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Higher Education Report: Norway

UNESCO National Commission

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Abstract

Education for all is a key priority of the Norwegian government, and Norway can demonstrate solid results and progress on many key indicators for Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education. Moreover, access to higher education is significant in Norway, as participation across socioeconomic backgrounds is supported through free public education and good financial support schemes for students. In general, higher education is highly valued across Norwegian society and the quality of education is high. However, the pandemic has also created challenges for the higher education sector, as observed across countries and regions globally. Restrictions and school closures has had a negative impact on the learning outcomes of students, in addition to the severe social impact on the life of young people. Several priorities remain high on the national agenda towards 2030, as Norway needs to address challenges related to lost learning through the pandemic, gender differences in learning outcomes and increasing the labour market relevance of study programmes. Education and research is a key part of the 2030 Agenda, and the higher education sector has an important role to play in the development of innovative knowledge for our common sustainable future. Norway has high ambitions for the higher education sector, as both institutions and students play important roles as agents of change. In our efforts towards 2030, it is important that UNESCO takes the leading global role towards making up for lost learning after the pandemic, building inclusive systems of education for all, and supporting international structures for collaboration on research across borders.

Content

Abstract	1
Content.....	2
Presentation.....	3
Current situation of higher education	3
1.1 Historical enrolment and graduation rates.....	3
1.2 Quantity and types of higher education institutions	4
1.3 Legal and institutional framework of higher education	4
Current challenges in higher education.....	5
Challenge 1.....	5
Challenge 2.....	5
Towards 2030 and beyond: recommendations for the future	6
Recommendation 1.....	6
Recommendation 2.....	6
Recommendation 3.....	7
References.....	8

Presentation

This report aims to present a brief overview of central dimensions of the Norwegian higher education system, through putting the spotlight on relevant developments and trends within higher education. The report highlights the key role that education and research plays for the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, as educated citizens and innovative research is central for global efforts towards building a more sustainable world. The report provides information on different dimensions related to enrolment and graduation rates, types of higher education institutions, and the legal framework of the higher education sector.

In addition, the report outlines some of the main challenges that are of high national priority within higher education. Several priorities remain high on the national agenda, as Norway needs to address challenges related to lost learning through the pandemic, gender differences in learning outcomes and increasing the labour market relevance of study programmes. The report concludes through the presentation of three overarching recommendations, all integral to our commitments to SDG 4 and the key role that education and research plays for the 2030 Agenda. A White Paper was developed in 2021, proposing a national action plan for the 2030 Agenda (Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation, 2021). The White Paper proposes ambitious national targets for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and it is currently being reviewed by the parliament (as of March 2022).

Current situation of higher education

High quality education is important not only for each individual deciding to embark on studies, but to society as a whole. Education is central to the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, in our common effort towards providing access to quality education for all. However, SDG 4 is also heavily interlinked with other challenges included in the sustainable development agenda, such as achieving gender equality (SDG 5), reducing inequalities (SDG 10) and combating climate change (SDG 13). High quality education and research is central to efforts towards addressing global challenges, and we must therefore approach the SDGs as both interlinked and interdependent. On the global level, Norway is a consistent supporter of UNESCO's important role within higher education and was the first country to ratify the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education.

The education level within the Norwegian population has increased significantly over the past decades, and the higher education sector is an important contributor to this development. The quality within the higher education sector in Norway has also faced significant improvements and investment in modern time, and students graduating with a degree from Norwegian higher education institutions can be confident that the knowledge they have acquired generally is of high international quality and based on sound evidence and research.

1.1 Historical enrolment and graduation rates

The challenges faced through the pandemic across countries, such as higher unemployment rates and decreased student mobility, has had a significant impact on the enrolment numbers at Norwegian higher education institutions. The growth of the student population was higher than in recent years, as the enrolment numbers show that the number of registered students in 2020 increased by four per cent compared to 2019 (Diku, 2021). With the increased pressure on the higher education sector, the government decided to increase funding for the higher education institutions in an effort towards expanding the capacity of institutions.

Although the pandemic represented a significant shift in several ways for the higher education sector, the development towards increased enrolment has been observed in Norway over a longer time period. The proportion of 19-24 year-olds enrolled in higher education was 37,8 % in 2020, while the same number in 2010 was 31,2 % within the same age group (Statistics Norway, 2021).

Higher education is highly valued across Norwegian society, as the extent of individuals holding a higher education qualification is higher in Norway than the OECD average (OECD, 2020). Statistics from 2021 show that fewer students are dropping out at the bachelor's degree level (Diku, 2021). More than half of the students at the bachelor's degree level starting their studies in 2017 completed their programme within the normal time frame. The numbers for students at the master's level, embarking on their two-year programmes in 2018, are slightly better. However, it is important to take into account that socioeconomic factors significantly affects the dropout rates. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to drop out of school, and ensuring equal opportunities for all remains of high priority for the Government.

1.2 Quantity and types of higher education institutions

Norway has a diverse set of higher education institutions, with a significant degree of institutional autonomy. There are several types of higher education institutions in Norway. The public institutions owned by the Ministry of Education and Research offering higher education are universities, specialised university institutions and university colleges. One of the main differences between the institutions is their degree of self-accreditation autonomy, as universities have a broader mandate for accreditation of study programmes. In addition to the higher education institutions owned by the Ministry of Education and Research, there are some institutions offering study programmes that are owned by other ministries, especially within the judicial and military sectors. Norway also has a large number of private higher education institutions offering study programmes, and 17 in total are currently receiving financial government support.

In terms of the quantity of higher education insitutions, there are currently 10 accredited universites in Norway (Ministry of Education and Research). The oldest university is the University of Oslo, which was founded in 1811. The Norwegian University of Science and Technology is currently the largest university in terms of student enrollment, with approximately 42.000 students. As for the Norwegian degree structure, it is in line with the Bologna Process, with 3-year bachelor degrees, 2-year master degrees and 3-year PhDs as the general rule. Moreover, the Bologna Process also paved the way for the development of the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT). NOKUT is an independent expert body under the Ministry of Education and Research, responsible for the quality assurance of higher education, accreditation of institutions and study programmes, as well as the recognition of foreign qualifications.

1.3 Legal and institutional framework of higher education

All higher education institutions in Norway are regulated through the Act relating to universities and university colleges (LOV-2005-04-01-15). This legislation entered info force in 2005, and parts of the legislative framework have been revised since then. The Act from 2005 ensured that the public and private universities and university colleges were regulated through the same legislative framework. Although minor revisions were made to the legal framework since it was introduced in 2005, it became clear that parts of the legislation was fragmented and difficult to understand. This made it challenging for the higher education institutions,

employees and students, with regards to creating clarity of responsibilities, rights and obligations.

The Ministry of Education and Research proposed changes to the Act relating to universities and university colleges in 2021, after a government appointed committee delivered an Official Norwegian Report (NOU) in 2020. The proposed legislative changes were approved by the parliament in May 2021. Among other changes, it is notable for this report to mention that the revised Act integrates a focus on sustainable development within higher education, as it specifies that universities and university colleges should contribute to environmentally, socially and economically sustainable development (Lovdata).

Current challenges in higher education

Education for all is a key priority of the Norwegian government, and Norway can demonstrate solid results and progress on many key indicators for Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education. The quality of education remains high in Norway, and participation in higher education across socioeconomic backgrounds is supported through free public education and good financial support schemes for students. However, some challenges remain that require increased attention towards 2030. Several priorities remain high on the national agenda, as Norway needs to address challenges related to lost learning through the pandemic, gender differences in learning outcomes and increasing the labour market relevance of study programmes at higher education institutions.

Challenge 1.

Although access to higher education remains high in Norway, gender differences in enrollment and learning outcomes represents a challenge. The educational level of the Norwegian population has been increasing over the last decade, and recent numbers show that larger parts of the population have completed education at the higher education level over the last decade. However, the gap between men and women is increasing within higher education, as more and more women are embarking on studies at higher education institutions (Statistics Norway, 2021). These differences must be seen in connection with observed gender differences across age groups and education levels, as boys in general have lower grade averages and dominate the drop-out statistics at the upper secondary level. In addition to the differences in enrolment and learning outcomes, gender disparities are visible when it concerns representation across different fields of study. The government is working on addressing gender differences in education through targeted measures and initiatives.

However, while the gender gap is increasing within higher education, it is important to take into account that the employment rate within the population remain lower for women than men, men are better represented at leadership positions and the gender pay gap is still persistent.

Challenge 2.

The majority of graduates from Norwegian higher education institutions attain relevant work after the completion of studies, and employers are as a whole content with the skills and competence of graduates. Moreover, graduates from higher education institutions in Norway have one of the highest employment rates across the OECD area (OECD, 2020). However, an OECD report from 2018 emphasize that improvements could be made towards increased cooperation between the labour market and the higher education institutions (OECD, 2018).

The degree of cooperation is lower than for the other Nordic countries, and more students should engage in practice as part of their studies.

To address this challenge, a White Paper on labour market relevance in higher education was presented by the Ministry of Education and Research in 2021 (Ministry of Education and Research, 2021). The government is currently working on following up the recommendations outlined in the White Paper. The world is changing more rapidly than ever before, and increased collaboration between public and private actors across sectors is an integral part of efforts towards reaching the broader 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

Towards 2030 and beyond: recommendations for the future

Recommendation 1.

The 2030 Agenda require that we approach the major challenges of our time together, as today's challenges are not respectful of borders. The comprehensive set of Sustainable Development Goals must be seen as interdependent of each other, and if we are to reach our goals we must take action that does not view each goal in isolation. Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education for all, should be viewed as a key component of building secure and prosperous societies. Moreover, education is central to reaching the other sustainable development goals, such as good health and wellbeing (SDG 3), gender equality (SDG 5) and reduced inequalities (SDG 10).

Norway has played a key role in efforts towards increasing UNESCO's role in coordinating global efforts for reaching Sustainable Development Goal 4. There was a need to revitalize the global education architecture, as it was not functioning as needed for adequate global coordination. It remains of utmost importance that UNESCO continue to take a leading role in pushing for action towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, through taking due responsibility for SDG4 where and when it is needed. Several priorities should remain high on UNESCO's agenda in the field of education, such as providing quality education for all, making up for lost learning through the pandemic and supporting international research collaboration for the development of innovative solutions targeting global challenges.

Recommendation 2.

Education is a human right, and one of UNESCO's highest priorities must be to ensure that all individuals, independent of their background, have access to quality education. The pandemic hit schools and universities hard, as restrictions have had a significant negative impact on the life and learning of children and youth across regions. With the pandemic, children have faced significant losses of learning, both in terms of developing basic skills and adequate social learning. The degree of learning losses is still to a large degree unknown, but we do know that across all levels of education, restrictions have created difficult environments for student learning and socialization.

Social inequality is one of the main challenges of our time, both between regions and countries and within societies. Education can play a key role in the development towards more equitable and prosperous societies, and it should therefore be of high priority for UNESCO as the key global actor within the field of education, to emphasize the important social dimension of education and learning. UNESCO can take a leading global role in building back learning after the pandemic, in line with the commitments of SDG4, and this effort should be built on a broader view of education as a tool for a more equitable society.

Recommendation 3.

International collaboration is central to further improving the quality of education on the national level, and we must view the national and international as interdependent when it concerns education and research. If we are to reach the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda as a whole, we need to support the structures that enable collaboration within research and innovation on a global level.

The importance of international research collaboration became visible with the mobilization for the development of vaccines against COVID-19, and cooperation across the SDGs will be key for the development of new knowledge on the broader transformation of society towards increased sustainability. The most pressing challenges of our time require that we think new and support innovative solutions, and international research collaboration should be seen as a key component of the 2030 Agenda.

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