

# Evaluation of Preschool Teacher Education in Norway 2010

## Summary in English

An evaluation of preschool teacher education in Norway has been conducted by NOKUT during 2008 – 10, commissioned by the Ministry of Education and Research. The evaluation comprises all institutions that provide preschool teacher education in Norway: three universities, three private colleges of higher education and 14 public university colleges. The aim and objective of the evaluation is to provide the best possible foundation for further development of Norwegian preschool teacher education. Special attention is paid to professional orientation and occupational relevance in relation to recent developments in the preschool field.

The providing institutions' self-evaluations occupy a central position as a source of information. In addition, a survey was conducted among all students who were registered on preschool teacher education programmes in the spring of 2009 and another survey went out to all candidates who received their preschool teacher diplomas in 2007 or 2008. Supplementing this information compiled by NOKUT, two external sources have been utilised: an investigation among managers and practice teachers in nursery schools and another among third-year students in preschool teacher education, soliciting their impressions of the quality of preschool teacher education. Both investigations were conducted for the StudData database at Centre for the Study of Professions, Oslo University College. Systematic studies have been made of all study plans and quantitative data have been compiled from public databases. Most of this body of information was used to prepare interviews during site visits at the providing institutions in the autumn of 2009.

Reformed national curriculum guidelines from 2003 have led to the development of more differentiated types of preschool teacher education programmes. Whereas students in 2003 could choose among 33 relatively similar programmes, their choice in 2010 had been widened to 51 programmes that either offer a general preschool teacher competence, or they have a special orientation towards e.g. aesthetic or natural science subjects. There is also a choice between full-time and part-time programmes, with a variety of curriculum arrangements. But although there is now a greater variety of programmes to choose among, few of the providing institutions stand out with a really profiled preschool teacher education.

There is an increasing tendency for the programmes to be organised in a matrix pattern, where subjects/modules are fetched from several organizational units in the institution. In varying degrees, most programmes also have cross-subject modules. The task of arranging the different elements that are included in the teaching plans and coordinating the activities that take place in two equally important learning arenas – subject teaching and practice training – is therefore very time-consuming, for administrative and scientific personnel alike. The successful coordination of these elements is vital in order to obtain wholeness and coherence in the learning process. It is a main impression that preschool teacher education has a strong orientation towards the professional and occupational field, but some of the evaluated programmes will have to revise their methods in order to improve the way in which subject theory and practice training are connected. As a group, the

practice teachers (employed in nursery schools) are chiefly preschool teachers with long experience and a high degree of commitment, but they often lack formal competence in student counseling.

Most preschool teacher education programmes experience weak recruitment compared with other major profession-oriented programmes. Still, about 60 per cent complete their education in accordance with the scheduled norm (3 years). Average annual production of study points per student is 50 ECTS, somewhat higher than for instance in general teacher education. The failure rate is low both in theoretical subjects and in practice training. The percentage of males who obtain a diploma is steadily increasing, but still very low. Lack of success in recruiting male students probably cannot be blamed on the providing institutions, but seem to stem from entrenched attitudes in society at large. Special incentives are regularly being introduced in order to increase male recruitment and to make male students complete their education successfully. Programmes with an orientation towards outdoor life and pastime particularly attract male applicants.

To a large extent students express satisfaction with their preschool teacher education and with the practice training component in particular. There is also a rising tendency for newly qualified preschool teachers to actually start their working careers in nursery schools. Of all candidates in 2005, 77 per cent worked in a nursery school two years after graduation. On the whole, fresh candidates consider themselves well prepared for preschool work. In their experience, theoretical subject knowledge is important and they find the connection between subject theory and practice training satisfactory. In these competence fields they feel well prepared for occupational work. But they also say that they lack sufficient insight into nursery school management and activity planning, as well as communication and interaction with parents and relevant public authorities.

There is good reason to ask in what direction preschool teacher education is now heading. The programmes give an impression of sturdiness, with experienced, dedicated and well-qualified teachers; but on the whole they fail to attract a reasonable share of such resources as are needed for vital competence development and research and development work. At many of the institutions, therefore, the average formal competence level of the teaching staff is relatively low and R&D work is rather low key. A general lifting of competence levels is needed, together with more time for R&D work. The demand for fresh knowledge about the preschool field, children's play and learning, preschool teacher education and occupational practice is large. But although many subject communities that are engaged in the education of preschool teachers possess strong research qualifications, academics with relevant research competence are often tied up in the institutions' research units or master degree programmes and their contributions to the educational activities at bachelor level are therefore meagre.

The impression that remains after this evaluation is that preschool teacher education has a low status in most institutions and is consequently low on the priority lists concerning resources for research and development projects. This is a matter for institutional leadership to address.

It is also necessary to reconsider the national curriculum guidelines for this type of education. Themes of vital societal and pedagogical importance that are referred to in the existing guidelines are often missing in the actual programmes. Examples of this are themes like how small children learn, problems connected with language and language teaching and the increasing cultural blend in nursery schools, where three quarters of all children now spend their day. The competence of preschool teachers must contribute to secure that their days are safe, happy and stimulating.