

The Quality Reform of Higher Education in Norway

A national reflection of the Bologna Process

More independence but at the same time greater responsibility to the institutions, increased rights to the students both to the quality of courses and the financing of their studies, a new degree system with Bachelor and Master Degrees as standard elements, greater emphasis on internationalisation and student exchange. These were the main elements in the "White Paper" on higher education submitted to the Norwegian Parliament (Stortinget) in March 2001 (Report No. 27 to the Storting (2000-2001)). Although there was broad agreement on these main issues, some of the proposals put forward by the Government were not accepted or were changed when the White Paper was discussed by Parliament in June 2001. However, even after the Parliamentary election of September 2002 that brought a new Government to power in October, the decision stands that the revised system shall be fully operational before the start of the academic year 2003-2004.

At a first glance, this report may look like a direct follow-up of the Pan-European Bologna Declaration of June 1999. However, the assessment of the system of higher education in Norway started with the appointment of a National Commission in April 1998, referred to as the Mjøs Commission after its chairman, professor Ole D. Mjøs, former Rector of the University of Tromsø and former President of the Norwegian Council of Universities. Other members of the commission represented academia, students, industry and labour unions and regional administration.

The need for an assessment of the Norwegian system of higher education was at that time apparent. Higher education policy had, after a previous commission chaired by the later Minister of Education and Research, Professor Gudmund Hernes, gave its recommendations to the Government in 1988, been based on a White Paper from 1991. The policy drawn up by Hernes in the White Paper was based on a binary system of interacting institutions ("Network Norway") with a university sector and a college sector, each institution being under Ministerial supervision of its educational programmes. Over the years, the binary system was eroded by a sequence of decisions in Parliament (Stortinget), giving colleges the right to develop secondary, research-based degrees, to hire professors and to take part in the training of researchers, to engage in fundamental as well as applied research, placing universities and colleges under a common law in 1995. After a change of Government, the new Minister of Education gave additional concessions to the state colleges, including the right to some colleges to award doctoral degrees in special fields. As he also decided that state colleges might be called university colleges and that private colleges might be upgraded to universities, little was left of the binary system when the Mjøs Commission submitted its report to the Minister of Education and Research in May 2000.

The 1991 White Paper had given priority to the expansion of higher education to cope with the rapidly increasing number of young students queuing for admission. A few years later, the number of young students started to decline. Life-long learning came into focus.

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. The need for stronger university leadership was also apparent.

The need for change was clearly seen by university leaders; many topics written into the terms of reference for the Mjø̄s Commission had already been assessed by the Norwegian Council of Universities. An assessment of the four-year cand.mag.-degree was done in 1997. (A proposition to go for a three-year degree was then turned down by the academic community, but in 1999 the Council advised the Mjø̄s Commission to go for a 3/5/8 year degree system and for a national grading system based on ECTS.) In 1998, the Council assessed the existing framework for contract activities and advised the Ministry to radically change the system. The Council's proposals were followed up by the Mjø̄s Commission.

As the binary system eroded, contacts between The Norwegian Council of Universities and the Norwegian Council of State Colleges in 1998-99 lead to a common understanding of institutional co-operation in the sector of higher education, the need for a plurality of institutions and the importance of focusing on quality in higher education and research. This led to the merger of the two institutional councils into the Norwegian Council for Higher Education in May 2000, on the very same day that the report from the Mjø̄s Commission was made public. Thus, universities and state colleges alike met the commission's report and the following White Paper standing on a common organisational platform. For the time being, private institutions are not members of the Council, but one expected follow-up of the recent White Paper is a law on higher education that also will cover private institutions.

Main points of the Mjø̄s Commission Report

Independent institutions

The Mjø̄s Commission Report (NOU 2000:14, May 2000 (690 pages, Norwegian text)) underlined very strongly the need for institutions to continuously adapt and readjust to the changing societal environment and demands and advocated a high degree of independence for the institutions. However, the Commission could not agree on the form of organisation and affiliation of the state institutions to superior authorities and left it to the Ministry and subsequently to the Parliament to choose between the form of an administrative agency with special and extended powers and a "special statute" company.

The Commission's majority submitted the following recommendations:

- The state institutions for higher education should be organised as separate legal entities pursuant to special statutes. The legislation concerning the organisation of universities and colleges should be modelled on that for state-owned enterprises, but allow greater influence to the staff and students of the institutions and make greater restrictions on the economic freedom for the institutions.
- When institutions are organised as separate legal entities, the existing provisions relating to severance pay and the right of preference to other state posts shall be maintained for a period of three years following conversion of the institutions.
- Organisation of tasks relating to administration by owners and overall administration of higher education and research by the Ministry should be viewed in the light of a new organization of state higher education institutions.

The Commission's minority recommended that:

- The state institutions for higher education should be organised as administrative agencies with special and extended powers. Such powers should include:
 - developing and establishing educational provisions
 - planning systems for courses, assessments and examinations
 - deciding internal organization
 - adapting regulations for appointments and staff to the needs of the institution
 - building up funds
 - participating in and establishing peripheral transferring profits from peripheral companies to the institution without this influencing the funding framework in relation to other existing contracts

Private higher education caters for 10 % of the total number of students in Norway. There is a law on private higher education, setting some minimum requirements, which have to be satisfied for students to obtain support from the State Loan Fund for Education. Some private institutions receive state support for special programmes, mainly for professional studies, and have been granted the right to award official degrees. The Mjøs Commission proposed to put private higher education on a more equal footing with state higher education, one element being a voucher system as part of the state financing of higher education.

Institutional Structure

The institutional structure of higher education in Norway consists of 4 traditional universities, 6 schools of higher learning offering specialised professional degree programmes and doctoral programmes, 26 university colleges (state colleges) and 2 national institutes of arts. (The law on private higher education does not define institutional categories.)

For a long time, a few state colleges have been working hard, both academically and politically, to become universities. As an advisory body to the Ministry of Education, the Network Norway Council, recently had suggested that the institutions themselves should be allowed to choose their designation, the institutional structure became a hot issue in the academic debate. The advice from the Mjøs Commission, was that, for being designated as a university, an institution should have:

- lower and higher degree courses and research that have a high academic standard,
- stable research activities and research in a number of fields,
- sound organisation and infrastructure for teaching and research,
- national and international networks and contacts,
- an academic organisation and staff to offer research training and doctorates in some fields,
- an academic culture with capacity for independent and critical reflection,
- a capacity for dissemination of knowledge

The commission recommended that the institution should have responsibility for secondary courses in at least five different areas and research training in at least four different fields before being designated as a university.

Degree Structure

After making a collective assessment of the issues associated with the degree structure in higher education, the Mjøs Commission recommended that the current degree structure

should be discontinued. The new structure should consist of two stages, where the higher degree level builds upon the lower. Furthermore, the Commission recommended that:

- The nominal length of studies up to completion of the higher degree should be set at 5 years in the new system.
- Studies in the new degree structure should be organised as follows: a lower degree level leading to a bachelors degree, a higher degree level leading to a masters degree and research training leading to a doctorate.
- The bachelor's degree course should have duration of 3 or 3½ years.
- Within a total time frame of five years, the institutions should be allowed considerable flexibility and freedom to structure master's degrees.
- A separate master's degree should be established as a two-year course giving additional competence in an additional field at the same level as the subjects in the lower degree.
- Courses with special requirements regarding professional practice may be exempted from inclusion in the new degree structure.
- The introduction of a new degree structure should result in a review and renewal of the structure and content of study programmes with a view to maintaining and developing the quality and increasing the intensiveness of studies.
- The nominal length of the research training leading to the doctorate should be maintained at the current level of three years (alternatively four years when combined with 25 per cent duties at the institution). Studies for the doctorate should normally build on a master's degree that itself builds on a lower degree. The basis for admission shall be decided by the institution awarding the degree.
- New degrees and degree titles should be authorised by statute and be subject to quality assurance by an independent academic body for accreditation and assessment.
- The degree structure should be adapted to the competence reform of lifelong learning.
- Students who have taken individual subjects may, in accordance with more detailed guidelines to be issued by the Ministry, have their accumulated qualifications approved as equivalent to a degree.

Quality and efficiency in the learning environment

After making an assessment of the issues associated with quality in higher education, the Committee recommended a strong focusing on quality in the learning environment:

- The main responsibility for quality development at universities and colleges should lie with the individual institutions.
- In the view of the Committee, academic units should be established for work on quality improvement at each individual institution, analogous to the teaching resource centres.
- The institutions should introduce the use of teacher portfolios or an equivalent system as part of basis for decision-making in relation to appointments and promotions.
- Systems should be established to create a greater degree of mutual commitment between student and institution during the learning process.
- Measures should be established adapted to the phases the student passes through on his or her educational pathway. In this connection, measures for first-year students are particularly important.
- The institutions' contact with the upper secondary school should be improved.
- Funds should be allocated to initiatives for improving the learning processes, such as group learning, counselling measures and assessment measures. Greater emphasis should be placed on the students' participation in the process of selecting and planning prescribed texts, teaching methods and seminars.

- During the course of their studies, students should be introduced to the research being carried out by the academic staff.
- A closer connection should be established between teaching methods and assessment, placing greater emphasis on continuous feedback during courses and the introduction of student portfolios.
- R&D work related to quality in higher education should be encouraged.
- Funds freed by reducing the length of degree courses by one year should be applied to quality promotion work at the institutions.
- Arrangements should be made to allow students who so wish to use the whole year for their studies, including periods when teaching is not offered by the institutions.

Higher education in an international perspective

The Mjøs Commission underlined the international character of higher education. To strengthen the international perspective of Norwegian higher education, the Commission recommended that:

- The responsibility of the institutions for the development of international strategies should be strengthened. Strategies for internationalisation should include education and research programmes, recruiting, pay and personnel policy and information and marketing.
- The authorities should make provisions for increasing the proportion of Norwegian students in other countries. Special emphasis should be placed on increasing the number of Norwegian students who take only part of their higher education at a foreign institution.
- Measures that encourage more competent foreign students to study in Norway should be strengthened.
- Formalised academic co-operation between Norwegian and foreign institutions should be encouraged, involving short periods of study at foreign higher education institutions. A greater part of the financial investments in studies abroad should be channelled through Norwegian higher education institutions.
- The availability of grants to cover tuition fees should be made more dependent on qualitative assessments of institutions and courses
- A programme should be established whereby funds allocated over the National Budget are applied to the financing of exchange agreements between Norwegian institutions and scientific educational institutions in other countries. Agreements concerning co-operation on master's programmes and doctorates should be given priority.
- Courses offered to foreign students must also be available to Norwegian students.
- The grading system used by universities and colleges should be based on the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). A common scale of marks should be introduced for Norwegian higher education with five pass marks.
- The commitment to co-operation between Norwegian universities and colleges and universities and colleges in developing countries should be strengthened.
- Research staff should be encouraged to spend sabbatical leave at higher education and research institutions in developing countries via strengthened co-operation between institutions and other incentives.
- In order to ensure that education taken by foreign students in Norway conforms to the special needs of their native countries and that students return home and use the competence they have acquired for the benefit of their countries, periods of study in Norway by foreign students should be more closely adapted to educational pathways available in the institutions in the countries concerned.

Funding of higher education and research

The Mjø̆s Commission pointed out the importance of establishing funding arrangements that make the institutions better able to perform the tasks assigned to them by society. The commission recommended that:

- Institutions' basic allocations should to a greater extent be associated with the results of their activities through unit cost funding on the basis of graduate and credit production
- General basic supplementary allocations may be granted to cover special needs, such as consideration for certain academic environments, responsibilities such as museums and libraries, and regional policy priorities
- Research allocations should consist of three parts, of which one part is granted on the basis of performance and quality criteria, one part on the basis of regional and professional policy priorities and one part in relation to the number of students.

A majority of the Commission's members also suggested that

- part of the state allocation should be directly linked to individual students on the model of the State Educational Loan Fund scheme for fee grants for studies abroad. A fixed amount would be linked to the individual student and should be paid out when the student has completed for example 50 per cent of the nominal period of studies.

The other members of the Commission pointed out that:

- The institutions' orientation towards the students will be taken care of in a funding system where greater emphasis is placed on funding the results of the institutions' activities. This minority will therefore not recommend a scheme involving voucher or fee grants to individual students.

Assessment and accreditation

Traditionally, the permission to establish new study programmes and new degrees has been given to institutions by the Ministry of Education or by decision in Parliament. There is yet no accreditation agency in Norway. The Mjø̆s Commission submitted the following recommendations:

- For assessment and accreditation of courses and higher education institutions, an academic body should be established with an independent status in relation to the Ministry and the higher education institutions. The organization of this body (Centre for Assessment and Accreditation in Higher Education) and its responsibilities should be laid down in the new Higher Education Act. The Centre for Assessment and Accreditation should accredit the institutions that shall have a right to offer officially approved courses, i.e. assess the courses and the academic environments and decide whether they fulfil the requirements for awarding degrees in the area concerned. The body should accredit both fields and level (lower degree, higher degree and doctorate).
- The result of the assessments and accreditation should be made public.
- The Centre should be led by a board composed on the basis of academic competence, and not on the basis of consideration of the interests of the parties involved. The Government should appoint members of the Centre's board.
- The Centre should assess whether the institutions have fulfilled the requirements for the relevant category of institution: university, state college or specialised scientific institution at university level. Here the Ministry should have the power to decide.

- The Centre should prepare general requirements for academic breadth and depth in the individual degree or professional course, provide the general guidelines and assess whether the requirements have been fulfilled.
- The Centre should issue rules for equivalence and transferability of qualifications from other institutions.
- The Centre should be able on an independent basis to accredit, give notification of shortcomings of course provisions and disapprove course provisions at institutions on the basis of assessments of the academic quality of such course provisions.

Reactions from the higher education sector to the Mjøs Commission Report

A statement of the Norwegian Council for Higher Education to the Ministry in October 2000 reflects the opinion of the institutional leadership in universities and state colleges.

Not surprisingly, the Council supported the Commission's recommendation of greater academic, administrative and economic freedom for the state institutions. The Council also underlined the needs for a new degree structure and for new teaching methods.

The Council pointed out that most of the organisational changes could be carried out without changing the formal status of the institutions to "special status" companies, but that such change could be relevant for some institutions. Closely linked to the formal status of the institution is also 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. The Council advised the Ministry not to change institutions to companies unless this was an explicit proposal from the individual institutions.

(Much of the energy in the national debate that followed was spent on these organisational topics, the final word is yet not said. A decision will only be reached in Parliament when the Law on Universities and Colleges comes up for revision.)

The Norwegian Council for Higher Education supported the development of a new budgeting system with separate allocations for teaching and for research, and with increased emphasis on quality and results. The Council underlined the need for long term planning and financial stability for the institutions – to safeguard cultural values and to maintain and further develop a broad platform of competencies to meet future challenges.

The Council pointed out the close relations between higher education and research and underlined the urgent need for realisation of Parliament's decisions of an increased national research effort. The training of new researchers is especially important in this connection.

The Council pointed out that all universities and state colleges support the introduction of a new degree system, supporting a two-level degree structure for the whole higher education sector, with research training on top of this 5-year structure. This did not stop individual academic from arguing strongly against what they considered to be a downgrading of higher education in Norway.

The Council reported that member institutions had different opinions on the Commission's proposal regarding institutional structure. However, the Council underlined the importance of developing a *multitude of institutions* in a national system of higher education to meet the various and changing needs for competence building.

The Council also supported the proposal to set up an independent centre for assessment and accreditation, assuming that this body should accredit institutions to give courses and award degrees in specified fields of study at different levels (Bachelor, Master, Doctor), but that the Ministry should define the framework for the various degrees.

The Council underlined the international dimension of higher education and the responsibility for each institution to link up with international partners and improve student mobility. The Council also pointed out that the Centre for International University Co-operation (SIU) set up by the Council was a service body for all Norwegian universities and colleges.

The comments from the Norwegian Council of Higher Education indicate that Norwegian universities and colleges were much more prepared for academic and organisational changes in 2000 than they were just a few years ago. Undoubtedly, the awareness of parallel changes in other countries in Europe made visible through the Bologna Process, was an important element in the Norwegian Process.

Main points of the White Paper on the Quality Reform

In April 2000 a social democratic Government took over from the centre coalition Government that appointed the Mjøs Commission. However, it was soon apparent that the new Government would follow up the Commission's recommendations on central issues. This was no great surprise, as the hearing of the Commission report indicated a broad consensus on these issues. Thus, the White Paper stated that:

- Universities and colleges will be allowed greater freedom in academic, financial and organisational issues.
- There is no room for more universities covering a full range of disciplines than the four existing.
- A new common degree structure will be introduced, involving a lower degree on completion of three years of study (bachelors) and a higher degree building upon this to be awarded on completion of a further two years of study (masters).
- Teaching methods involving a high level of student activity, new forms of assessment and regular feedback that promotes learning will be introduced.
- Institutions shall set up agreements with students concerning courses, clearly outlining the rights and responsibilities of the institution and the student in relation to each other.

Private institutions were not mentioned in the White Paper.

The Government made specific proposals on several issues where the members of the Mjøs Commission had not agreed:

- State institutions in higher education should not be reorganised as "special statute" companies, but obtain greater freedom
- Institutions should continue to elect its rector who shall chair the institution's board.
- Deans and department heads should *not* be elected, but be appointed by the rector.
- Colleges entitled to award doctorates should be able to apply for designation as universities.

Most important, the White Paper very clearly underlined the importance of quality.

On the financial side the Government proposed:

- Student support should be increased.
- More efficient running of the institutions should finance improved quality.

Objectives

The objectives of the White Paper very strongly involve the *institutions of higher education*; educating individuals is of course a central objective, however, the list is much longer:

- 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 contact and co-operation between Norway and the international community,
- to develop new fundamental 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.

Increased freedom for state institutions

In the White Paper, the Ministry of Education and Research stated that the current form of organization of higher education does not provide universities and colleges with sufficient freedom and responsibility to achieve overall objectives. There are many and varying requirements at different levels. 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 necessitate a clearer definition of the degree of autonomy that educational institutions are allowed.

The Government proposed that universities and colleges should be redefined as administrative bodies with special powers, and that educational institutions should be allowed greater freedom in academic, financial and organisational issues. It is also proposed that measures be established for more flexible use of personnel resources.

The White Paper stated that universities and colleges must be allowed to have the main responsibility for ensuring the quality of their own provisions. All institutions are to prepare plans for work on quality and are to implement systems to document the quality work. A quality development instrument will be set up and given the appropriate terms of reference and organization.

Institutional profiles

In the view of the Government, there was no room for more universities covering a broad range of disciplines than the four existing. Concentration of resources and development of dynamic academic institutions of a certain size is essential for a successful raising of the quality of Norwegian research.

However, the Ministry of Education and Research did not intend to restrict the designation as university to these four institutions. The White Paper advocated that also the six specialised state institutions at university level (vitenskapelig høyskole) should be designated as

universities. The Ministry further proposed that colleges entitled to award doctorates should be able to apply for designation as universities. Designation as a university should entail specific academic responsibilities within the disciplines where the institution is entitled to award doctorates. This would mean that 12 or more institutions could be designed as universities.

According to the Ministry, the research profile of the state colleges should be developed in close co-operation with working and civic life within the sectors for which the individual state college qualifies graduates, and the state colleges must be major actors within regional innovation.

Degree structure

The Government proposed to Parliament that a common degree structure should be introduced throughout higher education with new designations for the different degree levels. Lower degrees awarded on completion of three years of study (bachelors) will provide professional qualifications and/or qualify for admission to higher degree studies. The higher degree (masters), which will build upon the lower degree and be awarded on completion of a course of two years' duration, provides professional qualifications and/or qualifies for admission to doctoral studies.

There will be a need for two types of course: one resembling the traditional theoretically oriented Norwegian university degree at the master's level, the other more practically oriented. It should also be possible to establish course components that do not build directly upon courses taken at the lower level, but which combine subjects and disciplines in new ways. The first type of degree will qualify for admission to formal research training while the second type will not necessarily do so.

Formal research training will require the equivalent of three years full time work (in practise: part-time over a period of up to six years).

Students must succeed

The White Paper stated that relation between students and institutions must be strengthened. Educational institutions must make provisions to enable closer follow-up of students throughout their studies. New study arrangements will be introduced whereby students are admitted for three-year courses. In order to enhance the learning yield and progression, emphasis shall be placed on teaching methods involving a high level of student activity combined with assessments that promote learning by means of regular feedback. Educational institutions are to enter into agreements with students clearly outlining the rights and obligations of the institutions and students in relation to each other.

International institutional co-operation and student mobility

The Government stated that Norwegian institutions must be in the forefront of academic co-operation and student exchanges between countries. This can be promoted by increasing the priority given to participation in international programmes and exchange agreements between individual institutions. It was seen as a goal that all higher education institutions should offer students a period of study abroad as a component of the Norwegian degree course.

Norwegian universities and colleges must continue to develop their provision of courses held in English. Educational institutions should decide for themselves what provisions they will make in relation to other languages. In the light of the evaluation of the NUFU agreement (National Programme for Development-Related Research and Education), the Ministry would consider special incentives to encourage Norwegian education and research institutions to enter into mutual academic co-operation and exchange agreements with corresponding public institutions in developing countries.

Financing that promotes quality

The design and use of the financing model for universities and colleges must support major educational and research policy goals and strategies. In the view of the Ministry, quality considerations in education and research are best safeguarded by means of a financing system that emphasises the results attained and by introducing a partial distinction between teaching and research in the calculation of budgets.

In order to safeguard considerations regarding long-term research activities, breadth of academic provisions and maintenance of costly disciplines, the Ministry emphasised that a performance orientation in the financing model must be balanced by the introduction of basic financing of educational institutions as a third type of budget component in addition to the performance-oriented component of the financing of research and teaching.

Improved study financing

Students were in 2001 entitled to NOK 67 550 per academic year in the form of ordinary educational support. NOK 20 200 of this is awarded as a grant, i.e. a grant element of approximately 30 per cent, the remainder as loan. The loan and grant are paid simultaneously at the start of each semester.

The Ministry proposed that the ordinary educational support be increased by NOK 12 450 per academic year to NOK 80 000 per academic year. The ordinary educational support is to be paid first as a loan. Parts of the loan may be converted to grant when the student has completed the studies for which support has been applied. If the student follows the normal progression, NOK 31 300 of the amount of NOK 80 000 will be converted to grant according to the Ministry's proposal. This would correspond to a grant element of approximately 39 per cent.

Assessment but not accreditation

The Ministry did not follow up the proposition from the Mjøs Commission to set up an independent accreditation agency (Centre for Assessment and Accreditation). The argument was that universities and colleges must be allowed to have the main responsibility for ensuring the quality of their own provisions. All institutions should prepare plans for work on quality and to implement systems to document the quality work. The Ministry proposed that its own advisory Network Norway Council should be redefined as a quality development instrument and given the appropriate terms of reference and organization.

Reactions to the White Paper from the higher education sector

The immediate reaction of the Norwegian Council for Higher Education when the White Paper was made public in March 2000 was that the Council's comments to the Mjøs Commission Report had been taken into consideration by the Ministry of Education. The overall reaction from the Council was clearly positive.

A letter followed this first reaction to the Parliamentary Committee on Education and Research in April 2000. Here the Council welcomed the Government's promises to focus on quality in higher education, supported the introduction of the new degree structure and also welcomed the proposal of an improved student support system.

However, the Council pointed out that the improvements in teaching and learning proposed by the Government would have a high cost, as longer semesters and more individual guidance of the students would require additional staff. Resources might be reallocated over time; however, it would not be possible to have the new system operational in 2002 as suggested by the Ministry of Education, if new financial resources were not made available.

The Council agreed that the normal organisational form for state institutions in higher education should be the form of administrative agencies with special and extended powers. However, the Council asked that institutions that wanted to try out other forms should be permitted to do so. Although the Council recommended that each institution should have the right to decide on its internal organisation, a majority of Council representative voted for the appointment of deans and department heads as proposed by the Government.

The only other point, on which Council members did not agree, was the requirement for colleges to be upgraded to universities. Here a majority went for the Government's proposal, the minority preferring the proposal of the Mjøs Commission.

The disagreement on these two points reflected the discussion in the academic community in general. However, the opposition among academics against the new degree structure was not reflected in the Council: Evidently, not a single institutional board advised against the change to Bachelor and Masters Degrees for general studies.

The strong statements from the Council regarding economic costs of the Quality Reform convinced the Parliamentary Committee that the reform was not for free. On the request of the Committee, the Council made an estimate of the costs and reported back to the Committee that 1 500 MNOK would be needed in the first few years to change the system. This added to the 1 800 MNOK that the Ministry of Education would need for the proposed upgrading of the student support system.

Debate and decisions in Parliament

The Parliament discussed the White Paper in June 2001, based on comments from Parliaments Committee on Education and Research. The Committee gave its general support to the Quality Reform, tying this reform in with the upgrading of the Norwegian research efforts already decided on by Parliament. The Committee underlined that higher education and research are of great importance, to create a competence basis for continued economic growth and to create a better understanding of societal processes.

The Committee stated that quality has a price. Longer semesters, better teaching methods and individual counselling of students will require new economic and human resources. A majority in the Committee saw the estimate of the costs made by the Norwegian Council for Higher Education as realistic and indicated that budget increases of this magnitude (1 500 MNOK) would be needed for the Quality Reform to be a success.

The Parliamentary Committee agreed with the Government's proposal of a new degree structure, with a three year first degree in universities and colleges and a two year second degree. Professional studies might be organised after different models.

On the basis of the discussion following the report of the Mjøls Commission, the Government's proposal was that state colleges with the right to award doctorates should have the right to apply for designation as universities. However, the majority in Parliament voted for the proposal of the Mjøls Commission, implying the institution should have responsibility for master courses in at least five different areas and research training in at least four different fields. It was agreed that there is no room for more universities covering a full range of disciplines than the four existing, but several members of Parliament wished for a university in their own home region.

The majority in the Parliamentary Committee supported the Government's proposal following the recommendation from the minority in the Mjøls Commission that state institutions for higher education should be organised as administrative agencies with special and extended powers. Such powers would include the right to establish peripheral companies and transferring profits from such companies to the institution, a point on which the Government had wanted a more restricted line.

A minority in the Parliamentary Committee wanted to follow the advice from the Norwegian Council for Higher Education, i.e. letting institutions choose the alternative model if they so wanted, i.e. to be organised as separate legal entities pursuant to special statutes

For quality control, the Parliamentary Committee supported the proposal from the Mjøls Commission that an *independent* body, the "Centre for Assessment and Accreditation in Higher Education" should be set up, its responsibilities should be laid down in the new Higher Education Act. The Centre for Assessment and Accreditation shall accredit the institutions that will have a right to offer officially approved courses, i.e. assess the courses and the academic environments and decide whether they fulfil the requirements for awarding degrees in the area concerned.

A majority in the Parliamentary Committee proposed that the Law should prescribe that deans and heads of departments should be appointed not elected, the minority argued that it would be a paradox to give institutions greater freedom and then restrain their options regarding internal matters by excluding the possibility to continue the practice of elected deans and department heads.

The Parliamentary Committee stated that international exchange of students and scientists should be stimulated and that institutional agreements with foreign universities were important and should have special support. The Committee also agreed that courses given in the English language at Norwegian universities and colleges would make it easier for foreign students to come to Norway.

The Parliamentary Committee agreed with the Government that the state financing of the institutions for higher education should have three main components: a basic component, a teaching component and a research component. Up to now, there has been no such specification. A proposal from a majority in the Mjøs Commission that student vouchers should be one element in the student financing had been turned down by the Government but was brought into the discussion by the Parliamentary Committee, however, without gaining sufficient support.

The Committee agreed to increase the student support, but could not agree on the relation between loans and grants.

Usually, the Parliamentary Committee's comments on a White Paper are not formally voted over by Parliament; they are taken to be advisory to the Government in the follow-up process. In this case, however, Parliament made some explicit decisions:

Starting from the academic year 2003-2004, universities and colleges shall organise their educational programmes in a way that offers the students 10 months effective studies. Each student shall have the right to individual counselling and the possibility to attend organised seminars. Special attention shall be given to first year students.

Teaching at universities and colleges shall be research-based; the Quality Reform must not take resources away from research. The upgrading of the Norwegian research efforts to reach the OECD average in 2005 must imply a significant increase in basic research in institutions of higher education. Sufficient extra resources must be given to universities and colleges in 2002 and 2003 to make the Quality Reform operational in 2003.

In the follow-up, a lot is left to the institutions to decide, for instance, relating to the new study programmes and the new teaching methods. This work is already in progress.

The Ministry has also started its follow-up, some of this process – as for instance the new Law on Higher Education, must be brought back to Parliament for decision. As there is now a new Government and a new balance in Parliament, some of the decisions on points where there was (and probably still is) disagreement in Parliament, might be changed. This has already been the case with the student support, where the new Government did not follow up the proposals of the previous Government. So, exactly *how* much freedom institutions will be allowed, *how* student contracts shall be formulated and *how* the student support system finally will set up, are not yet clear.

Towards a Common European Area of Higher Education

What is clear, is that Norway has gone a way step along the lines of the Bologna Process:

Adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles

A degree structure based on two main cycles, articulating higher education in undergraduate and graduate studies, has been adopted and will be in general use from the academic year 2003-2004. Bachelor and masters degrees can be obtained at universities as well as at other higher education institutions. Programmes leading to a degree will have different orientations and various profiles in order to accommodate a diversity of individual, academic and labour market needs.

Establishment of a system of credits

For greater flexibility in learning and qualification processes, an ECTS-compatible credit system, providing both transferability and accumulation functions, will be introduced in Norway. The Diploma Supplement will soon be in use by all universities and state colleges.

Promotion of mobility

Norway has confirmed that the objective of improved mobility of students, teachers, researchers and administrative staff as set out in the Bologna Declaration is of the utmost importance.

Promotion of quality assurance

Norway has recognised the vital role that quality assurance systems play in ensuring high quality standards and in facilitating the comparability of qualifications.

Disagreements in the political process on questions relating to the Norwegian institutional structure, on the organisation of the institutions and their exact relation to the authorities, must not overshadow the fact that all through the process of the Mjøs Commission and the following White Paper, there has been a broad agreement - institutions, Government, Parliament - on the need for more independence but at the same time greater responsibility to the institutions, the need for a new degree system, an increased emphasis on quality and greater emphasis on internationalisation and student exchange.

21 January 2002 Per Nyborg