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Public policy and institutional autonomy in Norway

Abstract

The interaction between a public responsibility for higher education and the implementation of a public policy by autonomous higher education institutions is a key element in the Bologna Process. The Norwegian policy for higher education is a reflection of the Bologna Process. Norwegian HE institutions have been granted the autonomy they asked for to realise the public policy in higher education.

The need for change

In April 2002, a White Paper to the Norwegian Parliament announced more independence but at the same time greater responsibility to HE institutions, a new degree system with Bachelor and Master Degrees, increased rights for students both to the quality of courses and the financing of their studies, greater emphasis on internationalisation and student exchange. The revised system was fully operational at the start of the academic year 2003-2004.

At a first glance, this looks like a direct follow-up of the 1999 Bologna Declaration. However, the assessment of the system of higher education in Norway started with the appointment of a National Commission in April 1998, the Mjøs Commission. The need for an assessment was at that time apparent. The binary system of state institutions introduced thirty years earlier was eroding as universities and colleges came under a common law in 1995. Priority had for many years been given to the expansion of higher education to cope with the rapidly increasing number of young students queuing for admission. Challenges from the private sector made it apparent that the legal and economic framework for the higher education institutions was obsolete, hindering contract activities and co-operation with external institutions. Stronger university leadership was also needed.

The need for change was clearly seen by university leaders. Many topics written into the terms of reference for the Mjøs Commission had already been assessed by the Norwegian Council of Universities (the National Rectors' Conference). In 1998, the Council had assessed the existing framework for contract activities, recommending a radical change that was followed up by Mjøs. In 1999 the Council advised the Mjøs Commission to go for a 3/5/8 year degree system and for a national grading system based on ECTS.

A national policy

The objectives of the Norwegian policy on higher education as defined in the 2002 White Paper, very strongly involve the HE institutions, telling us that higher education is an element in national politics and that HE institutions are partners in the realisation of a national policy:

- to offer everybody the possibility for personal development,
- to take care of and further develop our common competence and culture,
- to strengthen democracy and contribute to a critical dialogue,
- to educate candidates for industry, the social sector, education and research,
- to contribute to the building of social structures and solidarity,
- to strengthen cooperation with the international community,

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- to develop new knowledge and new answers in the various sectors of society,
- to develop equity between men and women,
- to contribute to regional development and regional policies.

Institutional autonomy

In the White Paper, the Ministry of Education and Research stated that the current form of organization of higher education did not provide universities and colleges with sufficient freedom and responsibility to achieve the overall *national* objectives: Educational institutions are expected to deal with a number of tasks of importance for the country's culture, welfare, environment, economy and democracy. At the same time they are required to contribute to education and research of immediate benefit to working life in both public and private sectors. These goals and requirements implied a clearer definition of the degree of autonomy that educational institutions were allowed.

The outcome is that Norwegian HE institutions have obtained the autonomy they asked for. Most institutions and a majority in Parliament did not want changing the formal status of the institutions to "special status" companies, state institutions continue as administrative agencies with special and extended powers. Closely linked to its legal status is the question whether the institution should be led by a senate and an elected rector or by an executive board appointed by the Ministry and a rector appointed by the executive board. Norwegian HE institutions have the freedom to make their individual decision in this matter.

On the very same day that the report from the Mjøs Commission was made public, the Council of Universities and the Council of State Colleges merged into the Norwegian Council for Higher Education. Since then, this Council has for many purposes acted as an informal buffer organisation between Norwegian authorities and Norwegian HE institutions, coordinating institutional policies and practices in fields where an institutional autonomy is defined by law. However, it is the institutions' own organisation, coordinating institutional activity by consensus. It also acts as a common spokesman for the institutions vis-à-vis Government and Parliament.

Following the 2002 White Paper, a formal buffer organisation in the HE system was set up by the Ministry of Education and Research, the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT). NOKUT has the right to independent decision-making, it should not be influenced neither by public authorities nor by institutions.

In Norway, there is no buffer agency for the financing of higher education, however, there is one for financing research, i.e. the Norwegian Research Council.

A final remark

Developments in my home country have been based on trust: Trust between institutions working together in the Council for Higher Education, trust between the Council and the national authorities. Institutional autonomy without trust between institutions and authorities does not work. The institutions must be partners in the realisation of national HE policies.