher education institutions. Later, students numbers once more increased, but much slower than previously. Higher education budgets grew even slower.

During the 1980s and 1990s the binary system was eroded by a sequence of decisions in Parliament, giving colleges the right to develop secondary, research-based degrees, to hire professors and to take part in the training of researchers, to engage in fundamental as well as applied research, and placing universities and colleges under a common law in 1995. After a change of government, the new Minister of Education gave additional concessions to the state colleges, including the right to some colleges to award doctoral degrees in special fields. As he also decided that state colleges might be called university colleges and that such institutions might be upgraded to universities, little was left of the binary system when the next commission submitted its report to the Minister of Education and Research in May 2000. This commission was chaired by Professor Ole Mjøs, former Rector of the University of Tromsø and former President of the Norwegian Council of Universities.

The Norwegian Council of Universities was formally established in 1977 as an association for higher education institution at university level, a total of 10 institutions, among them the universities in Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim and Tromsø. The new association took over from the previous semi-annual University Rectors' Conferences which started in 1958. However, it was not until 1991 that a professional secretariat was established, making it possible for the university sector to play its full part in the further policy discussions and development.

When the Mjøs Commission started its deliberations in 2000, it was apparent that challenges from the private sector had rendered the legal and economic framework for state higher education institutions obsolete, hindering contract activities and cooperation with external institutions. Stronger university leadership was also needed.

The need for change was clearly seen by university leaders; many topics written into the terms of reference for the Mjøs Commission had already been assessed by the Norwegian Council of Universities. An assessment of the four-year cand.mag.-degree was made in 1997. A proposition to go for a three-year degree was then turned down by the academic community, but in 1999 the Council advised the Mjøs Commission to go for a 3/5/8 year degree system and for a national grading system based on ECTS. In 1998, the Council assessed the existing framework for contract activities and advised the Ministry to radically change the system. The Council's proposals were followed up by the Mjøs Commission.

While the Mjøs Commission was still sitting, ministers responsible for higher education in 29 European countries met in Bologna in 1999. This certainly influenced the Norwegian process and the report from the Mjøs Commission was in many respects a fusion of national development, signals from Bologna and a dash of market liberalism. For the higher education institutions, the outcomes would clearly be of great importance.

Contacts in 1998-99 between The Norwegian Council of Universities and the newly established (1995) Norwegian Council of State Colleges lead to a common understanding of institutional cooperation in the sector of higher education, the need for a *diversity* of institutions, and the importance of focusing on quality in higher education and research. This led to the merger of the organisations into the Norwegian Council for Higher Education in 2000, on the very same day that the report from the Mjøs Commission was made public. Institutions were meeting the new challenges on a common platform. Later the new organisation was renamed *Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions*, to better signal that it is an association of autonomous institution, not a government agency.

The objectives of the resulting Norwegian policy on higher education – the Quality Reform – as defined in the 2001 White Paper, very strongly involve the HE institutions, making it clear that higher education is a public responsibility and an element in national politics, and that HE institutions are partners in the realisation of a national policy:

- to offer everybody the possibility for personal development,
- to take care of and further develop our common competence and culture,
- to strengthen democracy and contribute to a critical dialogue,
- to educate candidates for industry, the social sector, education and research,
- to contribute to the building of social structures and solidarity,
- to strengthen cooperation with the international community,
- to develop new knowledge and new answers in the varies sectors of society,
- to develop equity between men and women,
- to contribute to regional development and regional policies.

In the White Paper it was stated that the current form of organisation of higher education did not provide universities and colleges with sufficient freedom and responsibility to achieve the overall *national* objectives: Educational institutions are expected to deal with a number of tasks of importance for the country's culture, welfare, environment, economy and democracy. At the same time they are required to contribute to education and research of immediate benefit to working life in both public and private sectors. These goals and requirements implied a clearer definition of the degree of autonomy that educational institutions were allowed.

A revision of the Law on Universities and Colleges was proposed by Government and decided by Parliament in 2002. It was a leaner law than its predecessor, delegating more decision power to the institutions. Three years later (2005) it was superseded by the Law on Higher Education (state and private) giving institutions even more autonomy, but at the same time also more responsibility and accountability. The outcome was that Norwegian HE institutions obtained the autonomy they had asked for: The institution appoints its professors, admits its students, decides its study programmes, is responsible for the quality of its programmes, receives a lump sum budget from the state in addition to income from contracts with state agencies and private industry. State institutions are still administrative agencies, but with special and extended powers. In all institutions, an Executive Board (a majority of members being elected internally) is the highest authority. An elected Rector chairs the Executive Board, if not the Board by 2/3 majority decides to *appoint* a Rector. The Rector will then be a *secretary* to the Board and responsible to the Board for the management of the institution. Both models are now in operation.

The assumption of the Ministry for Education and Research was that the Quality Reform should be financed by higher efficiency in universities and colleges. However, the Norwegian Council for Higher Education pointed out to the Parliamentary Committee that the proposed improvements in teaching and learning would have a much higher cost. Parliament decided that extra resources should be given to the higher education institutions to make the Quality Reform operational. The State budget for 2003 included such resources and this was followed up in later budgets until the agreed level had been reached, but only to be cut back in 2006 after a change of government.

With increased autonomy, much of the follow-up was left to institutions, for instance the development of new study programmes and new teaching methods. The development work started immediately after the Parliamentary decision in 2001 and the Reform was operational as from the academic year 2003-2004.

Bachelor and Master's degrees were introduced, not by law, but by Government decision. A national grading system with A, B, C, D, E for passed and F for failed and the use of a Diploma Supplement are prescribed by the law. A credit accumulation system is in operation. All students shall have a plan of study and better contact between the institution and the individual students is envisaged.

Higher education institutions now have their own systems for quality assurance. The development of a quality culture within institutions is considered to be of the highest importance. An independent national body for accreditation and evaluation (NOKUT) started operations in 2003 to oversee institutional quality and to accredit institutions and study programmes. For institutions that do not follow up on standards, NOKUT can withdraw accreditation.

On the outset, the four existing universities were considered to be accredited as institutions, with the right to establish new programmes in any field and at any level without the need for programme accreditation. State colleges in the same way have a right to establish new programmes in any field at Bachelor level. Institutions may seek programme accreditation on higher levels and they may also be upgraded to universities by a special accreditation procedure. Private institutions may operate on the basis of programme accreditation in special fields. They may also apply for institutional accreditation as college or university.

In this way, national higher education policies and the Bologna Process came together in the Norwegian Quality Reform. Institutions and their umbrella organisation have been and still are important partners in the process.

An independent evaluation of the Quality Reform has been carried out, the final 2007 report and the following White Paper to Parliament concludes that great changes have taken place in Norwegian higher education since the new system became operational in 2003.

A large number of new study programmes have been introduced at Bachelor and Master level, in universities as well as in university colleges. Learning outcomes are gradually having more attention than input; the average production of credits is increasing. Students are on the whole satisfied with the new system. Three institutions have been upgraded to universities by the new accreditation procedures. There has been an important expansion in research training at PhD level (third cycle) and research production has increased, even though university professors there is now less time available for research, as teaching is more time-consuming.

Seen from the higher education sector, the minimum factor is financing, as higher education budgets have been cut back and the previously agreed expansion of Norwegian research aiming at 3 % of GNP is not being realised.

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