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# ADULT EDUCATION IN NORWAY – AN OVERVIEW

*The paper gives a short overview of the institutional setting of the adult education system in Norway. After sketching the historical development of the system, the legislative framework and the bodies who are responsible for the adult education system are presented. This is followed by a presentation of the main providers of adult education and data about participation in adult education. Thereafter the financing of the adult education system is outlined. The paper concludes that Norway offers a legislative and institutional framework which provides favourable conditions for adult education.*

**Keywords:** Adult education in Norway, financing of adult education, participation, providers, Competence Reform, legislative framework.

## Preface

Interest in adult education has grown in the last decades. Many countries have realised that changing demands in working life and a constantly and rapidly changing world makes updated and new knowledge necessary in order to improve the economy's competitiveness, to increase the flexibility of the working force, and to enable the individuals to meet the new challenges which a changing world provides.

Individual countries have differing focuses on adult education, and the systems and organisation of the adult education therefore also differ to a great extent. The aim of this paper is to give a short overview of the institutional setting of the adult education system in Norway. This presentation will only focus on the most important characteristics of the adult education system in Norway. Due to this the description can unfortunately not be complete, and will not cover all aspects of this wide and multifaceted field. Despite this limitation, it is hoped that the reader will get a rough picture of the main characteristics of the adult education in Norway, and will be able to compare it with the adult education systems of other countries.

## Historical review

The Norwegian adult education tradition shares a common heritage with the other Scandinavian countries. It is strongly influenced by the Danish nineteenth century educational theorist N.F.S. Grundtvig (of the popular enlightenment tradition), who supported the Folk High School.

Until the 1950s adult education was primarily provided by humanitarian, political and other non-governmental organisations (NGOs). After that the state started to get involved (initially as a part of labour market policy).

In 1976 a separate Act on Adult Education was adopted (it came into force on 1 August 1977, when Norway became the first country in the world to adopt a separate act on adult education). The aim of the act was to increase equality between individuals and groups, and improve the regional distribution of resources. The Act was modified in 1992 (e.g. a new recognition and grant system for study associations was adopted). In 1993 matters related to distance education were included in the Adult Education Act (the Act on Correspondence Schools was abolished).

In the 1990s a series of comprehensive reforms were implemented. The first one was the implementation of a Core Curriculum, which describes the contents of primary, lower secondary, upper secondary and adult education. The broad reforms of the 1990s were intended, among other things, to make the initial education and training system more adaptable to the needs of adults.

A new Act on Education came into force in 1999, and parts of the Adult Education Act from 1976 dealing with primary and lower secondary education and upper secondary education for adults are now included in the new Education Act.

The Competence Reform, whose implementation started in 1999, is the latest reform having a great impact on adult education. The objective of the reform is to give adults better opportunities for training and competence building. The main elements in the reform are: the declaration that adults who need primary, lower and upper secondary education have the individual right to such education; the establishment of a system for documentation and recognition of non-formal education for adults; the establishment of the individual right for employees to study leave; the bettering of study funding for adults, and no taxation of enterprises' financial support for employees' education efforts (that is: if the education programme has relevance for his/her present job).

Two other main aims of the Competence Reform are the reorganization of the public education system to adapt it to the concept of lifelong learning, and to develop education opportunities which are offered by the workplace as a place of learning (in cooperation with the social partners).

(KUF, 2000, s. 6-8, 16-19; OECD, 2002, s. 28-31, 41-43, 55-56; EURYDICE/CEDEFOP, 1999, s. 25; KUF, 98)

## **Legislation and responsibility for the adult education system**

The following chapter provides a short presentation of the legislative framework which affects adult education. After that some of the most important agents who are responsible for the adult education system will be presented.

### ***Legislative framework***

A specific legislative framework regulates the adult education in Norway. The most significant laws are the Act on Adult Education from 1976 and the Education Act. The parts of the Adult Education Act that apply to primary and secondary education for adults were included in the new Education Act, which came into force in 1999. Further acts of significance to adult education are: the Act on Universities and Colleges; the Act on Folk High Schools; the Act on Private Schools; the Act on Private Colleges; the Act on Student Loans to Pupils and Students; and the Act on the State Educational Loan Fund.

The *Stortinget* (parliament) has made various amendments to these acts affecting adult education. In 2000 it decided that adults without primary and secondary education will get the individual and legal right to such an education. An amendment to the Act on Universities and Colleges gave adults aged over 25 and without formal entrance qualifications the possibility to enter university/college studies if the non-formal education is approved by the university/college in question. In 2000 the Parliament also amended the Act on Working Environment (from 1977). This amendment gives employees an individual right to study leave (from 2001).

(Bø, 2003, s. 7; EURYDICE/CEDEFOP, 99, s. 25; KUF, 2000, s. 16-18; KUF, 98)

## Responsibility for the adult education system

The government and parliament work out the goals and determine the legislative framework for the whole Norwegian education system. This implies that the state also has the responsibility for the general development of the adult education.

The Ministry of Education and Research is the highest administrative body for school and education. It has the overall responsibility for administering the educational system and for implementing the national education policy in this field. It has also the responsibility for developing curriculum guidelines. Furthermore it is responsible for the general development of adult education and for higher education.

Within the field of adult education the Ministry's main duty is to create and provide conditions suitable for lifelong learning to stimulate competence development, and to administer the various acts related to adult education.

The Ministry of Education and Research co-operates with other ministries when dealing with educational programmes which also affect these various other ministries' sphere of competence. Such coordination is carried out with the Ministry of Labour and Government Administration (in charge of labour market courses, employment policy), the Ministry of Local and Regional Development (immigration policy), the Ministry of Trade and Industry (industrial policy), and the Ministry of Health and Social Services (continuing education and training for health personal).

(OECD, 2002, s. 44, 53-54; Bø, 2003, 4-5; EURYDICE/CEDEFOP, 99, s. 25-26, KUF, 2000, s. 8-9)

The central government has delegated a great amount of responsibility and decision-making authority regarding the education system to the local authorities. The counties and municipalities have - within the limits defined by the state - direct responsibility for education and training at their level. The local authorities have also responsibility for planning and running adult education at their level.

The 435 municipalities are responsible for running primary and lower secondary schools. The 19 counties are responsible for and run the upper secondary schools. Higher education is administrated by the Ministry of Education and Research.

This implies that the municipalities are responsible for adult education at the primary and lower secondary level and that the counties are responsible

for adult education at the upper secondary level. Universities and university colleges (which mostly all are state-run) have responsibility for courses for higher education.

(EURYDICE/CEDEFOP, 99, s. 7-8, 25-26; KUF, 2000, s. 8; OECD, 2002, s. 54; Bø, 2003, 4-5)

The Norwegian education system was formerly characterised by a large number of advisory bodies which were concerned with specific types of education. Several reforms (which started in the end of the 1990s) have led to the dissolution of most of them. The system was reorganised, and 18 National Education Offices were established in each county in 1992. The National Education Offices represent the central government at the regional level and function as a link between the Ministry of Education and Research and the education sector on the regional/local level.

The function of the National Education Offices is to ensure that children and adolescents are given appropriate schooling in accordance with the statutory regulations, to give advice and stimulate work in each municipality with regards to primary and secondary education, and to promote co-ordination between the educational sectors and levels. Further they are responsible for reporting, evaluating, supervision and control of the education system on the regional/local level.

The National Education Offices are also responsible for adult education at the primary and secondary level, special education for adults and education for adults with Norwegian as a second language. Further they are responsible for co-ordination and co-operation between different actors of adult education in their regions.

(KUF, 2000, s. 9; OECD, 2002, s. 53-54; Bø, 2003, 4-5)

In 2001 the Norwegian government founded the Norwegian Institute for Adult education (VOX) as a central tool for the implementation of the Competence Reform. VOX is the result of a merger between three governmental institutions which were under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Research. These now defunct institutions are the Institute for Adult education, the Norwegian State Institution for Distance Education, and the State Adult Education Centre. VOX serves as a knowledge base for actors within adult education, both nationally and internationally. VOX is responsible for initiating, co-ordinating and implementing research and development projects (e.g. development of new learning structures and materials), facilitating contact and collaboration among national actors (e.g. social partners, providers

of adult education), establishing networks for adult education, and providing adult education (e.g. courses for adults and teachers).

(Bø, 2003, s. 6; KUF, 2000, s. 14)

### ***Providers of adult education***

Adult education is offered at different levels and from different agents. This makes the Norwegian adult education system rather complex. Adult education and learning is provided by public and private providers, NGO's and a variety of agents/actors involved in working life. In what follows some of the main providers of adult education and the type of education which is offered by them will be presented (this presentation is mainly based on the following sources: EURYDICE/CEDEFOP, 1999, s. 26-27; KUF, 2000, s. 23-36; OECD, 2002, s. 44-45, 74-89, 167-174; Bø, 2003, s. 8-9, KUF, 98; Tøsse, 2003, s. 183-186).

### ***Municipalities***

The municipalities are responsible for planning, developing and providing primary and lower secondary education for adults in the municipality. They are also responsible for providing special needs education for adults and education for adult immigrants (courses in Norwegian and social studies). If the municipality is not able to provide such education for adults in the existing facilities (e.g. primary and lower secondary schools) this education can be entrusted to study associations (see below).

### ***County authorities***

The county municipalities are responsible for planning, developing and providing upper secondary education for adults in the county. They are responsible for general education and vocational training at this level. The upper secondary education leads to qualification for higher education or to vocational qualifications (occupation). The counties provide ordinary courses in schools which adults attend together with young pupils, and courses specially designed for adults (so-called intensive or comprised courses in which progress is faster than for ordinary students). If the municipality is not able to provide such education for adults in existing facilities (e.g. public schools) this edu-

tion can be entrusted to study associations or distance education institutions (see below).

In connection with vocational education the government has given adults, without formal vocational certificates, the opportunity to certify their qualifications. Adults with relevant professional experience lasting 25% longer than the apprenticeship period for the trade may register for the trade or journeyman's examination. If the adults do not pass the required examinations in the theory of the trade they must take external examinations in the theory of the trade.

### ***Institutions of higher education***

According to the Act on Universities and Colleges all institutions of higher education are authorised to organise and hold further and continuing education and training in their fields. Adults can enter higher education as ordinary students or they can combine studies with full-time work as part of further and continuing education. The costs connected with this type of education/training are to be paid by them (in some cases the employer may bear these costs).

Access to higher education requires formal entrance qualifications. But as a result of the Competence Reform adults without formal entrance qualifications can be admitted to higher education studies if their non-formal education is approved by the university/college in question.

### ***Resource centres***

Resource centres are often attached to upper secondary schools (e.g. as separate departments within the school). Resource centres may also be organised as foundations or as individual limited companies (owned by the county or by private firms). Resource centres have their own budgets and are self-financed. The centres offer various forms of education and training. Often they arrange vocational training courses for the AETAT (public employment office). Some of the centres develop and provide courses and training, e.g. language or computer courses for private or public demanders on a commercial basis. In this way resource centres contribute to co-operation between upper secondary schools, public institutions and work.

## ***Study associations***

Study associations are voluntary, humanitarian, political and other non-governmental organisations whose primary purpose is to provide adult education (e.g. Folkeuniversitetet). They offer a great variety of courses and study groups for adults. The subjects of the courses range from leisure activities to courses at university level. Study associations determine their own study plans and are responsible for the content and organisation of the courses. Most of the courses are not bound by the curricula and examinations set by the public educational system. But some study associations also offer formal education (e.g. upper secondary education). These courses must be in accordance with the national curricula and education regulations. Adults who attend such courses must sit exams at a formal education institution as a private candidate.

## ***Distance education providers***

The basic idea behind distance education is decentralisation of education and competence building programmes in order to offer various groups possibilities for open and flexible learning. These courses were formerly mostly arranged as correspondence courses. But computer and video technology has enlarged the possibilities for organising this form of education. Courses offered by distance education cover a great variety of study areas and levels. Courses cover areas such as leisure activities, foreign languages, health care, economics, administration and technology. Many of the courses prepare participants for examinations which lead to formal qualifications (at the upper secondary or university level). The importance of courses leading to work-related qualifications has increased the last years.

## ***Folk high schools***

Most of the so called folk high schools in Norway are boarding schools which are owned and run by religious organisations, independent foundations, or county authorities. Folk high schools provide courses of different lengths (from a few days to 33 weeks) for young people and adults (there are two folk high schools for senior citizens). Their courses cover a great range of study fields, such as arts and crafts, music, international solidarity, and computer science. Courses are not based on standardised curricula and according to the Act on Folk High Schools the schools can not conduct exams and the courses can not lead to formal qualifications. But full-time are given three points for

the folk high school studies, which they can use in the competition for admission to higher education, and this has been the case from the 1997/98 school-year on).

### ***Private competence development enterprises/consultants***

These organisations offer competence development on a commercial basis. The courses (education and training) they provide are not regulated by law, standard curricula or other regulations. Depending on the competences and resources these providers dispose of they may develop courses and competence development programmes (e.g. communication courses), and can market these. Their customers may be private persons, but companies are the major source of demand for their products.

### ***Labour market authorities/AETAT***

These authorities provide labour market training for unemployed people. The aim is to provide the unemployed with occupational skills in order to enhance their job possibilities. Another aim is to motivate the unemployed to take part in continuing education and training to improve their qualifications and skills. Labour market training is shaped through co-operation between the authorities responsible for the labour market, and the education authorities. Courses are provided by a variety of actors such as labour market authorities, upper secondary schools and resource centres.

### ***The workplace***

A great part of the competence development in public and private enterprises takes place through in-house courses or on-the-job training. The workplace has therefore become an important arena for competence development and further training for adults.

The social partners have acknowledged the great importance of competence development and they co-operate for enhancing competence development within the working place. A collective agreement regulates their co-operation in this area (in 1998 the social partners accepted an action plan for competence development as an appendix to the collective wage agreement). To enhance competence development within the workplace the social partners encourage employers to increase competence and to offer systematic training

for their employees (e.g. the collective wage agreement requires that employers document the need for continuing training and develop training plans).

Education and training which takes place in the work place is provided by internal staff or by private consulting companies. Also the social partners' organisations offer job-oriented courses at different levels. These courses are primarily aimed for their members.

## Participation

The statistical material regarding adult education is fragmentary and insufficient. There are several reasons for this. The most important is that not all adult education is covered (such as competence development in enterprises). Another problem is that people over 20 are defined as adults in ordinary education and therefore, it is difficult to distinguish between ordinary students and adults in formal educational institutions such as universities.

### Adult education, according to topic/provider, number of courses and participants. 1998-2000:

Topic/Provider	Description	1998	1999	2000
study associations	courses of varying length	681359	681845	666729
folk high schools	main courses and short courses	28324	29592	29146
long distance education institutions	individual registration	44731	39394	37982
tuition for immigrants	teaching to level	28957	37567	27721
labour market training	courses of varying length	32869	25848	37176
primary education directed by municipalities	with offering exam	1877	1547	1248
special education at primary school level	with offering exam	7310	6570	6569
other adult education at primary school level	courses with varying length	1297	982	1146
lower and upper secondary education directed by counties	in ordinary classes and part-time students	30068	26467	20160
further and continuing education at university and colleges	further and continuing education	94078	81755	84504

(Source: SSB, 2001)

This table can not give an exact and complete picture of adult education for the reasons listed above, but the figures can at least help to provide a certain impression about the participation in adult education.

A report from Fafo (Nyen, 2004a, s. 17) shows, that in 2003 14.3% of 22-59 year old persons in the sample participated in formal education, that means education carried out according to recognised curricula and which gives formal qualifications, while 12.1% of the 22-66 year old persons participated in such education. In 2004 13.6 % of the 22-66 year old persons in the sample participated in formal education (see Nyen, 2004b, s. 10)

Several studies indicate that the degree of education and training on the job is very high and that the workplace is an important provider of adult education. Surveys conducted in the late 90<sup>s</sup> indicate that a great number of Norwegian companies (1996 90%, 1999 81%) offered competence development. (KUF, 2000, s. 33, Tøsse, 2003, s. 185)

A Fafo-report from 2004 shows that in 2003 57.2 % of those employed in the sample had participated in education and training at the workplace (courses, seminars, conferences). In 2004 55.4 % of those interviewed employees had participated in education at the workplace. (Nyen 2004a, s. 37; Nyen 2004b, s. 10)

With regard to participation in adult education, several studies show that there is inequality between different groups. Persons with higher education participate more in adult education (also in courses at the working place) than people with lower levels of education. Participation rates also differ according to the sector of employment and the place of living, meaning that sectors of employment and domicile have an effect on participation in adult education. (Nyen, 2004a; KUF, 2000, s. 33-35; Tøsse, 2003, s. 191-193)

### ***Funding and financing of the adult education***

The Norwegian political system is characterised by a great decentralisation of power and responsibility. This also applies to the Norwegian education system, where decentralisation is also reflected in the system of funding.

Municipalities and county authorities cover the costs of primary and secondary education for pupils including adults. They also cover the costs of adult immigration education. State grants which the local authorities receive for primary and secondary education were earlier earmarked for such. In order to increase the autonomy of the municipalities and counties this system was abolished and replaced by a grant system whereby the local authorities receive block grants (a lump sum) which cover all financial support from government for education, culture and health services (the state grants for financing the Norwegian language and social studies are still earmarked). This system im-

plies that decisions about economic priorities for adult education at the local level (primary and secondary education) lie with the municipalities and counties. Tuition is free, but adult participants have to bear the costs of textbooks in upper secondary education, and they have to pay a fee for both lower and upper secondary examinations.

Some of the adult education programmes which exist outside the primary and secondary education system are financed by earmarked grants or government subsidies.

According to the Act on Adult Education recognized study associations and distance education institutions receive state grants (the size of the grants depend amongst other things on how many lessons were given). Participants have also to contribute to financing. They have to pay course fees and they have to pay for required educational material (the fees for distance education institutions are often higher than fees for courses at study associations).

Folk high schools which fulfil the requirements set in the Act on Folk High Schools receive state grants (the grant model is based on three elements: a basic grant, a grant based on the number of pupils, and a grant for hiring costs). Public funding covers about 50% of the costs for running the folk high school. Tuition at the folk high schools is free, but students who attend courses at folk high schools have to pay for boarding and lodging (they can obtain financial support for this from the State Educational Loan Fund).

Higher education is administrated and funded directly by the Ministry of Education and Research. The funding of higher education institutions is based on framework allocations and on allocations based on results (this form of funding is becoming more significant). Tuition in Norwegian higher education institutions is free (students have to pay a small fee for student welfare services). With regard to continuing education at state-run higher education institutions, the general principle is that basic study programmes are free, but institutions are allowed to charge a user fee.

Private higher education institutions also receive state grants in accordance to the regulations in the Act on Private Colleges. Students at private higher education institutions have to pay fees for participation in study courses/programmes.

Labour market training is financed fully by the state. The Ministry of Labour and Government Administration is responsible for this financing. Participation in labour market courses is free for participants.

The costs for competence development in the workplace/company based on the needs of the enterprises concerned are first of all paid by these enterprises. But according to the Adult Education Act state grants can be given for enterprise-based training if certain requirements are met (that is, training must be organised in co-operation with public institutions, folk high schools or NGO's entitled to grants). Also the Norwegian Industrial and Regional Development Fund provides support to enterprises for competence development measures.

The social partners have, as mentioned above, initiated co-operation for competence development in the workplace. Both have acknowledged the importance of competence development and both have accepted that they have to contribute to the financing of a job-oriented further education system through wage negotiations.

(EURYDICE/CEDEFOP, 1999, s. 26; KUF, 2000, s. 8, 35-41; OECD, 2002, s. 33-34, 51-54)

Clearly there are a variety of forms of funding in the Norwegian adult education system. Some types of adult education are fully financed by the state (e.g. primary and secondary education, labour market training), other types are funded by the state and the adult participants (e.g. distance education, study associations), and others are paid for by employers.

## Conclusions

The aim of this article has been to give a short overview over the Norwegian adult education system. Therefore only the main characteristics of the adult education system could be presented here. Other important aspects of the system could not be presented here.

As we have seen, the central agents for providing adult education are the public school system, NGO's (study associations), distance education institutions, and the workplace. There are - also some private providers of adult education, but they are not as important as the agents mentioned above. As a result of the Competence Reform (which was strongly influenced by the labour movement) the workplace will become an even more important arena for continuing education in the future.

As pointed out above, Norway has a legislative and institutional framework that provides favourable conditions for adult education. The latest reform affecting adult education, the Competence Reform (which is the biggest

reform since the adoption of the Act on Adult Education), shows that Norway continues to put a strong focus on providing favourable conditions for competence building for adults. One aim of the Reform is to raise the educational level of the least educated, but its primary aim is to facilitate and promote competence development throughout the adult's working life in order to improve the economy's competitiveness and to increase the flexibility of the working force.

The Competence Reform has been criticised for a one-sided focus on the working life and for a lack of practical action regarding competence development for the least educated (Nyen, 2004a, s. 7-8; Tøsse, 2003, s. 181). Especially the last point of criticism touches a problem which seems to be general in the adult education system, namely unequal access to adult education. This is supported by several studies that have indicated that there is unequal access to adult education. An important task is therefore to carry out further research in order to identify the causes for unequal access.

It is not possible for us to evaluate the Competence Reform in this limited space. Readers who are interested in a proper presentation and evaluation of the Competence Reform are to be referred to the literature which deals with this topic (see below).

The Competence Reform seems nevertheless to reveal a common trend towards regarding and applying adult education mainly as competence development in and for the working life. Therefore it will be interesting to see if this trend will lead to an abolishment of the classic ideal of adult education - the classic idea of enlightenment and general education of the people. Especially in a fast-changing world that brings various new challenges to the people it seems important that the classic ideal of adult education should not be forgotten. Only an enlightened society can meet all the challenges and changes facing us in an open, reflective and constructive manner.

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