

# “A Master Degree is not a Master Degree” – Master Degree programs in the Norwegian state and private university colleges

The purpose of this report is to inform about the growth and development of Master Degree programs in the Norwegian state and private university colleges.

## Summary

### The amount of programs in the study

Since the implementation of the Quality Reform in 2003, the Norwegian state and private university colleges have been allowed to apply to NOKUT for accreditation of Master Degree programs. A registration shows that NOKUT has accredited 145 Master Degree programs at 38 state and private university colleges over the period 2003-2011. About half of the institutions provide one or two study programs, while one institution provides 20.

### Central regulations

Regulations concerning the Master Degree studies issued by the Ministry of Education and Research in 2002 allow the state and private university colleges to apply for Master Degree programs in accordance with three paragraphs: § 3, § 4 and § 5. The § 3 Master consists of 120 ECTS credits (two years of study) and will normally qualify the candidates for further Ph.D. studies. The § 4 Master consists of 300 ECTS credits (five years of study). The § 5 Master consists of either 90 or 120 ECTS credits and will normally not qualify the candidates for further Ph.D. studies. Over the period 2003-2011 NOKUT has not accredited any § 4 Master Degree program.

### A double field of tension

The above mentioned and other central regulations allow for Master Degree programs of a great variety, but puts at the same time clear restrictions on the structure and organization of the programs. This creates an organizational field of tension between variety and limitations. The same regulations also stress that the Master Degree programs must qualify both for occupational life and further academic studies. This creates a second field of tension related to content and learning outcomes. Based on information from the institutions applications for accreditation, this report documents and analyses how the state and private university colleges have interpreted, adjusted to, and implemented the possibilities available within this double field of tension and the somewhat vague and contradictory central regulations.

### The analysis

Depending on the institutions choice of paragraph (§ 3 or § 5) the Master degree program can be established in accordance with several different possibilities. This concerns the length of the program, the amount of occupational experience before admission, the amount of ECTS credits allotted to the independent and scientific work of the students, the expectations concerning learning outcomes and opportunities for a further academic career. This study shows that the institutions decisions in these matters are just as often based on strategic, subject related or pragmatic deliberations. Certain findings indicate that the difference between the two optional paragraph alternatives is not that obvious or clear, and that the institutions to a great extent interpret and give priority to their own understanding of the issue.

The study shows that the state and private university colleges to a limited extent have utilized the different possibilities that the two paragraph alternatives open for. On the one hand there is an overwhelming impression of a degree level marked by an established and traditional way of thinking about higher education, a limited amount of ECTS credits to dispose of and a certain ambivalence concerning the candidates' qualifications and competencies. On the other hand we find a small amount of study programs that also manage to find ways of organizing and combining the different alternatives in a way that considers a wide range of students and their different preparedness for studying and need of qualifications. Some programs that are organized in ways that can be described as challenging the borders of what the central regulations allow for, are also found.

This unevenness mirrors how the Master Degree program level is balancing within the double field of tension. The choice of paragraph alternative shows a massive option for academic norms and values and a unified and homogenous program level. At the same time other findings draw the attention towards a strong emphasis on the programs relevance for occupational life and a hetrogenous and varied Master Degree study level.

### **Conclusion**

The study concludes that a Master Degree study program in state and private state and private university colleges must meet and fulfill a number of different needs and alternatives. One program is not necessarily similar to the other. The question of what constitutes a Master Degree program is not easily answered.