

# Institutional Dynamics in Norwegian Tertiary Education

**The Norwegian sector of tertiary education (tertiary vocational and higher education) has undergone a dynamic development in later years. In simplified terms, one could say that the sector is characterised by vocational colleges aspiring to become higher education (university) colleges and university colleges aspiring to become universities. (“University colleges” can be compared with Fachhochschulen and polytechnics).**

The background of these trends are to be found in changes that were made in the frame conditions in 2002, when the reformed Universities and Colleges Act (2002) introduced institutional accreditation through the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) and thus opened up an opportunity for any institution to qualify for any institutional category, as long as it successfully passes the accreditation process and demonstrates compliance with the relevant standards. The reformed law – also called the Quality Reform – increased the institutions’ autonomy and room for strategic manoeuvres, including the right to seek ‘higher’ formal status. The Quality Reform also brought another mechanism that now enables new providers to acquire the right to offer higher education by having single programmes accredited by NOKUT. At about the same time the Tertiary Vocational Education Act regulated the tertiary vocational education sector.

## **A changing institutional landscape**

Since 2003 the number of universities in Norway has doubled (from 4 to 8) and also the number of specialised university institutions has increased. Several university colleges have explicit ambitions to acquire university status, which is demonstrated by the many mergers and merging processes in the sector. Furthermore, there has been a relatively strong growth in the number of new providers, as institutions that formerly could not offer higher education now have acquired the right to do so. The new providers are considerably smaller institutions than the long-established ones. There has also been a solid growth in the number of new master and doctoral degree programmes in the university colleges. NOKUT has accredited more than 100 master programmes and nearly 30 doctoral programmes in these institutions. In 1995 ten institutions had the right to award doctoral degrees; in 2012 the number had risen to 28, including ten state university colleges and four former state university colleges. All movements in the landscape are upwards; both in the sense that more and more programmes are developed at a higher degree level and in the sense that institutions are elevated in the institutional hierarchy.

## **Higher education in figures**

There are at present about 240 000 students in Norwegian higher education, distributed on some 75 institutions. About one half of these institutions have less than 1 000 students, while one quarter have less than 200. There are 8 universities, 9 specialised university institutions, 36 accredited university colleges and 22 non-accredited colleges of higher education.

## **Tertiary vocational education in figures**

16 000 students of tertiary vocational education are distributed on 115 schools. Nearly one half of these schools have less than 50 students. Some of them have – in addition to their provision within tertiary vocational education – developed courses at the level of higher education, following accreditation by NOKUT. This represents one aspect of ‘institutional drift’ and contributes to a less clear division between the sectors of higher and tertiary vocational education.

## **Drivers behind these movements**

The central authorities have always wanted larger institutional units and have provided budget stimuli for collaborative projects. However, mergers have so far been voluntary for the institutions. Mergers normally make it easier to climb the ladder of the institutional hierarchy than it is for a small institution to build the necessary competences alone; mergers are therefore often regarded as a means of achieving higher status. The rationale behind the institutions’ ambitions is often a belief that heightened status will facilitate the development and strengthening of their research and teaching activities. More specific reasons are also given, like increasing the ability to attract external resources and to improve student recruitment. An underlying cause is the institutions’

extended powers to provide new study programmes without having to apply for accreditation by NOKUT. The higher the institution is placed in the hierarchy, the more extensive these powers are.

When some schools of tertiary vocational education develop higher education provision, their main motive may be to increase student recruitment, the idea being that a school becomes more attractive if credits achieved there will count towards a degree in higher education. Tertiary vocational programmes cannot exceed two years' duration, which some of the providers obviously look upon as a restriction.

## **Dynamics and diversity**

These changes have affected diversity in the sense that some existing university colleges, and of course the university colleges that have achieved university status, have become more similar to the older universities. This, however, is a slow process. The portfolios of the "new" universities are still dominated by large professional programmes (teaching, nursing, engineering, etc.) and relatively few of their students follow master degree programmes. Programme diversity has increased in each individual institution, while the institutions in many ways have become more similar. So the development is towards increased diversity within institutions and diminished diversity among institutions.

## **Other possible effects**

Institutions, programme portfolios and students alike follow an "upwards" drift, as higher degree levels and higher institutional status are perceived to entail competitive advantages, both in the interrelations between institutions and in the students' opportunities in the job market. These dynamic forces have both positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, it provides academic development, with more robust discipline communities, broader portfolios and potentially better quality in education and R&D. But at the same time this institutional drift may harm the institutions' broad base of bachelor programmes and lead to the establishing of too many small and vulnerable discipline communities with responsibility for master and doctoral programmes. It is also possible to imagine a future trend where tertiary vocational education, which is supposed to be short and practically oriented, becomes more academically demanding to reduce the educational opportunities for persons with weaker theoretical abilities.

## **The institutional landscape of the future**

In 2008 the Stjernø Committee recommended that the future Norwegian landscape of higher education institutions should consist of 8-10 multi-campus universities, covering the nation's entire geographical area. These recommendations are well in line with the developments we are observing today. And although there most probably will not be a wave of mergers as dramatic as this, it is quite likely that more university colleges will become parts of a bigger university in the future.

Depending on political priorities, different adjustments in today's system are imaginable. A "closing" of the system, in the sense that changes in institutional category are not possible any more, will probably increase the pressure among university colleges for mergers with existing universities. Another radical option would be to remove restrictions on institutional titles and categories, allowing them all to call themselves universities. Such a change could (but must not necessarily) lead to changes in the system that regulates the institutions' self-accreditation powers. Still another option would be to adjust today's model to make it more demanding for institutions to qualify for university status.