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CURRENT TRANSFORMATIONS IN NORWEGIAN HIGHER EDUCATION¹

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ABSTRACT

This article revises Norwegian higher education debate from the publication of a radical reform proposal made by a government committee in May 2000 until the closure of the reform process in the parliament in May 2001. It is argued that a great rhetorical divide between neo-liberal and Humboldtian concepts of higher education characterized the debate, and that this to some extent distorted the coherence of the final solutions. Nevertheless, it is maintained that the reform is quite likely to instigate a period of profound changes in the national higher education system.

Introduction

In May 2000, a Norwegian government appointed committee presented a report on higher education with the selling title *Freedom with responsibility*.² In this report recommendations for reform were made that – if carried out – would lead to changes in the Norwegian higher education system that in many respects would fundamentally break with national traditions. In the first section of this article I will therefore briefly outline the development and the current state of higher education in Norway, and then go on to present the reforms proposed by the committee. Thereafter I will present the debate that has followed the report up to the conclusion in the parliament in June 2001. The article is based on a talk given at the Center for Studies in Higher Education in the spring of 2001 that originally was subtitled *What is the future of the university?* This subtitle was fortunately let out in the presentation at CSHE - fortunately because it most likely saved me from being a complete bore, talking vaguely about the “idea” of the university. Nevertheless, I did focus on arguments concerning the role of universities within higher education, and I will do so also in this article. Partly, this is because I am engaged in research on university history at the University of Oslo, but mainly because the role of the universities has been the focal point of the Norwegian debate in the wake of the publication of the report. Finally I will make some reflections on the proposed reforms, the debate that followed it, and on the current challenges facing Norwegian higher education.

Higher Education in Norway

From the establishment in 1811 to 1946 the University of Oslo was the only university in Norway. Throughout most of the 19th century the university almost *was* Norwegian higher education, mainly teaching theology, law and medicine and educating the civil servants and the elite parts of society. By the turn of the century a technical college was established in Trondheim in the middle part of the country, while the University of Oslo became ever more oriented towards research and research training. Together with some teachers colleges and professional schools, these institutions made up Norwegian higher education way into the 20th century. But it is first after WWII, and especially from the late 1960's that one can really talk about a higher education *system* in Norway. Facing the explosion in university enrollments from the 1960's, what might be called the Norwegian two-sectored system of higher education has developed: The *university sector* primarily focused on research and research training, and the *college sector* primarily engaged in professional training. Today there are four universities in Norway: Oslo in the south-east, Bergen on the west coast, Trondheim in the middle and Tromsø far north near the polar circle, and six specialized scientific institutions at University level. In the college sector there are 26 state colleges, two national institutes of the arts and 17 private colleges. These institutions are all bound together in what is called *Network Norway*, which is supposed to coordinate and manage the distribution of responsibilities within the system.

The present problems within Norwegian higher education originate to a large extent in the problems of getting this two-sectored system to operate according to an overall plan. A wide range of policy concerns that have not been strictly educational in core have guided the development of the national higher education system. Here I must remind that we are talking about the society from where the political scientist Stein Rokkan developed his comparative theories based on concepts such as "center vs. periphery" and "counterculture". Not surprisingly then, educational policy in Norway has frequently had a very strong regional taint, putting local cultural, social and economic policy concerns in forefront, often at the expense of more national considerations. Of course this is not a uniquely Norwegian characteristic, and it has for sure also played its part in for example the development of the Californian system of higher education. I am only suggesting that it has played a comparatively *stronger* role in Norway than most other places. Throughout its history, the Norwegian parliament has frequently been some sort of a marketplace for local policy trade-off between regional representatives in a variety of policy fields, including education. Partly as a result of this, colleges have often been developed to meet strictly local needs, and many of them have also functioned as research institutions that primarily should give status and economic returns to the local communities. Meanwhile, the universities who were thought of to be the national centers for research and research training have increasingly kept complaining about lack of research funding, as well as about a disproportionate workload in undergraduate teaching.

In California, the fundamental challenge to the higher education system seems to be how to accommodate the current and projected flood of students without giving in on educational quality. This is a great challenge to both policy planners and staff within the institutions, not the least in a time when the technological development poses so much uncertainty in a variety of ways. But in *addition* to these seemingly omnipresent problems of the so-called knowledge society, Norwegian higher educational planners and workers are faced with severe problems of coordination and division of work between institutions. The quality of both research and teaching has also been questioned for a long time, also from within the institutions themselves.

The Committee of Higher Education

To address these problems, a committee was appointed in April 1998 by the then Norwegian center-government to assess higher education and make recommendations for reforms, and they presented their report in the beginning of May 2000.³

The committee set out by stating that the need for change in the university and college sector was brought about by "new demands from students, industry and commerce, and the community at large. To

meet these demands] the institutions must be given incentives to show more interest in complying with the wishes of the students. [...] New approaches to studying and lifelong learning will require that institutions increasingly customize their courses in accordance with the requirements and expectations of the workplace.”⁴ If this is not done, the committee expressed deep concerns that Norwegian higher education would lose in the competition of what it called the *international competence market*. In order to meet these challenges the committee made a long list of recommendations for reform of which I will present the most important.

Regarding organization of the institutions the committee regarded it of vital importance that higher education institutions were made more flexible in order to be able to respond to the demands from society. Because of this they recommended that the institutions should be organized as separate legal entities in the form of special statute companies. By this the institutions would remain owned by the state, but the Ministry would no longer be directly responsible. Instead the committee suggested that “the central government administration should enter into contracts in the area of education in keeping with the interests of those seeking education and with the needs of society.”⁵

Further, the committee wanted to encourage the institutions to increase their international cooperation. Because of this it was recommended that the grading system in all Norwegian higher education should be based entirely on the European Credit Transfer system (ECTS), and that degrees should be changed accordingly to international standards. By introducing the bachelors and masters degree, the committee also hoped to reduce the time of study. In particular the traditional Norwegian ‘hovedfag’ degree usually requires more research than is usual for a masters degree, and thus tends to keep the students longer in the educational system before they graduate. By changing the degrees the committee hoped to save ½ to 1 year on lower degrees and a total of 1 year on the higher degrees.⁶ The committee wanted that funds that were freed by reducing the length of study should be put into improving learning processes by encouraging closer contact between teachers and students on all levels. This should be done by putting greater emphasis on continuous feedback, counseling and group learning and by introducing student portfolios in the assessment process.⁷ In addition the committee wanted to raise the standards of Norwegian research in general by increasing the fund for research and innovation by NOK 20 billion, that is US\$ 2,5 billion, and that research funding should be on OECD level within 5 years.⁸

Regarding administration of the institutions the committee stated that “Increased requirements regarding readjustment [...] will lead to a need for increased administrative competence on the part of the institutions. [...] The board has the main responsibility for the long-term development of the institution and has responsibility for strategic and financial administrative issues at the institution. [...] In the view of the Committee, the majority of the members of the board should therefore be appointed by the Ministry.”⁹ Traditionally the top management of Norwegian higher education institutions is the Academic council, which has only two external members. The rest of the board is composed of elected representatives from the institution, and the academic staff holds the majority – together with the rector and pro-rector. The committee recommended that this should be changed, and that the new board should be composed of eleven members out of whom six should be appointed by the Ministry and who may not be employees of the institution or attached to the institution in any way. Further, the Ministry should appoint Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the board.¹⁰

When it comes to funding, the institutions traditionally got their money through a combined system of basic allocations through the budget and target figures for certain activities. The committee recommended that the funding of the institutions in the future should be more closely linked to their capacity to offer education and research, and hence it advocated a clearer distinction between funding of teaching and research. They suggested that a greater part of the basic allocations to teaching should be more closely linked to the results of the units through unit cost funding based on the number of completed degrees and on the number of credits taken. It was also suggested that a part of the state allocations should be directly linked to individual students. In this way it was hoped that the students’ needs would exert greater influence on the activities of the institution. Research funding should also be linked to the number of students, as well as to performance and quality criteria.¹¹

Finally it was stated that the overall map of higher education in Norway did not any longer fit with the terrain. The universities have begun to offer a greater number of professional programs and some colleges are involved in research and teaching at the doctoral level. Therefore the committee recommended that the Ministry should be given the authority to decide which category the institution shall belong to by means of an accreditation process, and that it must be possible to permit institutions to be classified as universities that have a narrower range of disciplines. The accreditation process should be based on the recommendations made by a new and independent academic body called *Center for Assessment and Accreditation in Higher Education*. In order to facilitate students educational choices it was also recommended that this center should make public its assessments of courses and institutions.¹²

In the initial part of the report the importance of academic values such as *lehr- und lernfreiheit* as well as critical thinking and investigation was heavily emphasized.¹³ Nevertheless, the overall orientation of the actual proposals for reform could easily undermine such values. Almost without exception the committee made recommendations for a far greater influence of the educational market, that is the wishes and needs of the students, the workplace and the state. If so, the *freedom with responsibility* in the title of the report would only mean increased freedom and responsibility to respond and adjust to fluctuations in this market in order to survive as an educational institution. As such, the initial statements could be seen as nothing more than compulsory rhetorical exercises that above all reveals a remarkable inconsistency in the report as well as the incongruity between traditional academic values and the committee's conception of feasible means for improving Norwegian higher education.

The Norwegian Debate on Higher Education

By the time the report was published, Norway had recently gotten a new Labor-government. The new Minister of Education, Research and Church Affairs immediately embraced the report, as did most of the other political parties and the Norwegian Student Union. The leader of the Student Union proclaimed that this was first and foremost the students' reform. Even the rector at the University of Oslo expressed strong support and urged the new minister to "flex his muscles" and carry out the reforms without long hearings. He perceived the proposed reforms to liberate the institutions from state regulations, and make them ready to compete in what he called a European championship.¹⁴

But Rectors immediate response was about all the support that the university sector would give the report in the time to come. Soon, Rune Slagstad, a professor in sociology at the University of Oslo and one of the most profiled Norwegian intellectuals during the past few years, held a press conference in which he expressed strong opposition to major parts of the committee's work. He based his critique on an essay he wrote as an attachment to the report, on assignment from the committee itself.¹⁵ In his essay, Slagstad argues that it is of great importance to keep a sharp division of work between the universities and the more profession-oriented institutions, where the former must keep both state and industry at an arm's-length distance. This was necessary in order to guarantee the necessary freedom to critically investigate phenomena that neither industry nor state authorities would like to be investigated. Referring to Burton Clark he hence claims that the Research University has to be on top of the system of higher education as "an important pipeline to the future."¹⁶ Slagstad called his history-oriented essay *The house of knowledge within the Norwegian system*, and he portrayed the university as the "main building" of knowledge in modern Norwegian history. In his opinion the university had from the beginning in 1811 successfully been able to balance between German idealism and the more utility-oriented impulses of the enlightenment. He further maintained that this balance between *bildung* and utility had made up the characteristic of the Norwegian modernization process at large. Building on this notion of the Norwegian tradition, he claimed that the proposed reforms were nothing more than a local variant of a "global McDonaldisation of higher education, modeled after the fast-food principle [where] institutions should be transformed according to perspectives of short-term utility in order to meet the changing needs of ever more flexible individuals."¹⁷ And he continued: "We see here the contours of a Norwegian knowledge-state: a higher education system that is a half-academic hybrid, a vague arrangement for institutionalized half-competence."¹⁸ All this he perceived to be a part of what he called *the Anglo-American adjustment-reformism* in Norwegian politics since WWII. According to Slagstad, Norwegian politics in this period has by and large been neglecting the *bildung*-ideals of a continental tradition in favor of a utility-oriented Anglo-American

tradition. He obviously regarded the committee's report as belonging to this tradition, and he distanced himself from both this tradition and the report by citing one of the founding fathers of the Norwegian Constitution, the historian Jacob Aall, who in 1812 stated that the main mission of the university was to "Control self-interest and uncultivated affluence and be the most effective barrier against the confusion of the ages."¹⁹

Two days later, it was laconically stated in one of the major newspapers that the present never seemed as perfect as when it was threatened by change, and that the committee's report seemed to be just what was needed to unite the usually disagreeing Norwegian university professors.²⁰ And to some extent it really did. Voices were heard from all the universities and from faculty within about every discipline, expressing deep concerns about the report. The argument was partly that the recommended reforms would lead to a fight for scarce resources that would prove counterproductive, and that it would create a lot of mediocre institutions that would all pretend to be universities. Some expressed more sympathy with the overall orientation of the report, but claimed that the Norwegian universities had to be thoroughly upgraded before they could be let loose in a market of higher education. It was also claimed that the heavy focus on student needs might reduce higher education to being merely about professional preparation. But the main arguments were directed against the recommendations concerning administration and funding of the institutions. It was deeply feared that a Ministry appointed majority on the boards would deprive the universities of their autonomy and integrity. The argument was that the proposed student oriented funding system together with market orientation of research, might lead to neglect of both disciplines and research that would not be perceived of as giving immediate benefits to students or the political authorities. In Norway the market for research is first and foremost the state, and it may pose problems to the integrity of the university if state interests have to be considered merely as clients in a market. If so, the institutional freedom would come close to signifying nothing more than the freedom to respond to the market, which in Norway to a great extent would mean to respond to state interests. This is obviously quite opposite to the traditional understanding of academic freedom, meaning that the institutions should have the freedom to *resist* political and economic pressure.

The arguments in support for the committee's report have not been as visible in the public debate. But, as previously noted, the Minister was early in embracing the overall orientation of the report, and he has kept doing so. In the summer of 2000 he went to England where he was deeply inspired by what he encountered at The University of Warwick, and he later referred to this university as a model institution for Norwegian reforms. He was impressed by their administrative system where the board majority came from business and local authorities, as he was by the market orientation of both education and research where "both businesses and individuals buy tailor-made packages."²¹ In addition, support has been expressed from the college sector, primarily related to the prospect of becoming universities. Some, but remarkably few, of the members of the committee have also come out in defense of the report. They have partly claimed that the negative response mainly reflects the fundamentally conservative character of the Norwegian academic community, and argued that the reforms will bring Norway more in tune with development beyond national borders.

But, taking one step back, I would like to point to a couple of characteristics of the Norwegian higher education debate. First, and this I believe is quite grave, quite many of those who presumably would have an interest in the outcome of the debate have been more or less totally absent, and this even goes for the politicians. While higher education today is high up on the political agenda and leads to a lot of debate in countries such as Sweden, Germany and the US, this has not been the case in Norway. Why is this? There are no easy answers here, but it can be suggested that many Norwegian politicians did not want to invest any prestige in an unpopular reform they were more or less in agreement with and that was anyhow likely to be carried out more or less as recommended. In addition, major parts of both the business community and the college sector have clearly been in favor of the recommended reforms, but they may have adopted some sort of a strategic silence in order to not arouse more opposition and destroy something that seemed almost too good to be true. Further, it has been suggested that Norwegians are sick and tired of debating white papers and going through endless hearings, or even watching this process, and that they to some extent have lost faith in their ability to have an effect on the outcome of the political process. If so, the lack of higher education debate could also be a symptom of a more fundamental problem for the Norwegian democracy. One of the things that I came to appreciate

from my short stay in California, was the way that people from almost all walks of life took part in the public debate and seemed to believe that they were able to make a difference. Even though such beliefs can be both misguided and naïve, I nevertheless think them to be a sign of good health for the fundamental workings of democracy, and I believe this aspect to be somewhat down in Norway. Second, the rhetoric of the debate has frequently been stereotyping either the wonders or evils of market orientation in higher education. On the one side you have had the committee and the Labor Party Minister who, apart from their rhetorical exercises in praising the blessings of academic freedom and critical thinking, embrace the principles of neo-liberal higher education where the institutions are considered to be some sort of a service-enterprise and society is seen as merely a marketplace. On the other side you find a deep fear for everything that tastes of market among great parts of the academic community. Here some vague Humboldtian ideal is often brought on stage in order to defend institutions from whatever interference from the outside world. Fortunately, there has also been room for nuances and more constructive critique of the report where the need for change is appreciated – my point is only that this has somewhat drowned in the waves of the dominant rhetoric.

John Peter Collett, who recently published a book about the history of the University of Oslo, points to the fact that the Anglo-American tradition has got far more nuances than is usually displayed in the Norwegian debate, where this tradition often is presented as representing nothing more than free market competition on all levels at all times. He reminds us that the academic standards of the American elite institutions have resulted not only from competition in a market, but also from considerable private and/or public support that has given the institutions a great deal of autonomy and independence. Then, he suggests that if the committee wants to achieve its goal of academic excellence it should rather propose measures to assure greater financial and institutional independence.²² In a way, this connects to John Douglass' presentation of how the University of California has been built up to be what it is today, to a great extent as a result of the unusual level of autonomy that it historically has been granted. The combination of status as a public trust, the relative autonomy of the Board of Regents, and the implementation of non-populist strategic decisions at crucial stages can, according to Douglass, account for much of the success of both the University of California and the Californian higher education system in large.²³ This is of course not to say that this example should or could be followed in Norway, but it is a call for a historical and contextual sensitivity in evaluation and planning of higher education that often is lacking. This is also alluded to by the Norwegian organizational theorists, Johan P. Olsen, when he says that the committee's report falls short in analysis of both development and contemporary national challenges in higher education as well as of effects of the recommended reforms. Instead, Olsen claims that the committee has succumbed to international myths and fashions regarding higher education currently promoted by OECD and the European Union. Such myths and fashions, he continues, are regrettably too often likely to be accepted and legitimized in small countries with a limited capacity of developing new solutions based on local conditions. He agrees that renewal is absolutely required within Norwegian universities, but argues that reforms must be fundamentally focused on scholarly achievements. And he adds that it is a paradox if the university is not able to find partners who will respect its institutional autonomy and integrity in a society with a larger proportion of academically educated people than ever before.²⁴

An Exciting Future?

The hearings of the committee's report were ended in the beginning of October 2000, and in March 2001 the Ministry presented the white paper on higher education to the parliament. The 12th of May 2001 the parliament made its final decisions regarding the higher education reform. Here it became clear that even though large parts of the initial recommendations would be carried out, some of the critique had also been taken into account. As such, the state will maintain legal responsibility for the institutions, and elected representatives from the institutions will still hold the majority on the boards. But the funding system will be changed more or less as recommended, as will the grading system and the degrees. This means that both students and institutions will be awarded more explicitly for effective production of credits and degrees. The idea is that shorter and more efficient studies will free funds that can be put back into the institutions to improve quality, and by this one hopes to create a benign circle that will prove productive for the entire system. This can nevertheless be difficult to achieve in Norwegian institutions with a present

average of 20 students per teacher. Without proper funding these ambitious reforms can turn out highly counterproductive, and as the opposition in the parliament maintained during the final debate, it is not likely that quality will be improved merely by saving through higher efficiency. Therefore it is important to note that the parliament made clear that the reforms would require increased allocations to universities and colleges in 2002 and 2003. It is also clear that some colleges soon will be upgraded to universities. If this should mean anything but a change of label, increased funds will be needed here as well. If not, the reform could easily start a race for scarce resources that might scatter research-communities instead of creating new and healthy ones. The decisions on which institutions should be upgraded to universities will be made by a new and independent Center for Assessment and Accreditation in Higher Education. The composition and practice of this center will most likely have a great effect on the development of Norwegian higher education in the years to come. It *might* give much needed legitimacy to higher education institutions, and contribute to establish a climate for internal development and sound competition. But it might also very well be perceived of as an external and rigid body for control that by and large will meet resistance within the institutions. It can also prove difficult to establish an academic body with the necessary degree of independence from both state and higher education institutions in a small country as Norway.

The reform process in large has turned out to be very much in line with a more or less three decades long trend of ever increasing demands from society upon institutions of higher education for both greater efficiency and social utility. But the reforms might nevertheless instigate a period of deep transformations. A lot of questions and uncertainty about the future arises in the wake of the process: How will the reforms affect the relation between teachers and students and how will the learning-situations at the different institutions develop? To what degree will the politicians be willing to invest in higher education and research, and what will they expect in return? How would the new Center for Assessment and Accreditation affect both the inner workings of the institutions, the relationship between institutions and their legitimacy in the broader society? How would it affect the distribution of responsibilities and the coordination within Norwegian higher education? The list could go on. Perhaps then the most constructive effect of the reform process is that it provoked a feeling of crisis in the Norwegian academic community that might give birth to new thoughts and ideas about how to play an important role in society. Such creative exercises can prove to be most useful in the time to come.

Notes

¹ This article is based on a talk given at Center for Studies in Higher Education at UC Berkeley, 13 March 2001.

² NOU 2000:14. *Freedom with responsibility*, Presented to the Ministry of Education, Research and Church Affairs, 8 May 2000.

³ The committee had 16 members and was lead by Professor Ole Danbolt Mjøs from Institute of Medical Biology at the University of Tromsø. Apart from members from different educational institutions, students and representatives from the major labor-corporations, five professors were members of the committee: two of them in economics, one in physical chemistry, one in theology and one in the Saami language.

⁴ Chap. 1.1 and 2.1.

⁵ Chap. 2.1.1.

⁶ Chap. 2.1.2.

⁷ Chap. 2.1.4.

⁸ Chap. 2.1.5.

⁹ Chap. 2.1.9.

¹⁰ Op.cit.

¹¹ Chap. 2.1.10.

¹² Chaps. 2.1.11 and 2.1.12.

¹³ Chap. 1.

¹⁴ *Aftenposten*, 10 May 2000.

¹⁵ Slagstad, Rune, "Kunnskapens hus i det norske system", Attachment to NOU 2000:14, *Freedom with responsibility*, pp.434-482.

¹⁶ Op.cit., p.473.

¹⁷ Op.cit., p.472.

¹⁸ Op.cit., p.482.

¹⁹ Slagstad, 434.

²⁰ Aftenposten, 20 May 2000.

²¹ Aftenposten, 8 July 2000. The University of Warwick has been very successful in increasing research grants and expanding activity during the past 15 years. But this is not primarily due to external board-members or tailor-made educational packages, but must rather be explained by Warwick's traditions as a small and focused university with a strong *esprit de corps* that made it possible to maintain and develop core activities and values, and actively respond when they came under financial pressure from Thatcher's higher education reforms in the early 1980's.

²² John Peter Collett, Draft for a hearing to the committee's report from the Dept. of history at the University of Oslo, Fall 2000.

²³ John Aubrey Douglass, "A tale of two universities of California - A tour of strategic issues past and prospective" in *Chronicle of The University of California*, fall 2000, pp.93-117. See also Douglass' *The California Idea and American Higher Education: 1850 to the 1960 Master Plan*, Stanford University Press, 2000

²⁴ Johan P. Olsen, "Organisering og styring av universiteter" in *Nytt Norsk tidsskrift*, n.3 - 2000, pp.231-249.