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The Quality Reform in Norwegian Higher Education – The Future Role of Academic Libraries

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The Quality Reform in Norwegian Higher Education – The Future Role of Academic Libraries

Ingar Lomheim, Director, NTNU Library

Introduction

Before I start my presentation of the Quality Reform in Norwegian higher education, let me give a short introduction to the academic education system in Norway, and also say some words about library cooperation in Norway.

The Quality Reform involves the four traditional universities, six specialized university institutions, and 26 regional university colleges. All are public institutions, with most of their funding from the government.

Academic libraries in Norway have very close relations. First, this is due to our common library system BIBSYS. In addition to functioning as a common OPAC, this is also an integrated library system with different modules taking care of all the major internal operations in the libraries. The work in developing and maintaining BIBSYS has brought the libraries together and strengthened cooperation over the last 30 years.

At a political level, the academic libraries work together in a special library committee within The Norwegian Council for Higher Education.

The need for a reform

The initiative for a reform in Norwegian higher education was taken by the government and was based on the following needs:

- A new degree structure and student evaluation system as an answer to the Bologna Declaration on international standardization of education. Education is a product in an international market. Competition between institutions and nations will depend on the possibility to compare the products.
- The problem of financing an education system where the number of students has grown from 50 000 in 1971 to 200 000 in 2001. It is impossible to handle this demand in the national budget.
- The institutions in higher education were not able to handle the rising number of students. The students did not graduate within the prescribed time, and their results were not good enough.

The answer to these needs is a reform which has a realistic possibility of combining better quality

with a reduction in the nominal length of time needed to study for a degree.

The Reform

The major elements in the reform are as follows:

- Bachelor's degree with a duration of 3.5 years. Master's degree: 5 years
- Strong focus on quality in the learning environment. Funds to be allocated to initiatives for improving learning processes. Greater emphasis is to be placed on student participation in the process of selecting and planning prescribed texts, teaching methods and seminars
- Education processes with methods turning from teaching to learning (problem-based learning). Special focus on flexible learning, introducing electronic learning platforms
- Closer connection between teaching methods and assessment, placing greater emphasis on continuous feedback during courses and the introduction of student portfolios
- Demand for internal quality systems at the institutions
- The basic allocations to the institutions are to be linked to the results of their activities to a greater extent through unit cost funding on the basis of graduate and credit production
- Study financing: If the student follows the normal progression, 39% of his or her student loan will be converted to grant

Quality – The role of the library

While the reform is focusing on quality, the new funding system will enhance competition between academic institutions. In this new situation it will be more important than previously to attract high quality students, teachers and researchers. To succeed, university libraries have to demonstrate their importance in this new environment, and success will depend on our ability to change focus and resource dispositions to some new areas:

- The library in a new learning environment
- The electronic library
- The publishing library

When we spend more money and resources on these areas we will have to reduce other activities. The traditional paper-based library will be given less priority. This change involves internal

discussions about the important core library culture. Working with the cultural change inside libraries will be a great challenge for management.

The library in a new learning environment

The new learning environment in the quality reform involves the following areas:

- Flexible learning environment
- Management of teaching and learning through a Learning Management System (LMS)
- Problem-based learning
- The learning centre model

A flexible learning environment means that student access to learning resources does not depend on "time and space". For libraries this means that focus must be on electronic resources for literature support.

Furthermore, we will have to build up and maintain a high quality user interface to our (electronic) resources.

The use of LMS in the communication between teachers and students will bring us into closer contact with teachers. For all teaching programmes the libraries should assist the teachers in selecting and presenting learning material via LMS. Again electronic information resources will be of great value.

The transition from teaching to learning means that the traditional curriculum-based learning will change to problem-based learning (PBL). From the very start of their studies, students must be able to search, select and access quality information for their problem solving.

This means an early focus on information literacy. Since students will communicate via LMS, the library must create interactive learning programmes in information literacy for the LMS.

There should be a compulsory student test in information literacy before they graduate.

Flexible learning and PBL-methods will give an excellent opportunity for libraries to rearrange their furniture and fittings in order to attract student activities. Learning centre models have been introduced at academic libraries in Norway with considerable success. Rooms for different forms of group activities, combined with modern equipment and services in information retrieval and processing, will provide high value support for learning quality.

The electronic library

Students, teachers and researchers are familiar with the Internet as a gateway to information. How can libraries present their resources and user interface to become the first choice of users when they need information?

The greatest problem for Norwegian libraries is not to buy electronic resources but to make them visible and available for the users. Our common library system BIBSYS has been an excellent tool for storing and retrieving paper-based material, but so far it has failed to change the focus to electronic resources. To access electronic resources our users today have to search in BIBSYS as well as the library web.

While the other Nordic countries all have had their national electronic library projects running for several years, it was not until last year when our own national project was launched by The Norwegian Archive, Library and Museum Authority.

Until we know exactly how a national digital library will work, each library has to create their own strategy for electronic development. For the university libraries a major question is how to deal with the hybrid solution, the balance between electronic and paper material. A far-reaching discussion in many institutions today concerns the cancelling of printed journal subscriptions.

The publishing library

The traditional role for academic libraries has been to import knowledge and make it available for students and teachers. In the future we will also play an important role in exporting knowledge from our parent institution. The major processes for the storage and retrieval of electronic teaching material, doctoral theses and other publications should be taken care of by libraries. Organizations and systems for electronic publishing are now established at the four university libraries in Norway.

New priorities – How do we deal with change?

The quality reform in Norwegian higher education will force the academic libraries into making new priorities. The need for a closer focus on electronic resources, web-interfaces, cooperation with teachers and students, information literacy and electronic publishing means that some of our traditional activities must be reduced.

We will have to move librarians from internal processes and traditional circulation work into the (flexible) user environment for direct contact and services. To handle this demand the internal work processes have to be changed and simplified. The change from paper-based to electronic resources will give us an excellent opportunity to take care of this, but we might run into considerable conflicts with traditional library cultures.

To develop and maintain an organization culture for change is, and will be, one of the major tasks for the management of academic libraries. At the NTNU Library we started a process two years ago to develop a "Learning Organization Culture". This is an organization that learns and encourages learning among its people. It promotes the exchange of information between employees hence creating a more knowledgeable workforce. This produces a very flexible organization where people will accept and adapt to new ideas and changes through a shared vision.

When we consider the need for change as an organizational problem in Norwegian public institutions today it is first of all because of the new economic situation. During the last few years the budgetary models have been changed. With lower allocations from the government, and funding models based on result indicators, institutions are forced to make strict priorities. For the first time we have had to cancel or change some activities when new priorities become necessary. For the employees this is a change from a safe and secure work situation to uncertainty. Many cases from the last few years have shown that the internal processes needed to handle the demand for change can be a problem in organizations where decisions are traditionally based on democratic processes and staff involvement.

Library cooperation in Norway

There is close cooperation between the academic libraries in Norway. This is partly due to the common ownership of our national library system BIBSYS. Up to recently there has been general agreement about the development of the system. Today we can see some problems in this cooperation because of the different needs of future solutions between the university libraries and the smaller library units that also cooperate. The need for a system that can be an efficient tool in handling electronic resources is more pressing for the large institutions, and the process of developing BIBSYS in this direction is too slow. There are 100 member libraries, and the decision processes are slow. As a result of this the four university libraries now are discussing library portal solutions outside BIBSYS. For the first time in 30 years some members are breaking out of the BIBSYS community.

The Quality Reform, and the rising competition between academic institutions, might have a negative influence on loans and document supply between the libraries. In Norway interlibrary loans are free of charge. This means that the large libraries are using considerable resources (with no compensation) supporting smaller institutions with literature. In a situation where there is competition and clear priorities on use of local resources, our parent institutions will not allow this kind of subsidy. The result might be restrictions on, or paid external services for libraries.

Further changes in store for Norwegian higher education?

Over the last two years Norwegian institutions of higher education have been actively involved in a process of quality reform. This process was initiated at a European level, to increase mobility between European institutions of higher learning and to better respond to changes in European and international labour markets. Now a Norwegian government committee, named the Ryssdal Committee after the committee chair, has posted a report including recommendations that threaten to overthrow some of the most widely accepted precepts of higher education in Norway.

In much of Europe, Norway included, higher education at state-supported institutions is free. Norwegian higher education is controlled centrally and institutions are largely funded by state support. Most Norwegian institutions of higher learning use a split-leadership model with a rector who is responsible for academic issues and a director who is responsible for administrative issues. The leadership and decision making responsibilities at each institution are shared with a Board of Directors.

Drawing up proposals for re-vamping a nation's system of higher education is a challenging task. The ten-member Ryssdal committee certainly found it so. In the end the committee opted for a series of recommendations that included the following:

A majority of the committee felt new laws should be established ensuring the separation of the State and Education. Under the new legislation, each individual higher education institution would have an independent foundation or foundation-like status, under the control of a Board, the majority of whose members would be external to the institution itself. A minority of the committee preferred a continuation of today's model whereby the State establishes higher education priorities and provides the major source of funding for the national institutions of higher education.

A majority of the committee felt that an appointed rector should assume both the institution's academic and administrative leadership. While a minority felt that institutions should be able to choose to maintain today's split-leadership model (academic rector and administrative director), where the leaders may be appointed or elected according to the individual institution's tradition, or to opt for the single leader model.

A majority of the committee supported a movement towards the payment of student fees. The payment of tuition would depend on institution's funding (i.e. the issue of fees must be included in any funding contract). A minority of the committee preferred a continuation of today's model, whereby it is unlawful to charge tuition for special or higher learning activities at state-funded institutions.

Many university leaders and faculty have been expressing concern over the Ryssdal Committee's activity. Jan Fridthjof Bernt, a law professor at the University of Bergen (UiB), previous rector at UiB, and one of Norway's leading specialists in Administration and Management Law has voiced some serious apprehensions. Application of these recommendations will result in tremendous changes to higher education as we know it in Norway today, he says.

Sigmund Grønmo, sociology professor and previous vice-rector at UiB agrees that the very principles underlying higher education in Norway today are in question. Universities and colleges play a central leadership role in Norwegian society, both in terms of being research and education

centres, but also as centres for democracy and social values. The process of building up academic excellence requires long-term strategies. He does not believe that as such they can be optimally governed by market forces. The leaders of higher education themselves need to be well grounded in academia (research, teaching) in order to be effective leaders, he feels.

The committee's recommendations now move on to the next round of discussions. It will be interesting to see what the future holds for higher education and academic libraries in Norway.

