



Flexible and decentralised education at vocational colleges, university colleges and universities





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Preface

The green shift and digital transformation are among the biggest changes our society will face in the coming years. Together with other technological developments, these processes will result in the disappearance of many jobs, the emergence of new jobs and industries and changes to work tasks. Many of us, perhaps most of us, will need to supplement and further develop our skills at some point.

The Norwegian Government is seeking to open up the education system to a greater extent. Our goal is for education at vocational colleges, university colleges and universities to be available to all, regardless of where you reside in the country and what your current life situation is. The purpose of this strategy is to increase access to flexible and decentralised high-quality education programmes that are adapted to the various needs of the work force as a whole and of individuals.

This need for new skills has arisen for several reasons. Some people begin to work early on in life and later wish to have the education they missed out on when they were younger. Others do not have the opportunity nor the desire to move from their home place in order to obtain an education. Yet others need to be able to combine education with their working life and family life. Some people need to supplement their skills. This is just as true of the tourism entrepreneur and seafood producer in rural communities as it is of urban dwellers with small children who live near a campus.

In other words, there is no one-size-fits-all solution that can accommodate all needs.

Education must be made available to all. This is precisely the reason for this strategy for flexible and decentralised education and why it covers programmes at vocational colleges, university colleges and universities. A more accessible education system benefits both individuals and society at large. In order for the private and public sectors to deliver good products and services to inhabitants, it is important to have access to the skills required. Just as important are educational programmes of high quality so that individuals and employers can devote time and resources to skills development.

At present, flexible education is widely available throughout the country. The Government has prioritised various measures to accelerate this development in years to come. This strategy elevates and connects the work that has already been initiated and sets the course for how to proceed in coming years. I wish to thank everyone who has contributed to this strategy. I look forward to collaborating further to offer people even more opportunities to pursue the studies of their choice in the ways that best suit them.



Henrik Asheim
Minister of Research and Higher Education

Content

Preface	p. 03
Introduction	p. 05
Opportunities and challenges	p. 11
Goals and areas of priority	p. 15
1: Increased access to flexible and decentralised programmes nationwide	p. 16
2: Strengthening cooperation between actors in education and in the work force and ensuring better connection between supply and demand	p. 23
3: Efforts to ensure high-quality flexible education that is adapted to the needs of individuals and the work force	p. 30
4: Better framework conditions that offer greater opportunities for institutions, the work force and students	p. 35
The road ahead	p. 39



Introduction

Technological development, digital transformation, the green shift and other changes entail shifts in tasks and the way we work. Ongoing skills development is therefore important to the work force. The Commission on Employment (Norwegian Official Report 2021:2 *Skills, Activity and Income Protection*) notes that it is important for individuals to be able to engage in lifelong learning in order to develop their skills, quality of life and participation in society, better adapt within a fluid working life, and remain attractive members of the work force until retirement age. Our success at retaining jobs, creating new jobs and developing services in municipalities nationwide depends entirely on skills being up to date. This is the basic view in the Norwegian Government's white paper *Skills Reform – Lifelong Learning*. Higher education and vocational college education play an important role in the skills reform.

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the Norwegian Government's primary guide for addressing the greatest national and global challenges of our time. This strategy will contribute to SDG number four: ensuring quality education that is inclusive and equitable and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all.

The Norwegian Government's integration strategy, *Integration through Knowledge (2019–2022)*, provides guidance for a cross-sectoral effort to achieve faster and better integration. The main goal of the strategy is a higher rate of participation in the work force and in society. Knowledge, education and Norwegian language skills are the most important bases for entering the labour market and building a good life. Knowledge and a high level of skills

in the population are also decisive, both for change and future value creation and for the sustainability of the welfare society. The efforts to improve knowledge, skills and qualifications are thus the most important component of the integration strategy. The strategy will help immigrants and their descendants obtain the skills that both they and society need so that they can enter the labour market and become active, independent participants in society. Improved access to flexible and decentralised education and qualifications can also help close the skills gap that excludes many immigrants from the work force and society.

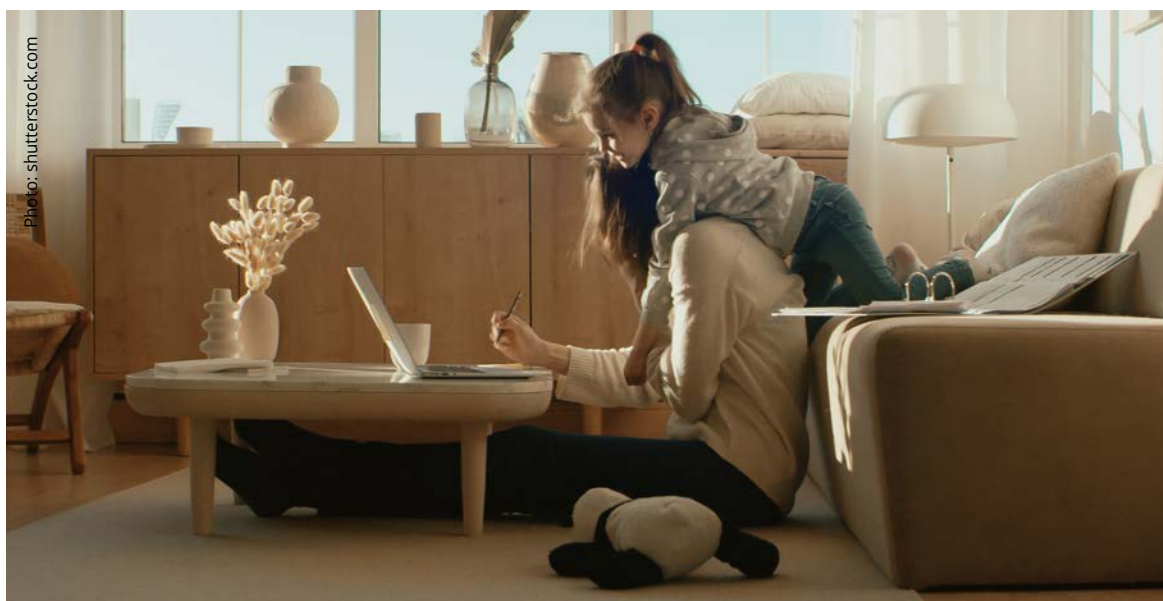
The country's need for skills varies among regions, industries and trades. It also varies among the people who need to acquire skills, depending on their life situation. Programmes at vocational colleges, university colleges and universities must, to a greater extent than is currently the case, accommodate a diversity of students and a multifaceted work force that is undergoing change.

The Norwegian Government is opening up upper secondary education, vocational college education and higher education. "Flexible education" is an umbrella term for education that is structured to be more accessible to people who are unable to study full-time on campus or at a place of study. The programmes may be session-based, module-based, part-time, web-based or decentralised. A single programme may have multiple structural components, such as topics and modules. With the growing use of digital instruction, it is becoming more difficult to distinguish between full-time studies on campus/at a

place of study, decentralised programmes and flexible programmes. Many students, including those who live near a campus, may benefit from flexible teaching plans.

This strategy is part of the Norwegian Government's long-term efforts to make education more accessible to people, regardless of their place of residence or phase of life. Among other things, it builds on the white paper *The Skills Reform – Lifelong Learning* and the white paper *Education for Change – Better working life relevance in higher education*. The strategy for flexible and decentralised education puts particular emphasis on its decentralised, or geographical, component. The Norwegian Government, which wishes to accelerate the development of flexible education programmes and promote the decentralised perspective, has initiated a number of measures that will strengthen the development of such programmes in the years to come. This strategy contextualises these measures and sets the course going forward.

This strategy must be viewed in the context of other strategies of the Norwegian Government, especially the strategy for vocational college education. The purpose of that strategy is to create a framework for the development of the vocational college education sector, which is growing rapidly. That strategy emphasises the need to continue increasing the capacity of the vocational college education sector. In addition, it highlights the need to actively encourage exceptional quality. In the autumn of 2021, the Norwegian Government also presented a new digitalisation strategy for the university and university college sector. The strategy for flexible and decentralised education must also be viewed in relation to the Government's strategies for business development along the coast, in mountain and inland rural areas, and in small towns and urban areas. Skills are a key component of these three strategies for rural areas.





Box 1

Key terms

Institution is used in higher education to describe a university or university college as an organisational unit, *while campus or place of study* is used to describe a physical location. A university college or a university may have several campuses. In this strategy, *campus* is generally used to emphasise physical location. *Vocational education college* is used to refer to a vocational educational institution beyond the high school level, and the physical location is referred to as the *place of study*. A vocational education college often has several places of study.

Flexible education programmes are programmes with multiple options for learning activities in respect of time, place, scope and progression. Programmes may be web-based and/or location-based.

The Database for Statistics on Higher Education (DBH) distinguishes between web-based and decentralised education programmes:

Web-based education programmes may be fully digital but may also be supplemented by regional or campus-based study sessions.

Decentralised higher education programmes take place at physical gathering places other than university or university college campuses. Instruction is often provided in blocks of time (e.g. as weekly or weekend sessions).

Location-based education refers to programmes that require physical attendance at the campus or place of study.

With the increased use of digital and web-based learning resources, the distinction between web-based, decentralised and location-based education is sometimes unclear.

This strategy builds on the measures and extensive knowledge base that have been developed in conjunction with other processes:

- Meld. St. 14 (2019–2020) Report to the Storting (white paper) *The Skills Reform – Lifelong Learning* (skills reform)
- Meld. St. 16 (2020–2021) Report to the Storting (white paper) *Education for Change – Better working life relevance in higher education* (report on Working Life Relevance)
- Meld. St. 19 (2020–2021) Report to the Storting (white paper) *Governance of Public Universities and University Colleges* (the Governance Report)
- Meld. St. 16 (2016–2017) Report to the Storting (white paper) *Quality Culture in Higher Education* (quality report)
- Prop. 111 L (2020-2021) *Amendments to the Act Relating to Universities and University Colleges, the Student Financial Aid Act, the Vocational College Act and the Professional Qualifications Act, etc.* (consolidated proposition)
- Meld. St. 5 (2019–2020) Report to the Storting (white paper) *Levende lokalsamfunn for fremtiden (Thriving Communities for the Future)*
- Norwegian Official Report 2020: 12 *Næringslivets betydning for levende og bærekraftige lokalsamfunn (The importance of business and industry for thriving and sustainable local communities)* (Commission on Rural Business Development)

- Norwegian Official Report 2020: 15 *Det handler om Norge – Utredning om konsekvenser av demografiutfordringer i distriktene (It's about Norway – Report on the consequences of demographic challenges in the rural areas)* (Commission on Rural Demographics)
- The Norwegian Agency for International Cooperation and Quality Enhancement in Higher Education's (Diku) series of reports 05/2021: *Kartlegging av studiesentre: organisering og rammebetingelser (Survey of Study Centres: structure and framework conditions)*
- Tilstandsrapporter om høyere utdanning, most recent Diku series of reports 07/2021 *Tilstandsrapport for høyere utdanning 2021 (Status Report on Higher Education 2021)*

Furthermore, as part of its work on the strategy, the Minister of Research and Higher Education has held six regional meetings where the county councils, educational institutions, students, social partners, representatives of public and private working and business life, study centres and several other actors have contributed.

In recent years, there has been strong growth in block grants for universities and university colleges and operating grants for vocational education colleges. During the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2021, extraordinary resources have been made available to ensure that universities, university colleges and vocational colleges can develop and offer flexible programmes. Staff at vocational colleges, university colleges and universities have gone to great lengths to make higher education available to new and existing groups of students. In addition, digital solutions and new

organisational models have been developed for flexible instruction, exams and fieldwork.

The government and its ministries can have an impact on the goals, development and activities of higher education institutions. This is achieved by way of laws and regulations, annual state budgets and other procedures in the annual governance cycle. In addition, the Directorate of Higher Education and Skills, the National Agency of Quality Assurance and the Education and Research Sector's service provider play a role in the higher education system.

This strategy contains several expectations of institutions of higher education and indicates measures to achieve the desired

development of the sector. The strategy also highlights the county councils' important role as a skills policy actor and as an owner and administrator of vocational college education; cf. Meld. St. 6 (2018–2019) Report to the Storting (white paper) *Oppgaver til nye regioner (Tasks for New Regions) and Innstilling (Recommendation) 119 S (2018–2019)*.

This strategy also takes note of challenges and opportunities as these relate to the work force and to students themselves. It includes positive examples to inspire the various actors and it encourages better facilitation of the attainment of the strategy's goals within working life.



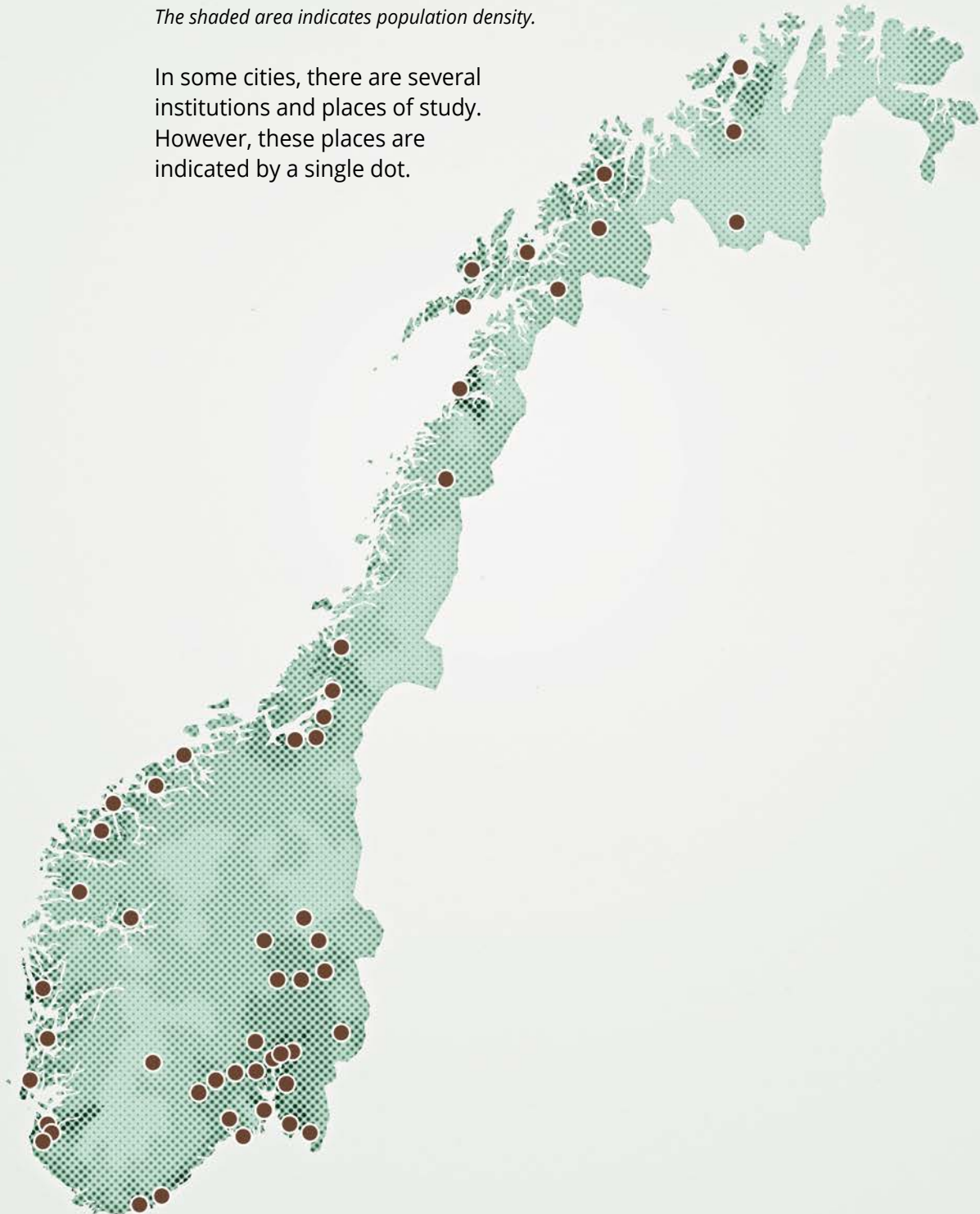


Map 1

University and university college places of study

The shaded area indicates population density.

In some cities, there are several institutions and places of study. However, these places are indicated by a single dot.



Opportunities and challenges

There are 24 public universities and university colleges and 25 private university colleges in Norway. Many of these institutions have more than one campus, as well as programmes that are spread out geographically. During the 2020-2021 academic year, public universities and university colleges had approximately 70 physical places of study, while private university colleges had approximately 40. In the same academic year, 73 vocational colleges had a total of 183 places of study or locations where educational programmes were provided. This includes session-based education programmes.

The maps on pages 10 and 14 show the places where students were registered for location-based instructional programmes during the 2020–2021 academic year. These programmes are still admitting students, which shows that there is already a highly decentralised place-of-study structure in Norway.

A closer look shows that half of the population in Norway lives within ten kilometres of at least ten different types of programmes and nearly everyone lives within one hundred kilometres of a programme.

In addition, several study centres and places resembling study centres cooperate with vocational colleges, university colleges and universities to offer education in different parts of the country; see the map on page 24. In recent years, there has been a rise in the number of students enrolled in flexible programmes off campus. Web-based instruction at universities and university colleges is rising, while decentralised instruction is declining somewhat. In 2020,

the number of students in decentralised programmes increased for the first time since 2015, but the sharpest increase occurred in web-based programmes. Compared with 2019, the number of students in such programmes rose by 25 per cent. Furthermore, some session-based instruction offered by certain institutions is reported as “instruction at the institution”. This was a positive development until universities and university colleges had to switch to mostly digital teaching due to the pandemic. The positive development in purely web-based instruction and web-based instruction with study sessions is even more pronounced among vocational education colleges.

Most educational institutions are located in a city or urban area. This may be an obstacle for students who are unable or unwilling to move away from rural areas to study. There may, however, be good reasons for many young people to move in order to pursue an education. The Commission on Rural Demographics notes that many young people move to major cities rather than to the nearest institution. Many students who study in smaller places also move to larger cities for work after completing their studies. Recruitment of competent labour is challenging in many rural municipalities.

According to both the Commission on Rural Demographics and the Commission on Rural Business Development, it is especially important to have flexible and decentralised education programmes for those who are already established in rural areas as well as for those who wish to live and study there. These may be web-based, session-based or decentralised, or a combination of such programmes. There is no one-size-fits-all

solution. The Commission on Rural Demographics has determined that solutions for ensuring recruitment to rural areas must be linked to elements in several different sectors, such as well-functioning housing markets in rural areas and infrastructure that ties housing and labour markets together. This is also essential for maintaining a dispersed population of refugees and other groups of immigrants. It is therefore essential to have several types of programmes that meet these groups' different needs.

The Commission on Rural Demographics has also pointed out that traineeships in rural areas must be better utilised. Decentralised programmes offer an opportunity to establish and utilise traineeships in the municipal sector that are not currently used due to the distance to campus. Such traineeships could also support the municipalities in their recruitment of healthcare personnel, for instance.

Flexible and decentralised education programmes must be closely linked to the need for skills in the community and in the work force of the various regions and must meet individual students' demands for education. However, the community's need for skills may not always align with the institution's education programmes. Universities, university colleges and vocational education colleges must therefore cooperate with county councils and with the public and private enterprises

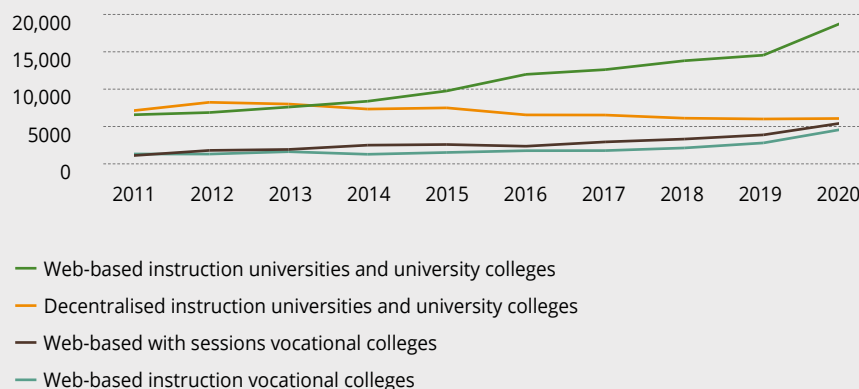
in the regional skills forums to identify which education programmes are needed and sufficient numbers of students can be recruited to these programmes. Even if a skills deficit has been identified in a region, increasing the number of education programmes and study places in the field of study will be of little assistance if the recruitment of students fails.

For this reason, it is important to assess the demand for education and mobilise both enterprises and applicants for studies. On this basis, the Government has initiated the pilot project Skills Pilots (2020–2022) and tripartite industry programmes; see Box 3 on page 17.

The Commission on Employment (cf. Norwegian Official Report 2021:2 Skills, Activity and Income Protection) believes that the parties to working life must develop the provision of continuing and further education together with providers. For this reason, a tripartite industry programme for skills development is, according to the commission, one of several models that should be further developed. More open and flexible education programmes are also a key objective in our neighbouring countries. As part of its new skills agenda, the EU is working on micro-credentials, which are intended to provide more flexible module-structured education programmes. The goal is to achieve a broader range of educational opportunities and a bigger role in lifelong learning for universities, university colleges and vocational colleges.



Figure 1
Number of students in flexible programmes at universities, university colleges and vocational education colleges, 2011–2020



Box 2
Funding for the development of traineeships

In the summer of 2020, several universities and university colleges were granted funding by the Norwegian Agency for International Cooperation and Quality Enhancement in Higher Education (Diku) to develop flexible education programmes. The University of South-Eastern Norway (USN) received NOK 5.6 million for its project *Sustainable Nursing Education: Flexible and Decentralised Programmes of Study for the Rural Areas*. This decentralised nursing programme will be a four-year part-time programme developed in collaboration with the municipalities and the health services of the rural areas. The programme will support better utilisation of work placements in the municipalities because it will enable the use of places that typically would not have been used due to excessive travel times.

OsloMet received NOK 5 million from Diku to develop a supplementary education programme for refugees and immigrants who have received nursing education in their home country (outside the EU/EEA). This programme will be organised on a part-time basis and offered in the county of Nordland from the spring of 2022.



Map 2

Vocational college places of study

The shaded area indicates population density.

In some cities, there are several institutions and places of study. However, these places are indicated by a single dot.



Goals and priority areas

The goal of this strategy is to improve access to flexible and decentralised high-quality education programmes that are adapted to the various needs of the labour

market and of individuals. The Government has four different priority areas in this strategy that will contribute to attaining this goal.



Priority areas of the strategy

1. Increasing access to flexible and decentralised programmes throughout the country
2. Strengthening cooperation between actors in education and working life and ensuring a better connection between supply and demand
3. Efforts to ensure high-quality flexible education that is adapted to the needs of individuals and working life
4. Better framework conditions that offer better opportunities for institutions, working life and students



1: Increasing access to flexible and decentralised programmes throughout the country

Combining work and family with a long commute to participate in a study programme is expensive and challenging. Needs vary over time, and people live in many different places. Education programmes therefore need to be more flexible and targeted, which will involve making them more accessible so that they can take in a more multifaceted and geographically dispersed student group. Decentralisation may help make programmes more geographically accessible, and other forms of flexible adaptation can increase accessibility and quality for many students.

There has been an increase in the number of students enrolled in programmes that are not location-based (see Figure 1), but there is still room for improvement. Under the current government, several application-based schemes and programmes have been established with the aim of increasing access to study programmes that meet the changing needs of the work force over time; see Box 3.

The pandemic has shown the importance of having a flexible system that can quickly address the need for new skills. When the unemployment rate rose sharply in the spring of 2020, the Norwegian Government enhanced existing schemes so that those who became unemployed or were furloughed could use their newly available time for skills development. Coordinating overlapping schemes within a single directorate will make it even easier to respond quickly when skills needs arise.

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Lessons learned from the skills reform and the skills package show that educational institutions are capable of developing flexible solutions while also responding to any short-term needs that arise. The unplanned restructuring of educational institutions due to the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in major costs in terms of wellbeing, motivation, workload, and quality, according to the student health and wellbeing survey. However, the experience gained and skills developed during the crisis are of value to the efforts to make more education programmes available off campus.

Flexible programme schemes entail institutions being more flexible in the targeting of their programmes and providing decentralised programmes wherever the need arises. At the same time, the development desired needs to be supported with funding. Overall funding should be assessed to determine whether it is being provided in a manner that supports such development.



Box 3

Application-based schemes and programmes

The Skills Programme (Skills Norway) will develop education programmes that are needed in working life and can be combined with near full-time employment. This programme consists of several different schemes, including:

Grants for the development of flexible continuing education programmes in order to improve access to skills by enterprises that need to digitalise their business, improve digital skills for individuals and increase cooperation between educational institutions and businesses on the development of such continuing education programmes. These programmes will be developed in cooperation with university colleges, universities and vocational colleges and enterprises. To date, approximately NOK 125 million has been allocated.

The goal of the tripartite industry programme for skills development is to ensure that employees, furloughed personnel and unemployed persons in certain industries that are particularly in need of change will receive the skills development they need. This industry programme is a tripartite collaboration between government and social partners to increase participation in skills development. Applicants may be universities, university colleges, vocational education colleges, county councils, student unions or other private providers. To date, ten industry programmes have been established and been allocated approximately NOK 265 million.

The aim of **Skills Pilots** (2020–2022) is to identify enterprises' needs for skills-enhancement measures, as well as to link and facilitate adapted continuing and further education programmes in rural Norway. One important objective is the testing of different methods and models for this work. The Skills Pilots projects will contribute to the development and testing of new methods and models to reach this objective. The projects will also support the county councils' strategic roles and responsibilities in respect of regional skills policies. The target groups of the projects are public and private enterprises, particularly small businesses in rural Norway. All ten of the county councils in this scheme have initiated pilot projects.

The aim of **grants for flexible education** (Diku) is for universities and university colleges to offer flexible and relevant education for students who do not have the opportunity to study at a university or university college campus due to their place of residence or life situation. Universities and university colleges may apply. So far, approximately NOK 193 million has been allocated.



Box 4

The Skills Reform and the Skills Package

Since 2018, the Norwegian Government has allocated approximately NOK 1 billion to the development and operation of flexible programmes. Part of these funds are being utilised for programmes targeting selected industries through the Industry Programme. In addition, vocational colleges, university colleges and universities are invited to apply for funding to develop and operate flexible programmes. The schemes are organised by the Directorate of Higher Education and Skills. Funding for web-based programmes initiated for people who have become unemployed or been furloughed in connection with the COVID-19 crisis (i.e. the Skills Package) are part of these schemes. This commitment has resulted in a broad range of flexible programmes at all levels of education and in many disciplines throughout the country.

The Norwegian Government has prioritised programmes pertaining to the green shift, technology and health, and skills for selected industries that have been proposed by the social partners. Many enterprises have been involved in developing programmes. Most of these programmes are web-based; they often include study sessions and can be provided to people who do not live near campus.



Priority area 1

Prioritised measures

- Following up prioritisations by universities and university colleges for flexible and decentralised education through the governance dialogue
- Emphasising flexible and decentralised programmes in proposals for the funding of increased educational capacity at universities and university colleges in forthcoming years
- Continued prioritisation of funds for flexible and decentralised education programmes and other application-based schemes
- Establishing a separate rural programme to stimulate demand in rural areas
- Gathering all current application-based schemes and programmes that offer support for flexible education programmes under the Directorate for Higher Education and Skills and considering the coordination and harmonisation of overlapping schemes
- Developing fully digital education programmes
- Assessing labour market relevance, continuing and further education and flexible and decentralised programmes when reviewing the funding system for higher education
- Following up the educational capacity of vocational colleges in line with the strategy for vocational college education
- Assessing how to improve reporting on and knowledge of the scope, quality, implementation and results of flexible programmes



More information on the measures

Expectations of educational institutions

The Norwegian Government expects universities and university colleges to prioritise lifelong learning as well as flexible and decentralised programmes within their prevailing framework conditions. This is a key element of the institutions' social mission. The Ministry of Education and Research will follow this up in the governance dialogue with the sector.

This does not mean that everyone should have the same expectations. A more differentiated governance through institutional development goals and governance parameters must support

academic diversity and breadth in the sector while also adapting to different regional and local needs. Funding through e.g. application-based schemes, where the qualitatively best projects are rewarded, will support governance dialogue and development agreements.

The Government believes it is important for vocational colleges to continue their efforts to facilitate flexible education programmes for lifelong learning. In its strategy for vocational college education, the Norwegian Government has announced that it will establish a model for the distribution of places of study that builds on an available knowledge base and analyses of skills needs and that safeguards the skills needs of

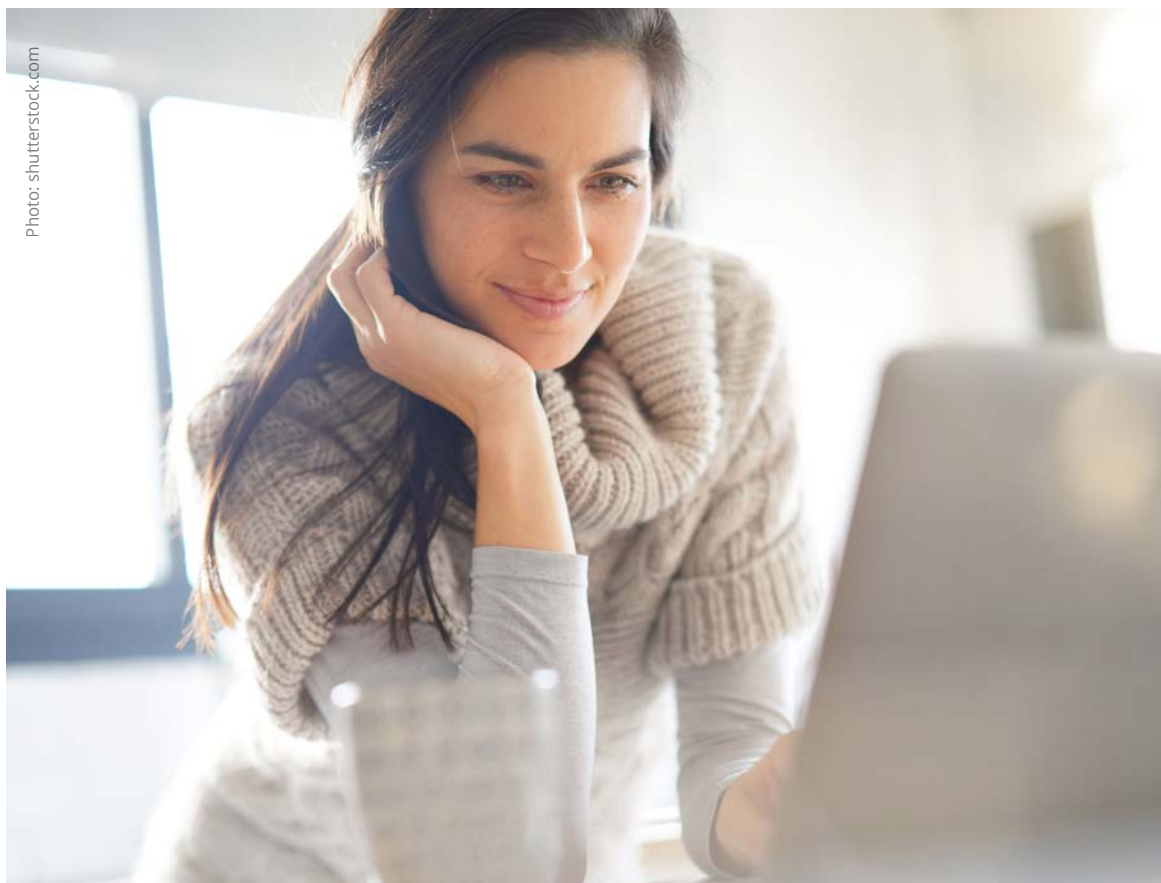


Photo: shutterstock.com

the labour market and vocational colleges' opportunities for planning. By engaging in dialogue and sharing the labour, vocational colleges, university colleges and universities can meet the needs of the population and the labour market in education programmes in different parts of the country.

Enhancing the funding for flexible and decentralised programmes

The Government will continue to enhance application-based schemes for the development and operation of flexible and decentralised programmes. The Government will address the structures of application-based schemes and ensure that fully digital programmes are developed. Furthermore, the Norwegian Government will establish a decentralised programme for skills development. This scheme will strengthen decentralised education programmes in rural areas in line with identified skills needs, both locally and regionally. The scheme will enable regional actors, in a binding collaboration with an educational institution, to apply for funding for the implementation of education programmes in line with identified demand. The scheme can help e.g. county councils, regional skills offices, enterprises and public services realise the skills plans they have developed. The aim of this scheme is to meet the specific skills needs that have been identified by county council assessments of skills needs and in discussions in regional skills forums, or through the skills pilots and the opportunities for mobilisation of demand that they have identified. The purpose is to ensure that the demand side can also take the initiative and

encourage an educational institution to offer decentralised programmes that meet the specific skills needs of rural areas. The application must document a binding collaboration between a party requesting skills and a university, university college or vocational college as the provider of education. Detailed guidelines for the scheme, including who is eligible to apply, will be developed in collaboration with the Directorate of Higher Education and Skills.

In its proposals for funding the increased capacity of education programmes at universities and university colleges in the years ahead, the Norwegian Government will prioritise flexible and decentralised programmes. The Government will also consider whether the Directorate of Higher Education and Skills should be involved in announcing application-based funds for the increased capacity of education programmes at universities and university colleges when appropriate. These application-based funds will supplement the funding of the universities' and university colleges' block grants and operating grants for vocational education colleges. The relationship between the universities' and university colleges' block grants and application-based funds will be assessed as part of a comprehensive review of the funding system. In its white paper *Governance of Public Universities and University Colleges*, the Norwegian Government has announced a comprehensive review of the funding of universities and university colleges in support of the policy goals of the sector. In this connection, labour market relevance, continuing and further education and flexible programmes, including programmes in rural areas, will be specific topics for

consideration. Greater scope for universities and university colleges to charge tuition fees for continuing education will also help increase capacity and ensure additional programmes; further information is available under Priority Area 4.

The funding scheme for the vocational education college sector is being evaluated as part of the follow-up in Meld. St. 9 (2016–2017) Report to the Storting (white paper) *Fagfolk for fremtiden – Fagskoleutdanning (Skilled Workers for the Future – Vocational College Education)*.

Comprehensive administration of application-based funds through the Directorate of Higher Education and Skills

The Directorate of Higher Education and Skills was established on 1 July 2021. At that time, all relevant schemes and programmes for flexible education that earlier were under Diku and Skills Norway were gathered in one place; see Box 3.

This will permit a comprehensive perspective on the structures of, and connection between, various application-based schemes in the years to come, which will make them more user-friendly for applicants.

The Directorate will be responsible for a comprehensive analysis and information system to address national and regional needs for highly educated labour and which is aimed at applicants for studies, institutions and authorities. This, combined

with its comprehensive responsibility for application-based schemes for flexible education programmes and close dialogue with skills policy actors, will facilitate more significant efforts in the years ahead.

Better knowledge base and reporting

There is a need for better reporting and a better knowledge base in terms of the scope, quality, implementation and results of flexible programmes. Statistics should, to a greater extent than at present, highlight how institutions succeed in providing programmes for different segments of the population. This applies to how the programmes are used by individuals from different geographical areas and with different educational and work backgrounds.

It may also be appropriate to distinguish between different forms of decentralised programmes, such as those organised by an educational institution with session-based elements and programmes that have a regular base somewhere other than an institution, such as at a study centre. In addition, it may be appropriate to distinguish among types of education using various elements of digital technology. This is discussed in greater detail in the 2021–2025 digitalisation strategy for the university and university college sector that was launched in September 2021.

The Ministry will, in cooperation with the Directorate of Higher Education and Skills, assess how to enhance reporting and expand the knowledge base.

2: Strengthening cooperation between actors in education and working life and ensuring a better connection between supply and demand

It is currently too difficult for students and employers to gain an overview of the flexible education programmes that are available. Similarly, it is challenging for educational institutions to gain an overview of the needs of, and recruitment opportunities in, the work force.

It must become easier for various groups of students to locate education programmes. There is also a need for more information about national and regional needs for qualifications.

Therefore, it is important to develop local and regional cooperation and coordination, which will make it easier to define and identify needs and mobilise demand.

On the supply side, there is a need for greater cooperation between educational institutions to, for instance, ensure that programmes are offered across regions by cooperating educational institutions. It is not necessary for every institution to be equally good at everything. Good cooperation across counties will benefit everyone.

As responsibility for skills policies has been assigned to county councils through the regional reform, it is natural that the county councils, as skills policy actors, assume overall responsibility for their county. It is also desirable and beneficial for county councils to cooperate with each other to support better coordination between the different actors.



Box 5 **Lisa**

Lisa (41) works as a hotel manager in Lofoten. She has extensive experience in the hotel industry but has seen the need to enhance her skills. Therefore, she has completed the course Sustainable Visitor Management and Vibrant Local Communities. This course is offered by the Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU), which received a grant to develop it through Diku's programme for flexible education programmes. The course is web-based and has study sessions in different places in Nordland County. It was developed in cooperation with Nordland County Council. The aim of the course is to increase the competence of municipal planners and other actors in the public and private sector, especially those with responsibilities in the fields of land and environmental management, tourism and community development. According to Lisa, it is a good, inspiring course, as well as an important course at this time. She says that it is great to see so many people from the industry on the course, as this offers added value. "It is difficult to combine studies with a full-time job, family and other activities," says Lisa. "But this type of structure makes it manageable."



Map 3

Study centres and similar places

The shaded area indicates population density. Source: Diku 2021

The centres are placed at their mailing address location but many of them cover a larger geographical area.





Priority area 2

Prioritised measures

- Strengthening the culture of cooperation between different actors in education and working life, nationally and regionally
- Implementing regional meetings with representatives of the county council, enterprises, public services, social partners, educational institutions and students in order to follow up the strategy
- Building on the county councils' comprehensive responsibility and their role as a skills policy actor
- Continuing the assessment of a digital skills platform for lifelong learning
- Developing a comprehensive analysis and information system to address national and regional needs for highly educated labour and aimed at applicants for studies, universities and university colleges and authorities
- Establishing an application-based scheme through which study centres and similar actors can apply for funding for projects and activities in cooperation with providers of education



More information on the measures

Culture of cooperation

The Norwegian Government wishes to enhance the national and regional culture of cooperation in education planning. In order to succeed, educational institutions must prioritise lifelong learning and flexible and decentralised programmes. This is part of the institutions' current mission. Nevertheless, the institutions must reprioritise resources in order to enhance the development and offer of flexible and decentralised programmes. Many programmes that are currently offered only on campus may be relevant to a greater number of people if offered in a flexible manner.

Furthermore, the Government would like to see greater cooperation among vocational education colleges, university colleges and universities on the provision of flexible and decentralised programmes. The Directorate of Higher Education and Skills has announced funds intended to help facilitate good bridging schemes between vocational education colleges and university colleges and universities. The University of South-Eastern Norway, the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, the University of Tromsø – The Arctic University of Norway and Western Norway University of Applied Sciences have already jointly established the Maritime Bachelor's Degree Programme, which is specially adapted to applicants who have completed two-year maritime vocational college studies. This is one example of how cooperation on the use of equipment and facilities can provide better programmes and be more resource-efficient for the institutions. Other public bodies such as municipalities and county councils can cooperate with

the educational institutions to facilitate a physical study environment for students undertaking studies in a decentralised manner by helping to create gathering places in existing facilities at schools, town halls, libraries, etc. In this manner, they will help programmes become more widely accessible. Other enterprises may, of course, also contribute by making suitable facilities available in their own enterprises or in business parks or similar. Student centres also play an important role in programme outreach.

The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) is another important actor at the regional level. NAV is well acquainted with the labour market and has good knowledge of regional labour needs. The experiences of the Skills Package show that cross-sectoral cooperation, especially with NAV, is a decisive success factor for greater participation in relevant skills development. NAV can be an important cooperation partner that can help good flexible-education programmes reach the unemployed, furloughed and vulnerable in the labour market.

It may be challenging for providers of education to obtain an adequate overview of the needs of the labour market and of applicants for studies. Private and public enterprises should coordinate their skills needs to a greater extent to make demand as coherent as possible. Such "purchaser competence" may make it easier to cooperate with educational institutions on the development of targeted programmes because it will be easier for the providers of education to relate to needs. In several of the application-based schemes to be gathered under the Directorate of

Higher Education and Skills, there is a requirement for cooperation between actors and for parties from working life to define needs. In addition, providers of education may more easily reach students with good programmes when the cooperation between concerned parties is closer and more binding. This can be achieved through shared use of meeting spaces or agreements to borrow/lease facilities used by universities, university colleges, vocational education colleges, enterprises, study centres etc. Solutions may differ in different parts of the country.

In order to ensure follow-up of the strategy, the Government will facilitate regular regional meetings with, among others, representatives of the county council, enterprises, public services, social partners, educational institutions, study centres and students. The regional skills forums can create a basis for dialogue. The purpose of these meetings will be to review the implementation status of the strategy for flexible and decentralised education in the region. The Directorate of Higher Education and Skills will be given a key role in the implementation of the meetings.

The skills policy role of county councils

Skills needs are not the same in all parts of the country, and the regions face different challenges in terms of meeting their skills needs. There are different types of businesses in different regions. There are also variations in education levels and population age. Furthermore, enterprises in different parts of the country face varying degrees of challenge in recruitment.

Through the regional reform, the county councils were given enhanced responsibility for skills policy in their respective regions. In recent years, the county councils have systematically carried out their skills policy role. The county councils are increasingly assuming overall responsibility for skills policy in the county. All of the county councils have established, or are in the process of establishing, regional skills forums in which social partners and representatives from the university and university college sector, vocational education colleges and NAV can participate. The skills forums are now, to a considerable extent, well-functioning arenas for discussing skills needs and the development of skills policy strategies and measures in the counties. The knowledge base for regional skills needs is a key topic for the skills forums.

The county councils have also been made responsible for improving coherence between the demand for labour in the labour market and individual development and use of own skills. The need for cooperation and coordination is considerable. How this can best be implemented varies in different parts of the country. For instance, in some regions, study centres play an important role in delivering programmes, while in others, it is appropriate to structure the programmes differently or prioritise other needs. In the working life relevance report, the Norwegian Government shows e.g. how regional skills forums and the Council for Cooperation with Working Life at universities and university colleges can cooperate to create regional arenas for cooperation.

Information and guidance are important in ensuring that the flexible programmes are put to use and meet individual needs. Close interaction between county council career centres, enterprises and providers of education is important.

In the new Integration Act, the county councils have been given special responsibility for drawing up plans for the qualification of immigrants. These plans shall include measures to help immigrants obtain qualifications to meet regional labour needs. This entails the individual county council being aware of the skills and skills needs of immigrants residing in their county. The councils should also have an overview of education programmes that are specially adapted for adult speakers of minority languages, including Norwegian language training programmes.

As owner of the public vocational education colleges and with responsibility for administering government grants to both public and private vocational education colleges, the county councils are also a key actor in the regional development of

vocational college education. The vocational education colleges provide programmes that are directly relevant to the labour market. They provide flexible continuing education programmes to meet the specific and immediate skills needs of companies and enterprises. This makes the vocational education colleges a significant resource when moving from assessed needs to the delivered replenishment of skills in the work force. The Norwegian Government believes that the vocational colleges offer considerable potential as a tool for the development of locally adapted skills and as participants in the strategic skills efforts of the counties.

In consultation with the members of the Skills Policy Council, the Government will renew the national skills policy strategy and collaborate to further develop the work of the National Skills Council.

Digital skills platform for lifelong learning

It is not enough to just develop more flexible programmes and stimulate demand. We must also ensure the best



Photo: shutterstock.com

possible match between the programmes that are developed and the demand of individuals and enterprises. Individuals and enterprises need to know about the availability of programmes and opportunities, and providers need an overview of the skills needs of the work force. As a follow-up of the Skills Reform, the Directorate for ICT and joint services in higher education and research (UNIT) and the Directorate of Higher Education and Skills are preparing a report on a digital skills platform for lifelong learning that has been commissioned by the government.

Analysis and information system

In the Governance Report, the Government announced the development of a comprehensive analysis and information system in respect of national and regional needs for highly educated labour that is directed at applicants for studies, universities and university colleges and authorities. Responsibility for the analysis and information system will be given to the Directorate of Higher Education and Skills, and the system is to be based on the Committee on Skills Needs' analyses and related processes. The Ministry of Education and Research will consider how to include vocational education colleges and other levels of education in the analysis and information system.

The role of study centres

In many places, study centres and similar actors play an important role in facilitating flexible and decentralised education programmes locally, partly by connecting those requesting a relevant education

and those who can offer it, as well as providing information about programmes and mobilising enterprises and individuals to take part in skills development. The Government plans to establish a new application-based scheme under the Directorate of Higher Education and Skills for actors from study centres and similar actors.

Such a scheme will be based on the ability of study centres, in collaboration with providers of education, to play a significant role in reaching out to and facilitating flexible and decentralised education programmes for students. An application-based scheme will ensure that funding goes towards qualitatively good projects and activities in cooperation with providers of education, who will have academic responsibility (vocational education colleges, university colleges and universities). Their role will vary between regions and between different study centres. The application-based scheme will make it possible for study centres to apply for funding by performing relevant activities, such as activities related to information, mobilisation and facilitation. An application-based scheme will ensure targeted funding.

The scheme will require applicants to document collaboration with an educational institution that can offer accredited programmes and the project's anticipated receipt of funding from other actors, such as county councils, municipalities and/or business actors. Detailed guidelines for the scheme will be developed in cooperation with the Directorate of Higher Education and Skills. The Government will address the scope of the scheme in the national budget.

3: Efforts to ensure high-quality flexible education that is adapted to the needs of individuals and working life

The Quality Reform for Higher Education (the Norwegian version of the Bologna Process) emphasised a degree structure based on education programmes that form a coherent whole. *The Quality Report* offers a range of definitions and understandings of the term *quality*. These include essential elements of quality (see Figure 2) and standards that must be maintained to ensure students' learning outcomes. The report also relates to excellence, diversity, change and innovation, efficiency and, not least, labour market relevance.

Educational institutions must strike a good balance between campus-based and flexible, decentralised education for both degree programmes and shorter programmes. In the years ahead, it will be important to organise degree programmes in a manner that enables more students to complete a larger proportion of their programmes digitally.

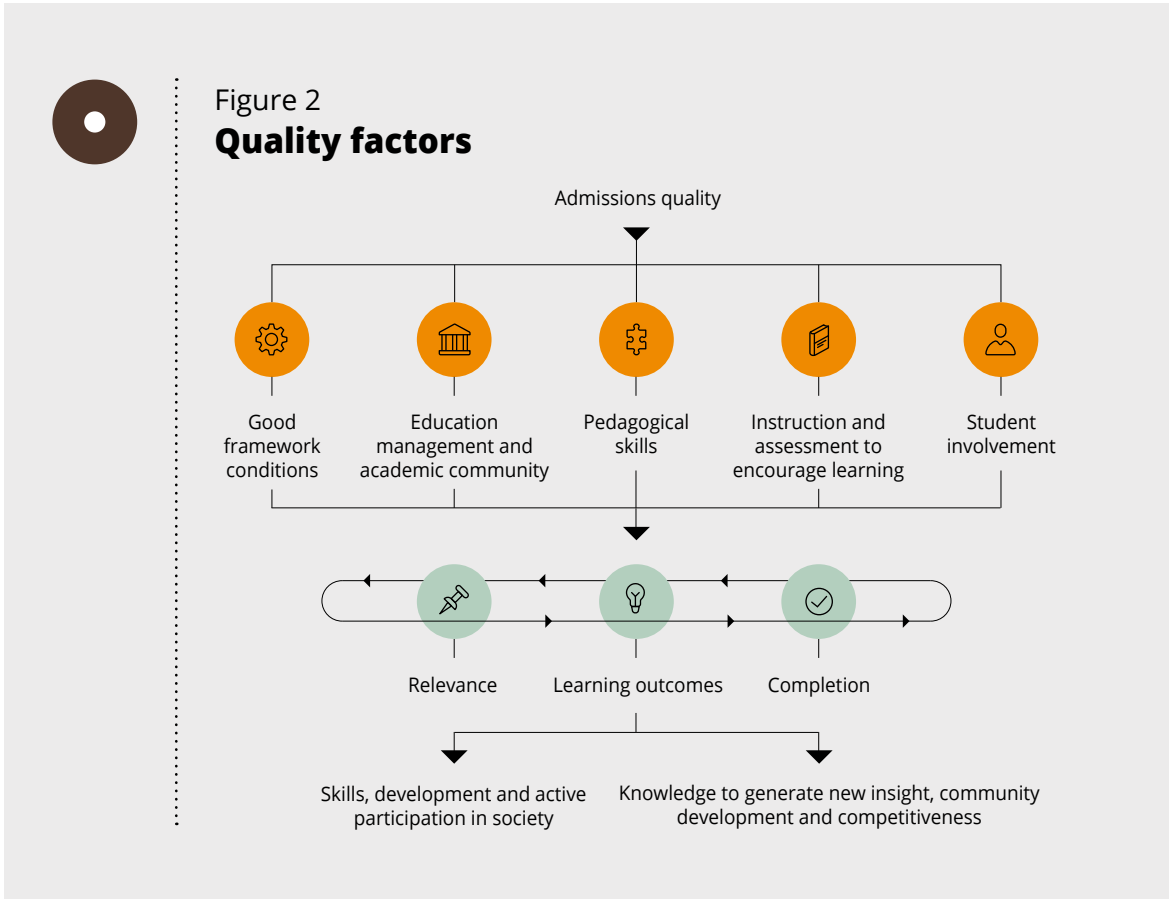
The requirements for the educational quality of degree programmes and shorter programmes are the same. The requirements for mandatory traineeships and other skills training must be safeguarded, regardless of how the programmes are structured. Whether programmes are provided on campus or are decentralised and/or flexible, learning outcomes must be achieved within the framework of the National Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning. Education programmes provided at universities and university colleges must also be research-based. Education programmes must be developed within an academic community and the instruction they provide must be subject to quality assurance by qualified personnel.

” *One important lesson of the COVID-19 period is that future education programmes should combine a physical presence on campus and digital instruction in a manner that promotes learning outcomes, a learning environment and flexibility.*

It is challenging to develop digital teaching methods that ensure good learning outcomes and skills that are needed in the labour market. Greater emphasis on learning and practice at the workplace also necessitates pedagogical adaptations that take account of adult students with extensive work experience. In order to succeed in this, it is important that educators have a high level of pedagogical skill.

The digital transformation will trigger changes in study habits and learning preferences that educational institutions must meet if they are to remain relevant in the future. Despite the problems and challenges that rapid digitalisation during the COVID-19 pandemic has created for students, nearly half of the respondents in the Student Barometer Survey for universities and university colleges in autumn 2020 stated that they had come to view web-based teaching more favourably. This is a good starting point for continued work on the digital transformation in education, which must give high priority to quality, flexibility and good pedagogical use of digital technology. One important lesson of the COVID-19 period is that future

education programmes should combine a physical presence on campus and digital instruction in a manner that promotes learning outcomes, a learning environment and flexibility.



Box 6
Cato

Cato (38) lost his job in the spring of 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and since then he has applied for many jobs. He took advantage of the opportunity to take a web-based course, *Process Management and Design Thinking*, at the University of Agder, as it is in a field where he wanted to enhance his skills. After the course, he was hired for a temporary position at the Norwegian Communications Authority, and he believes that this course helped him to secure the job. By replenishing his skills in this manner, he showed the employer that he had the ability and the willingness to acquire new knowledge.



Priority area 3

Prioritised measures

- Continued commitment to quality-promoting measures for education programmes through the Directorate of Higher Education and Skills
- Emphasis on better pedagogical skills among teaching staff at universities and university colleges
- Utilisation of digital technology to ensure that more students have access to higher education regardless of life situation, work situation or place of residence
- Stimulation of quality development of web-based and session-based vocational education by way of skills enhancement in web-based teaching
- Encouraging educational institutions to structure education programmes so that they can be adapted to meet the needs of and provide opportunities to various types of students
- Offering supplementary education to individuals with foreign education credentials
- Considering a review of quality criteria



More information on the measures

Quality-promoting measures in the programmes

As part of the escalation plan for the current long-term plan for research and higher education and as part of the strategy for vocational college education, the Norwegian Government will continue to facilitate quality-promotion measures through the Directorate of Higher Education and Skills. This pertains to programmes that promote enhanced quality in education, active learning for students and greater relevance to the labour market.

Digital transformation

The new 2021–2025 digitalisation strategy for the university and university college sector was launched in the autumn of 2021. This strategy involves, among other things, digitalisation for flexible education, digital pedagogical innovation, digital skills in all subjects and a culture of digital transformation. Digital pedagogical innovation and digitalisation for flexible education will be especially important for achieving the objectives in the strategy for flexible and decentralised education.

Teaching methods and the role of the educator must be developed so that they emphasise knowledge about learning and teaching as well as academic knowledge. Physical infrastructure and technological equipment must facilitate different forms of education and good learning environments in physical, fully digital, mixed and hybrid instruction.

Pedagogical principles and didactic methods must be developed to ensure that different types of digital teaching methods can be utilised to support the improved learning and involvement of all students, regardless of life situation, work situation or place of residence.

The digital transformation of education must be based on a clear understanding of the students seeking an education and their needs and preferences as regards instruction and learning. Better cooperation outside the university and university college sector is needed in order to create relevant education programmes that are available to all.

Turning to vocational education colleges, the Government has prioritised support for digital technology and investment in equipment and infrastructure through the development grants administered by Diku. This task is now to be the responsibility of the Directorate of Higher Education and Skills.

Structure and facilitation of education programmes

When education programmes are further developed, educational institutions must allow the same programme of education to be taken on a full-time or part-time basis, on campus or at a study centre, in flexible or decentralised form, and as a continuous trajectory or in modules (micro-credentials). Through well-planned organisation and the use of digital aids, a multi-faceted student group can complete the same education in different fashions.

By viewing the opportunities of different student groups and organisations in context, it will be easier to integrate lifelong learning into basic education. This includes the potential for offering Norwegian language classes to individuals with foreign education credentials and limited Norwegian language skills in parallel with supplementary education or other courses of study. Web-based Norwegian language study may be particularly relevant in this context. The manner in which institutions choose to facilitate this will vary according to the education programme, needs in different parts of the country and the prioritisation of resources.

As a follow-up of the *Skills Reform*, the Norwegian Government has proposed amendments to the Vocational College Act that permit accreditation of vocational college programmes that are shorter than

30 credits. The goal is to meet the demand among students and within the labour market for shorter flexible programmes.

Considering a review of quality criteria

Rapid changes in society require bringing skills up to date. New-generation digital skills and new technology provide opportunities for more flexible studies than ever before. It may therefore be necessary to reconsider how to facilitate and structure education programmes so as to meet the education and skills needs of tomorrow. The Ministry will determine the best possible way to achieve this, partly on the basis of the white paper on *Working Life Relevance*, the white paper *Governance of Public Universities and University Colleges* and partly on the basis of the new digitalisation strategy for the university and university college sector.



4: Better framework conditions that offer greater opportunities for institutions, working life and students

If we are to succeed in increasing access to flexible, high-quality education programmes as described in priority areas 1 to 3, it will be necessary to facilitate good framework conditions for the educational institutions, students and other actors. Regulations and funding schemes must, to the greatest extent possible, enable institutions both to develop shorter modules and to facilitate better opportunities to be paid for programmes requested by representatives of the labour market. Applicants for studies must be able to gain access and admission

to such programmes, and adult students who are working full-time and who have children, a mortgage or other obligations must have access to educational funding schemes that are better adapted to such programmes and to the students who use them.

Employers must make it easier for employees to study by allocating time for studies, exam preparation, etc. Needs in this regard may vary among students depending on their programme.



Box 7 Jørgen

Jørgen (41) runs his own graphic design and printing company. He has always been interested in robotics, and in 2020 he was admitted to a new programme at Hordaland Vocational College called *Robot Technology and Industrial Digital Production*. This programme was established in 2020 when the vocational college was allocated funding to expand education programmes for unemployed and furloughed students. A new virtual-physical factory was used for teaching students, which included online teaching. "This is a forward-looking and sustainable programme, and something I can work with for the rest of my life," says Jørgen. "There is a lot of theory in the programme, but the practical work with the virtual-physical factory is something different altogether. Everything is programmed, and the robots carry out the physical production. Programming and controlling are performed on a computer, and you can do it sitting anywhere in the world. This is a three-year, web-based programme with six study sessions per year." Jørgen finds it doable to follow the programme while running his own company.



Priority area 4

Prioritised measures

- Amending tuition fee regulations so that universities and university colleges can charge a tuition fee for education programmes specially adapted for students with work experience
- Continued efforts to make the Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund's schemes more flexible so that they are more adapted to lifelong learning
- Introduction of new regulations that make it easier to combine unemployment benefits with education
- Review of the regulations for admission to higher education, including flexible and decentralised education
- Encouraging institutions and employers to ensure good framework conditions for students to obtain a flexible and decentralised education



More information on the measures

Tuition Fees Regulations

The Norwegian Government has proposed amendments to the Tuition Fees Regulations which, following public consultation, it has decided to adopt. The changes will enter into force on 1 January 2022. This proposal will allow public universities and university colleges to offer fee-based education programmes that are adapted for students with work experience. The proposal will make higher education accessible to more students, regardless of life situation, and will increase the number of relevant continuing education programmes that can be taken in combination with work. This proposal makes it clear that programmes for students with work experience that charge tuition fees must not conflict with ordinary education programmes, which must remain free of tuition fees.

Funding for education

The Norwegian Government has made it easier for adults to receive subsistence funding so that they can combine studies and work. For instance, in 2020, it became possible to apply for a student loan when studying half-time or less, and students over the age of 30 can receive an additional loan of up to NOK 100,000 per year. The next step will be introduced in the autumn of 2021, when part-time education programmes will no longer count for as much as full-time programmes for a maximum period of eight years and will include the right to a loan and grant. In order for everyone to have access to shorter education programmes and to invest in

their own skills development, education funding must become more flexible and offer better income compensation for shorter periods.

Unemployment benefit regulations

The Norwegian Government has proposed new regulations that will make it easier for unemployed and furloughed persons to combine unemployment benefits with training and education programmes. In particular, it will be easier to spend the unemployment benefit period acquiring compulsory and upper secondary education and training and vocational college education.

For education programmes at universities and university colleges, the Government's proposals will impose certain limitations, such as age limits, study progression, duration and restriction to legitimate job seekers. This must be viewed in the context of the Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund's responsibility for education funding.

Admissions

If admissions rules are to help achieve the objectives of flexible and decentralised education, they must be designed to support them. Decentralised programmes of study are an important resource in terms of recruiting and retaining skills in rural municipalities. In some places, qualified applicants in local communities are overshadowed by more qualified applicants from other parts of the country. The current admissions regulations apply to basic

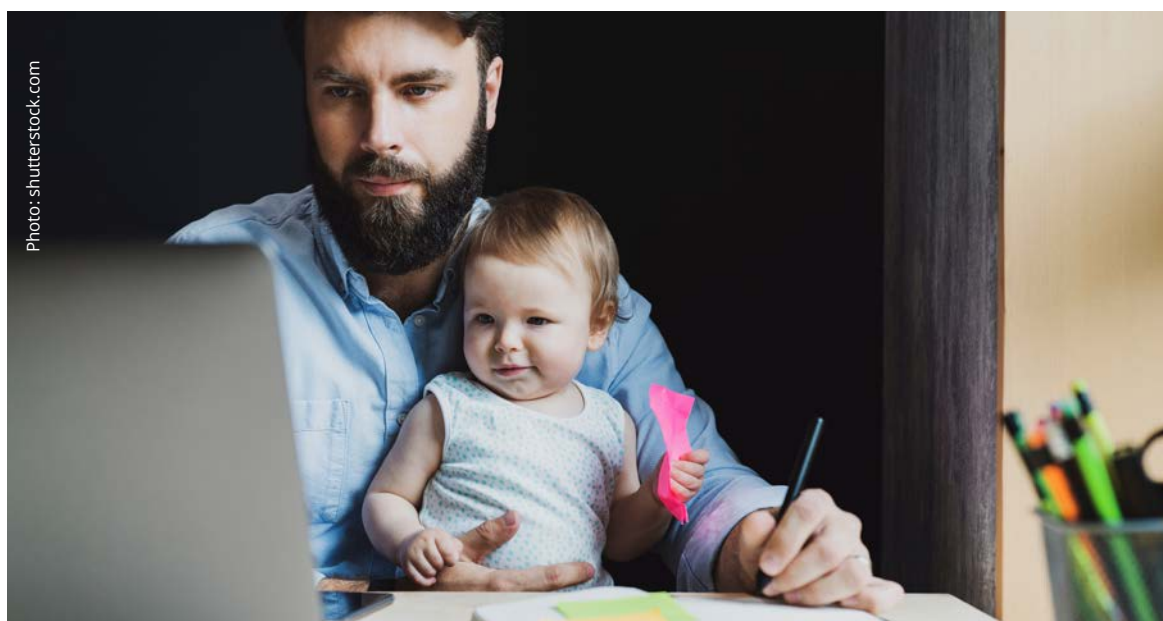
education and were generally established in 2007. Several amendments have since been made to adapt them to different needs.

In the spring of 2021, a commission was appointed to conduct a comprehensive review and assessment of the regulations for admission to universities and university colleges. The commission will look at all aspects of the current admissions regulations, including decentralised education, and make recommendations for regulations that will help ensure that the resources in the population are utilised in the best possible manner and that we can meet the needs of the labour market.

Give students good framework conditions for success in their education

Flexible and decentralised education programmes have their own challenges. At regional meetings and in other contexts,

a number of students have pointed out the need for further facilitation and support in order to successfully complete their education. This includes, among other things, sufficient time to study and prepare for exams and, in many cases, a longer unbroken period of time for work on assignments, attending sessions, and similar. Some students have a longer commute, which educational institutions and employers may need to consider when planning the structure of programmes and exams. The Government encourages the various actors, whether educational institutions, employers or others, to be as flexible as possible and to assist in their own areas to facilitate the students' studies as much as possible.



The road ahead

This strategy offers a direction for the education sector's work in the years ahead. The Norwegian Government and ministries will follow this up through relevant processes.

Implementation of this strategy will rely on the efforts of many different actors – or partners. It will require the effort of each individual partner with a role in the skills policy work. Good cooperation across regions and between the various actors is essential to continuing development in the desired direction.

County councils are a key partner in achieving the objectives of this strategy, both as administrators of the vocational education college sector and through their skills policy role; see the discussion above under Priority Area 2.

The Ministry of Education and Research wishes to have regular dialogue with the partners concerned in the years ahead on the status of the strategy's implementation and follow-up. The Ministry will collaborate with the Directorate of Higher Education and Skills and with the partners concerned, particularly the county councils, and will assess how such meeting arenas can best be facilitated. Follow-up must be viewed in connection with the work undertaken by the National Skills Policy Council.

This strategy will be a key part of the Ministry of Education and Research's governance dialogue with subordinate agencies such as the directorates, universities and university colleges.

Diku has assessed a new model for the dimensioning of vocational college education. This model is discussed in the strategy for vocational college education

” *Good cooperation across regions and between the different actors – or partners – is essential to continuing development in the desired direction*

and this discussion will be continued with the actors involved in the vocational education college sector.

The Directorate of Higher Education and Skills will be given a key role in the follow-up of the strategy. The Directorate will be given the important task of coordinating the overlapping parts of the application-based grant schemes for flexible and decentralised education. The Directorate will furthermore, in line with the white paper *Governance of Public Universities and University Colleges*, have responsibility for essential tasks related to the dimensioning of the education programmes, including a system to set out skills needs.

Financial and administrative consequences

Strategy measures may be implemented by way of current budgetary frameworks. Some of the measures are scalable, depending on the prevailing budgetary frameworks. The financial frameworks will be assessed in conjunction with the annual national budget.

A comprehensive review of the funding for universities and university colleges will be initiated in respect of the key considerations noted in this strategy. The funding system for vocational education colleges is currently being evaluated. Amendments to laws and regulations will be followed up in the usual manner.

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