

Further growth and enhanced quality

Strategy for tertiary vocational education

Preface

The Government wants to see growth in the vocational college sector, and its ambition is for the quality of vocational colleges to be increased in step with this growth. The purpose of this strategy is to devise a framework for the development of tertiary vocational education.

An important characteristic of tertiary vocational education is that it is developed in close collaboration with the labour market. Vocational colleges should contribute to a knowledge-intensive labour market by offering professional top-up for those already in employment and provide study programmes for people who would like more education after upper secondary education. This special role of vocational colleges will continue to be important going forward. Vocational colleges must also offer opportunities for graduates who want to pursue their career.

New technology and the transition to a greener economy give rise to major changes in society and new labour market needs. This makes vocational colleges even more relevant, as they offer short, practical study programmes that the labour market needs. Vocational colleges are in close contact with the labour market and are capable of establishing new programmes as the need arises. At the same time, traditional vocational college programmes are becoming more and more specialised, and the duration of some of the programmes is increasing in step with the need for more in-depth skills. Vocational colleges must strike a balance between the different needs and expectations of an ever-changing society. The ambitions and goals for tertiary vocational education are based on a sector that encompasses great variety, with different goals for the programmes it represents. I appreciate all the useful input we have received on the strategy. It obviously reflects great interest in vocational colleges in society. The input has helped to give direction to an educational sector that is becoming increasingly important to Norway.



Henrik Asheim

Henrik Asheim, Minister of Research and Higher Education

This document has been electronically approved and signed by the Minister.

Part 1: From the white paper on vocational college education until the present



Development during the period 2016–2020

Figures on tertiary vocational education show extensive changes over just the past five years. The development during the period 2016–2020 shows that the number of vocational colleges has decreased, among other things because many vocational colleges have merged, and that the number of students has increased substantially. The gender balance has improved somewhat, and there are only minor changes in the breakdown of subject areas. The figures also show that the proportion of part-time students was 65% in 2020 and that just under half of the students attended campus-based teaching at a vocational college.

Vocational colleges	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Total	91	81	83	80	73
Public (%)	45%	46%	43%	45%	38%
Private (%)	55%	54%	57%	55%	62%
Vocational colleges with fewer than 50 students	39	30	29	32	34
Vocational colleges with more than 500 students	8	9	11	12	15

NSD/DBH-F.

Vocational college students	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Number of students	15,061	15,690	16,701	18,299	23,279
Female students (%)	42%	43%	44%	45%	47%
Male students (%)	58%	57%	56%	55%	53%
Foreign nationals	363	404	440	494	N/A
Number of graduates	6,154	5,740	6,320	6,720	8,338

NSD/DBH-F.

By subject area (FKF)	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Health and welfare	22%	25%	26%	27%	26%

By subject area (FKF)	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Creative subjects	15%	14%	13%	12%	11%
Transport	8%	8%	8%	8%	7%
Technical subjects	41%	39%	40%	39%	37%
Economics and administration	11%	11%	11%	11%	15%
Other	3%	3%	3%	3%	2%
Not stated (small modules)					2%

NSD/DBH-F.

Vocational college students, different categories	Number	Percentage
Full time	7,876	35%
Part time	14,774	65%
Web-based with sessions on campus	5,955	27%
Web-based	4,740	21%
Campus-based	11,581	52%

NSD/DBH-F.

Evaluation of measures in the white paper

In order to determine the current status of tertiary vocational education, an evaluation has been initiated of the measures proposed in the white paper on vocational education. The Storting largely endorses the 48 measures that were proposed.¹ The measures were intended to support the Government's ambition for the vocational colleges. Deloitte has conducted an evaluation of how the measures in the white paper have been followed up and implemented since 2017.² In the first report, published in 2021, they looked at how far the work has progressed. The report shows that a great many of the 48 measures have been implemented. Considerable changes have been made in recent years to the set of rules that regulate the sector. Among other things, the new Regulations relating to Tertiary Vocational Education have been adopted, and vocational colleges have been included in the Norwegian Universities and Colleges Admission Service (SO). An exemption has also been adopted that enables vocational colleges, on certain conditions, to be granted accreditation of programmes of up to three years' duration. Overall, the evaluation shows that a total of 33 measures have been implemented, 9 have been partially implemented and 6 have not been implemented. How far the introduction of the measures has come in practice varies. There were four main objectives of the white paper.

1. Students must engage in their field and succeed in their education

In order for students to become engaged in and succeed with their education, it is necessary for the framework and other conditions to also support this goal. The white paper identified shortcomings in this area. Issues such as membership of student unions and welfare services for students have therefore been followed up after the white paper was published, by enabling vocational colleges to become affiliated to a student union.³ Vocational college students are also included in the upcoming survey on living conditions for students. A survey of dropout rates and causes in tertiary vocational education was also conducted in 2018.⁴ Graduate surveys have also been conducted on a regular basis among vocational college graduates.⁵

A number of measures in the white paper are intended to improve conditions for students. Increased prestige and better framework conditions for tertiary vocational

¹ Deloitte (2021): *Evaluering av fagskolemeldingen. Første delrapport – status for implementering av tiltak i fagskolemeldingen* (in Norwegian only)

² Deloitte (2021): *Evaluering av fagskolemeldingen. Første delrapport – status for implementering av tiltak i fagskolemeldingen* (in Norwegian only)

³ Section 1 of the Act of 14 December 2007 No 116 relating to student unions was amended by the Act of 8 June 2018 No 28 relating to tertiary vocational education.

⁴ NIFU report 2018:21 *Hvordan er gjennomføringen i fagskoleutdanningene? En undersøkelse av særtrekk ved helsefag, kreative fag og tekniske fag* (in Norwegian only)

⁵ To be updated with references.

education will hopefully have a positive impact on students' motivation and engagement.

2. The teaching staff must have updated and work-related vocational skills

The white paper emphasised that high-quality education is conditional on highly skilled teaching staff. To address this, a survey was conducted by OsloMet in 2018 to map the skills and qualifications of vocational college teachers.⁶ The survey showed that vocational college teachers generally have a higher level of formal qualifications than the minimum requirements set out in the Regulations of 23 April 2020 No 853 relating to the supervision of tertiary vocational education (the Vocational Education Regulations). Some of the exemption provisions were made more stringent, which helped to tighten the qualification requirements. In an effort to raise the quality of teaching skills, a dedicated programme in educational theory and practice for vocational college teachers was established at OsloMet, with the first group of students starting in autumn 2019.

One of the financial initiatives taken to promote development among the teaching staff was to make application-based development funds available for raising the quality of tertiary vocational education. Since 2017, a total of NOK 230 million has been granted in development funds, allocated to 206 projects at Norwegian vocational colleges. Among other things, the funds have been spent on developing new study programmes, improving the capacity for digital teaching, and various investments in infrastructure and the procurement of teaching equipment. This had led to a substantial upgrade and improvement of the colleges' teaching capacity and the quality of education. Both private and public vocational colleges have been granted funds.

3. Vocational colleges must offer education programmes that are needed in working life and attractive to students

A special characteristic of tertiary vocational education is that it can be applied in the workplace without further training. That means that the content of the programmes offered must match the skills needed in the labour market. The programmes must also have the ability to motivate students. An annual study barometer survey for vocational college students was therefore introduced and conducted for the first time in 2017.⁷ In 2020, nine out of ten vocational colleges took part in the survey, which will shed light on how students perceive the quality of the education offered. Four graduate surveys have also been conducted among vocational college students who have completed their education, most recently in 2019.⁸

⁶ Lyckander, Rønnaug H and Sidsel Øiestad Grande (2018): *Kompetanse og kompetansebehov i fagskolene* (in Norwegian only). OsloMet Report 2018 No 7.

⁷ <https://www.studiebarometeret.no/en/fagskole>

⁸ NIFU report 2020:12 *Fagskoleutdannedes karriereveier: Funn fra en undersøkelse av personer uteksaminert med fagskoleutdanning i 2017 og*

To learn more about how the labour market views tertiary vocational education, an employer survey has also been conducted. The survey was carried out as a three-year project starting in 2016, with the final report published in 2019.⁹

It is a goal to improve the knowledge and information provided by public career guidance services about tertiary vocational education, so that the programmes that are available become better known. A process has therefore been initiated in Skills Norway, the Directorate for Lifelong Learning, to ensure better and up-to-date information on the website www.utdanning.no. Skills Norway has also developed a national digital career guidance service and a National Quality Framework for Career Guidance. The inclusion of tertiary vocational education in the Norwegian Universities and Colleges Admission Service has also helped to make the programmes more accessible, as applications for admission are made in the same place as applications for study programmes at universities and university colleges.¹⁰

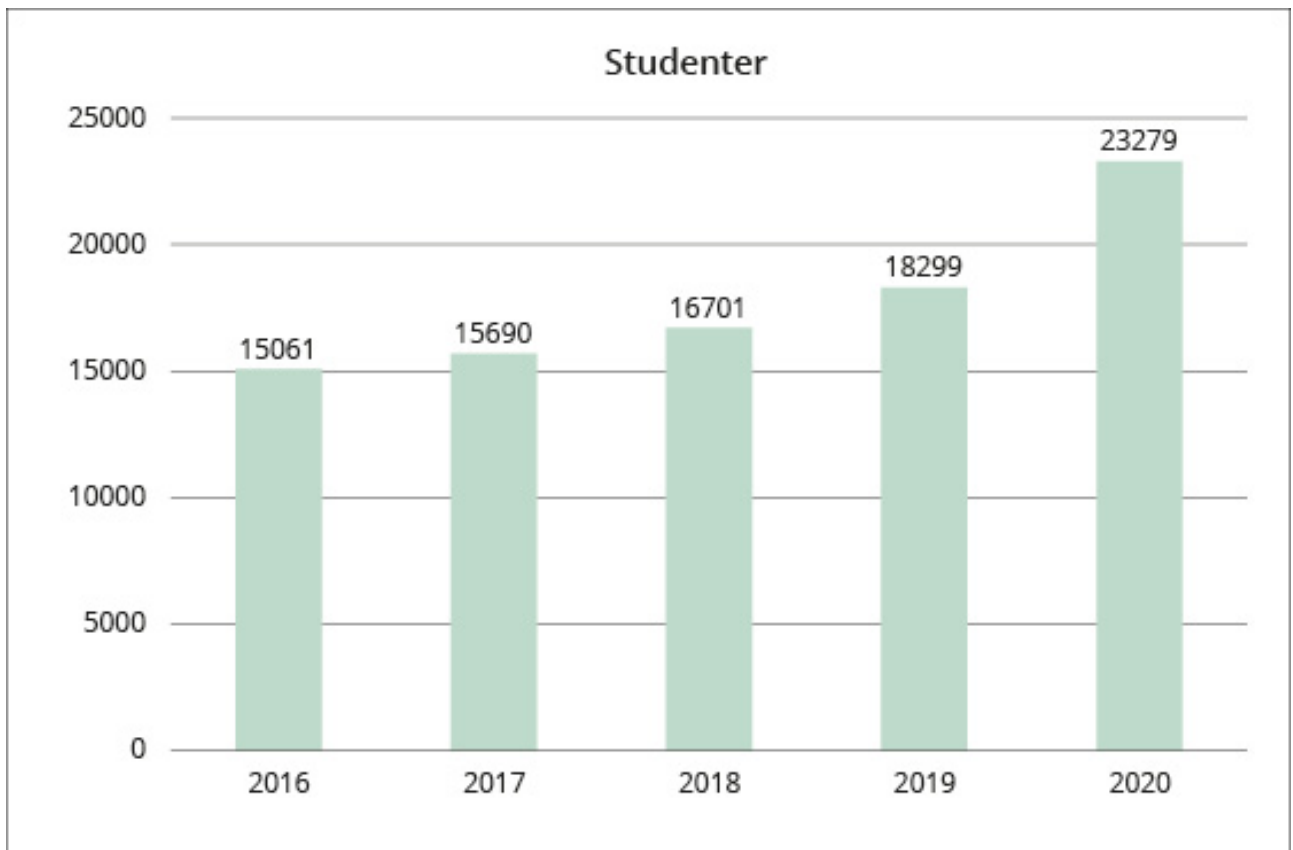
Government grants to establish new student places have increased markedly since 2017, most recently in the national budget for 2021, with funding for 500 new students. There has also been a marked increase in the number of students at vocational colleges in recent years, from 15,061 students in autumn 2016 to 23,279 in autumn 2020.¹¹

2018 (in Norwegian only).

⁹ NIFU report 2019:3 *Utdanning for arbeidslivet. Arbeidsgivers forventninger til og erfaringer med nyutdannede fra universiteter, høyskoler og fagskoler* (in Norwegian only).

¹⁰ Public vocational colleges and some private ones are part of the service.

¹¹ Source: The Database for Statistics on Higher Education's database for tertiary vocational education.



NSD/DBH-F

The Government has proposed to amend the Tertiary Vocational Education Act to provide for the possibility of granting accreditation to tertiary vocational programmes conferring up to 30 credits. The purpose is to meet the demand for shorter, flexible programmes from both students and the labour market.

The term 'tertiary vocational education' was introduced in the new Act relating to tertiary vocational education (the Vocational Education Act) in 2018. The same legislative amendment also stipulated that vocational colleges were to have their own boards of directors with at least seven members, comprising representatives of business and industry, students and staff, in addition to the school owner.

4. The vocational college sector must be well organised, with clear ownership and good governance

Deloitte's evaluation points out that the Government proposed ten measures in the white paper that were intended to fulfil the goal of well organised vocational colleges, with a clear ownership structure and good governance.¹² The white paper identified challenges relating to the organisation, governance and management of vocational colleges that are largely the same regardless of whether they are private or public, with a clear regional affiliation or national range. Several of the measures proposed

¹² Deloitte (2021): *Evaluering av fagskolemeldingen. Første delrapport – status for implementering av tiltak i fagskolemeldingen* (in Norwegian only)

were related to the composition of the boards of directors and clarification of their authority and responsibility. These have been addressed in the new Vocational Education Act.

The white paper also proposed to change how the sector is funded, with a view to ensuring more stable, predictable funding. This included organising operating funds for vocational colleges in a joint grant scheme. The government operating grant has now been organised under the Ministry of Education and Research and is allocated in the form of a basic grant and a performance-based grant. The Norwegian Agency for International Cooperation and Quality Enhancement in Higher Education (Diku) manages the grant scheme and allocates funds to the county authorities, which in turn distribute the funds between the vocational colleges in their county.

Overall assessment of the status of tertiary vocational education

The evaluation shows positive development in the sector, and that the white paper and the measures proposed therein have made important contributions to this development. Two of the most important measures concerned the designation 'tertiary vocational education' for vocational college education and the introduction of credits as an indication of the nominal length of study and learning outcomes.¹³ The evaluation highlights that these two changes in the regulations are essential to be able to raise the status of tertiary vocational education, and to make it more attractive to a wider group of applicants.

Reference is also made to how the increased attention devoted to tertiary vocational education in recent years, reflected among other things in the white paper, is an important driving force in the development work. A number of measures have also been taken to strengthen the knowledge base in different areas. The funding system that was introduced as a consequence of the white paper will also be subject to evaluation. The report is scheduled for publication in early 2022. This strategy will therefore not concern the funding system, but the Ministry will raise the matter in the appropriate manner once the evaluation has been completed.

¹³ Ibid.

Part 2: The way forward



The four focus areas of the strategy

The status review shows that many of the measures set out in the white paper have already had a positive impact on the development of tertiary vocational education. The evaluation will take a closer look at the impact and experience of the changes that have taken place since the white paper was published, and a concluding evaluation report is scheduled for 2023. Only then will we have a full overview of the status of tertiary vocational education. There is nonetheless a need at this point to set a course for the further development of tertiary vocational education.

The Government would like vocational colleges to continue to develop as important providers of skills and qualifications for the labour market, through relevant, high-quality study

programmes. The strategy emphasises that the further development of tertiary vocational education should be based on the programmes' distinctive nature.

An important precondition to achieve this is to continue working on raising the quality of the programmes. The strategy therefore focuses on goals and measures that will help to further develop vocational colleges' quality assurance systems and promote work on quality in all parts of their organisation. Four focus areas have been identified for vocational colleges:

1. Growth in the vocational college sector

The Government will facilitate further growth in tertiary vocational education in step with the need for more skilled workers and employees with up-to-date, high-level vocational expertise. The allocation of new student places will be governed by rigorous processes aimed at mapping and giving priority to skills needs in the labour market.

2. Raising the quality of tertiary vocational education

- a. *Institutional accreditation*: Vocational colleges must be able to achieve a higher degree of self-governance to develop and change the programmes they offer, to be able to respond more quickly to labour market needs by offering highly relevant, high-quality study programmes.
- b. *Online teaching skills*: The Government will stimulate improvements in the quality of web-based and session-based teaching by focusing on skills development
- c. *Internationalisation*: Facilitate international cooperation and mobility

3. Stimulating excellent quality

The Government will focus on quality enhancement by establishing centres of excellence for tertiary vocational education.

4. Higher competence requirements in the labour market must be met by offering study programmes at a higher level

Based on an overall review, the Government will consider whether some vocational study programmes can be placed at a higher level in the National Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning.



A precondition for achieving the goals is to implement measures at all levels of the sector, from the Ministry, via directorates and county authorities to the individual vocational colleges. The strategy reflects the Government's ambitions for tertiary vocational education, and will serve as a guide to further policy making. Key policy instruments in the work on raising the quality of tertiary vocational education are the development funds the Directorate for Higher Education and Skills (previously Diku) manages based on criteria stipulated by the Ministry. In its further work on quality enhancement, the Ministry will consider how the development funds can be designed to support the goals of the strategy.

As owners of the county vocational colleges, with responsibility for managing government grants for both private and public vocational colleges, the county authorities play a key role in the regional development of tertiary vocational education. The county authorities are also responsible for upper secondary education, which forms the basis for admission to tertiary vocational education. The Government believes it is important for the county authorities to take a proactive approach through their role as school owners and managers in relation to the vocational colleges, and contribute to cross-county cooperation between vocational colleges.

Different regions have different labour needs, which reflect differences in industry structure and the fact that the need for services varies with the population's level of education and age. The offer and availability of labour also varies, which means that businesses in different parts of the country face different recruitment challenges.

The county authorities are familiar with the characteristics of their own region. This insight and proximity to the population and businesses are decisive to ensure that the role of vocational colleges is tailored to regional skills policy.

In connection with the regional reform, the county authorities have been assigned clearer responsibility for contributing to a better match between the labour market's demand for labour and each person's development and use of their own skills. As regards immigrants, this responsibility has been codified in the Act relating to integration through training, education and work (the Integration Act). It follows from the Act that the county authorities must draw up plans for the qualification of immigrants. These must include measures that will qualify immigrants to meet regional labour needs.

Focus area 1: Growth in the vocational college sector reflects skills needs



The goal of the skills policy is to ensure that more people have updated skills in line with the needs of the labour market. The number of vocational college students has increased a great deal in recent years. It is the Government's ambition that the vocational college sector continues to grow, and it will take steps to facilitate this. There is no basis for quantifying this growth ambition for each year going forward, however, since we do not know enough about the labour market's need for vocational college graduates. Nor do we know enough about those applying to vocational colleges. For example, only half of the vocational colleges are currently part of the Norwegian Universities and Colleges Admission Service. Moreover, there will be a need to assess the various instruments of the skills policy against each other in the work on annual national budgets, among other things to ensure that we strike a good balance between capacity, quality and the development of new study programmes.

The Government will give priority to the work on establishing a system that ensures that future growth in tertiary vocational education comes where the need is greatest. This can also increase predictability for the labour market, which needs skills, the vocational colleges, which

are developing new study programmes, and future vocational college students, who are about to make their educational choices. A system for the allocation of funds for student places will ensure that we have relevant, qualified labour throughout the country. The strategy for decentralised, flexible education at vocational colleges, university colleges and universities, which is to be presented sometime before summer, describes vocational colleges as important providers of decentralised, flexible education.

Vocational colleges' contribution to the Skills Reform and A New Deal for Skills

The objectives of the Government's Skills Reform are that no one's skills become obsolete, and that the labour market has access to the skills it needs.

Since 2018, the Government has allocated around half a billion Norwegian kroner to the development or operation of flexible education. Flexible education refers to courses and programmes that are available to persons who, because of their living, work or life situation, are unable to study full-time at a vocational college, university or university college.

Vocational colleges have been a key contributor in this initiative, and have since 2018 received a total of NOK 160 million from various application-based schemes to develop or run flexible programmes and courses.

Vocational colleges have especially played a key role in the tripartite industry programme for skills development initiated in 2019. The programme is a partnership in which the central government and the social partners work together to increase participation in skills development within selected industries. Ten industry programmes have been established in the following industries: travel and tourism; hairdressing; the retail and specialist trade; the industry and building sector; the construction industry; the food and beverage industry; the electrical, automation, renewables and power industry; municipal health and care services; oil, gas and service suppliers; and the maritime industry.

Vocational colleges have also received funding for places on short, flexible further education courses for the industry and building sector under the *Industrifagskolen* scheme. This includes vocational education developed through the industry and building programme, or that is deemed to fall within the scope of what the parties call *Industrifagskolen*. Representatives of businesses or partnerships between local businesses in an industry, together with the employee representatives, must take active part in the process of identifying skills needs and recruiting applicants for the course.

Many vocational colleges have also received funds to develop flexible further education courses in digital skills. In addition, vocational colleges have contributed to the Government's extensive skills development initiative for unemployed and furloughed workers during the coronavirus pandemic.



Experience of the work on allocating new student places in 2020

The revised budget for 2020 included funds for 1,500 new student places on vocational college programmes from autumn 2020. This came in addition to 100 new places in the balanced budget for 2020. For the places allocated in the revised budget, the county authorities were asked to report the need for new places to Diku, based on local and regional needs and the vocational colleges' capacity. It was a requirement that the reported needs were aligned with the boards of the individual vocational colleges and relevant industry organisations, and that they contained a plan for recruiting students.

A review of Diku's work on the allocation of student places in the revised budget for 2020 indicates that this way of organising the work helped to strengthen the collaboration between the county authorities and the vocational colleges. It is likely that the county authorities will get a better picture of the skills needs in their own region as they continue working on skills plans and strategies. So far, everything suggests that the new places established in 2020 were filled.



System for allocating new student places in tertiary vocational education

A system is needed that ensures that funds for new student places are allocated between and within the county authorities in a way that meets the needs of the labour market. The central government is responsible for allocating grants to the county authorities, which in turn distribute funds between the vocational colleges. The county authorities must ensure diversity in the range of private and public providers of tertiary vocational education, also through the allocation of funds for new student places.

Better knowledge about future skills needs will provide a better basis for dimensioning tertiary vocational education. A system for allocating funds for student places should therefore be closely linked to an assessment of the skills needs of each region.

Regional skills plans developed by the county authorities will help them in their work on identifying skills needs. This work will also aid in the collaboration between the county authorities, the social partners and educational providers in general. The Government expects the work on new skills plans and established collaboration structures to generate more knowledge about the need for tertiary vocational education. The work carried out by the Official Committee on Skill Needs also provides insight into regional skills development work.

Over time, more systematic efforts to identify skills needs and the need for more student places in tertiary vocational education will give the authorities a better basis for determining the size and scope of the sector going forward, and the allocation between county authorities of operating grants for vocational colleges. Each county authority will have a better basis for assessing how the operating grants for tertiary vocational programmes they manage should

be divided between different providers in their own county. This will give the county authorities a more active role in the vocational college sector.



The need for new education

An increasing number of skilled workers report through student and apprentice surveys that they plan to take further education or studies after achieving their journeyman's or trade certificate.¹⁴ Given that approximately 27,000 persons take a trade exam each year, there is a potential for more applicants for tertiary vocational education. There may therefore be reason to consider new subject areas where a need for developing new study programmes may arise in future.

Admission to many vocational study programmes is based on a general university and college admissions certificate, in addition to a trade or journeyman's certificate. There may therefore also be fields of skills or professions that are not based on such a certificate, but where there may nonetheless be a need for developing new tertiary vocational study programmes.

The Ministry has asked the vocational councils for an assessment of the need for new pathways from upper secondary education and training to higher vocational education. The same request has been addressed to the National Council for Tertiary Vocational Education. The councils point out that a pathway from vocational training to tertiary vocational education

¹⁴ <https://skoleporten.udir.no/rapportvisning/fag-og-vrkesopplaering/laeringsmiljoe/laerlingundersokelsen/nasjonal?enhetsid=00&vurderingsomrade=6&underomrade=54&skoletype=6&skoletypemenuid=2&sammenstilling=1>

is missing for many subject areas, but also that a more thorough survey should be conducted. This should include an assessment of whether the current structure of upper secondary education and training provides appropriate pathways from the upper secondary level to tertiary vocational education. It should also be considered whether there is a potential in other parts of the labour market for the establishment of relevant study programmes.

A better overview and a more thorough assessment of potential new pathways from upper secondary education and training to tertiary vocational education can help to meet potential needs in the labour market and also complete the range of vocational training available, thereby making it more attractive.



Support for education

The Government has made it easier for adults to receive subsistence support in combination with studies and work. For example, it became possible from 2020 to study less than 50 per cent of a full-time programme, and for persons over the age of 30 to be granted an additional loan of up to NOK 100,000 per year. The next step will be introduced in 2021, from which time part-time studies will no longer be considered on a par with full-time studies with regard to the maximum loan period of eight years. To ensure that everyone has access to shorter, flexible courses of education and is able to invest in the development of their own skills, the funding arrangement must be made more flexible and be better suited as a replacement of income over a shorter period.

The Government aims to

- **facilitate further growth in the vocational college sector**
- **establish a system for the allocation of new student places that takes account of the labour market's need for skills, vocational colleges' possibility of planning, and that is based on available knowledge and analyses of skills needs**
- **announce an assignment to establish new pathways from upper secondary education and training to tertiary vocational education**
- **further raise the profile of tertiary vocational education, among other things by further developing the information available on the website Utdanning.no**
- **continue to develop flexible funding schemes that make it easier for adult students to combine work and studies**

Focus area 2: Raising the quality of tertiary vocational education



Tertiary vocational education must be part of the education system that responds to current needs in the labour market. This requires flexibility and the ability to make targeted adaptations to study programmes at short notice. Vocational schools are good at that. At the same time, it is important that the programmes offered are of high quality and provide good learning conditions for students. Many factors play a role in the effort to raise the quality of education. Three key factors are the development of the accreditation system, the teachers' online teaching skills and international cooperation.

An especially important tool in quality assurance efforts is the accreditation of study programmes. It is currently the Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) that

grants accreditation to study programmes offered at vocational colleges. Vocational colleges may apply for accreditation for a subject area, however, which means that they are authorised to accredit study programmes in certain subject areas themselves. When NOKUT grants such authorisation, it is based on the college having established appropriate procedures and systems for quality assurance.

The feedback from vocational colleges that have been granted accreditation for a subject area is positive. The accreditation process is demanding in terms of both time and resources, but it helps to raise the quality at the institution. In 2020, 9 of 73 vocational colleges had been granted approval of a total of 13 subject areas. Some vocational colleges have accreditation for more than one subject area.

A challenge of this system is that the authorisation for accreditation is limited to certain subject areas, which is an obstacle to cross-disciplinary teaching and learning. Society's need for skills is constantly changing, and the rate of transition in the labour market is increasing in step with digitalisation and the transition to a greener economy. Several vocational colleges have highlighted an increasing need for studies that combine elements of several subject areas. This is relevant in, for example, health technology, building and ICT, technology and management.

One example is the business Trøndelag Ortopediske Verksted, which makes various orthopaedic appliances. The company has been practising this traditional craft for many years, but new technology such as 3D printing challenged the old working methods, giving rise to a need for knowledge about data modelling. A partnership with the vocational college in Trøndelag enabled the company to select elements from different study programmes and put together a tailored study package for orthopaedic technicians.

The Government would like to boost efforts to raise the quality of tertiary vocational education by giving the institutions greater freedom to determine the development of and changes to study programmes. We will do so by proposing that vocational colleges are eligible to apply for institutional accreditation, in other words the possibility of self-accreditation in all subject areas, thereby ensuring cross-disciplinary flexibility. The status report for 2020 suggests that institutional accreditation is most relevant for the larger vocational colleges that currently have accreditation for one or more subject areas.¹⁵

¹⁵ Diku report series 04/2020: *Tilstandsrapport for høgare yrkesfagleg utdanning 2020* (in Norwegian only).



Institutional accreditation

The Government proposes that all vocational colleges be eligible to apply for institutional accreditation for all subject areas, as is currently the case for most universities and university colleges. This was proposed by the Markussen Committee, which pointed out that it would make vocational colleges more flexible and adaptable.¹⁶

Institutional accreditation will enable vocational colleges to establish new study programmes in response to the needs of the labour market, and thereby achieve a better match between the supply of and demand for relevant, flexible education. Many argue that this is the next natural step for the vocational colleges that have come the furthest in establishing quality control systems through accreditation of subject areas. Institutional accreditation will

- enable vocational colleges to respond quicker and more accurately to the needs of the labour market
- lead to greater predictability and possibilities of planning and innovation without being dependent on approval processes to make changes or develop new programmes

These conditions apply to vocational colleges that currently only have accreditation for single subject areas. In order for vocational colleges to contribute to change, it is important that they control their own resources over time, such as the possibility of allocating or recruiting necessary teaching staff, infrastructure and machinery or other teaching equipment.

To develop tertiary vocational education, vocational colleges' quality assurance work should be reinforced. This can be achieved by enabling vocational colleges that currently have accreditation for a subject area to achieve institutional accreditation. Consideration will

¹⁶ Norwegian Official Report (NOU) 2019: 12 *Learnability — Lifelong learning for reskilling and competitiveness*.

therefore be given to establishing criteria and a framework for self-accreditation. Once the funding system has been evaluated, it should be considered specifically whether there is a basis for using the system to support quality assurance work in other ways than is currently the case. It will not be a requirement for all vocational colleges to have institutional accreditation to be able to continue offering tertiary vocational education.



Online teaching skills

To maintain and raise the quality of tertiary vocational education, it is essential that stringent requirements apply not only to the academic competence, but also to the online teaching skills of teachers and supervisors with overall responsibility for teaching. During the COVID-19 pandemic when more and more teaching has taken place online, teachers have found themselves in need of increased digital skills. The requirements that apply to teaching qualifications are set out in the Vocational Education Regulations. Teaching staff who provide flexible, web and session-based education must have relevant teaching qualifications.

Tertiary vocational education is increasingly offered as web and session-based study programmes.¹⁷ Despite this, a survey conducted by the company ideas2evidence in 2021 found that only half of the teachers described their online teaching skills as good. Furthermore, only a quarter of those who teach students online have formal online teaching qualifications. Although this represents a considerable increase from 2018, there is still a need for further improvement. Eighty-two per cent of teachers who teach students online say that they would like to improve their online teaching skills.

¹⁷ <https://diku.no/rapporter/dikus-rapportserie-9-2021-tilstandsrapport-for-hoegare-yrkesfagleg-utdanning>



Internationalisation as a tool to achieve quality enhancement

International cooperation raises the quality of Norwegian education and generates qualifications and skills that are of decisive importance to the restructuring of the Norwegian economy. Vocational schools are only engaged in international collaborations to a limited extent. The Government has therefore made it an express goal to increase vocational colleges' participation in international education programmes such as Erasmus+ and Nordplus. The goals of EU's and Norway's education policies largely concur, and European education programmes are therefore also effective means of achieving quality enhancement.

Important forms of internationalisation include:

- exchanges of students and staff
- cooperation on study programmes
- cooperation on the development of programmes, courses and degrees

Vocational colleges can use different forms of international collaboration projects to develop, exchange and test new innovative practices and teaching methods. Collaboration projects provide the possibility of developing new subject descriptions, testing new ways of teaching and learning, developing new ways of collaborating and engaging in innovation. There are several good examples of this from schools, vocational education and training and higher education, from which vocational colleges can draw knowledge and inspiration.

International cooperation can also have a direct impact on the individual students and members of the academic staff involved. Student mobility is particularly useful when it comes to language skills and cultural understanding, but can also pave the way for study or work placements with a company or educational institution in a particular area of expertise. The international collaboration thereby offers students an extended arena for learning, which in turn improves their skills. These skills will benefit business and industry when the students enter the labour market, and mobility should thus also be seen as an important element of

the skills policy. For staff, these collaborations provide opportunities to update their skills and knowledge through partnerships with businesses, or insight into new forms of learning and teaching methods.

More international cooperation will give vocational colleges useful tools for skills development, quality enhancement, renewal and innovation. It is therefore a goal that vocational colleges participate in the various international education programmes that are available. Reference is also made to the work on Erasmus + for the period 2021–2027, which will contribute to international cooperation.

Accessibility and storage of diplomas and verification of education data

There is currently no well-functioning solution available that provides information about which study programmes are accredited. This results in manual quality assurance work and an inadequate knowledge basis for a number of parties, including the Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund (Lånekassen). The need for an authoritative register for accredited study programmes at vocational colleges, university colleges and universities has been highlighted, called for and described at a general level, for example in the 2018 report *Et velfungerende kunnskapssystem* ('A well-functioning knowledge system'), and on NSD's forum for vocational college statistics. The need for a register is greatest for vocational colleges and slightly less pertinent for universities and university colleges. One of the measures proposed in the white paper was to make vocational college diplomas accessible in the Diploma Registry portal. This is still only possible for a small number of vocational colleges, because most do not have a digital solution for storing diplomas. The need for a register of accredited study programmes and a storage solution for digital diplomas should be seen in conjunction with the need to develop other digital solutions in the education sector.

The Government aims to

- **consider establishing criteria and a framework for institutional accreditation with a view to enabling vocational colleges to choose to establish and change study programmes even after they have been granted general approval by NOKUT**
- **encourage more vocational colleges to achieve accreditation of subject areas**
- **help to raise the quality of web and session-based courses by enhancing online teaching skills**
- **encourage more vocational colleges to make use of the possibilities that lie in international study programmes to raise the quality of their education**
- **consider establishing a register for accredited study programmes and a solution that enables vocational college diplomas to be stored and made accessible**

Focus area 3: Stimulate excellent quality in tertiary vocational education



Projections from Statistics Norway show that we will need at least 70,000 skilled workers in 2035.¹⁸ The Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise's (NHO) annual skills barometer survey shows that 50 per cent of businesses in need of expertise look for personnel with tertiary vocational education, while 60 per cent look for upper secondary level vocational qualifications.¹⁹ In addition, requirements of skilled workers are increasing in step with technological developments, the green transition and the need for lifelong learning. To help ensure that the vocational pathway and tertiary vocational education develop in a positive direction, we need some guiding stars to lead the way.

Centres of excellence for tertiary vocational education

The Government proposes to establish a centre of excellence scheme for tertiary vocational education. This will be a prestigious scheme that encourages excellent quality in tertiary vocational education in Norway. The status can be awarded to groups that help to bring together learning communities, the labour market and experts to achieve academic development and innovation. In the development of the initiative, it will be expedient to build on experienced gained through the Centres of Excellence in Higher Education (SFU) and the Erasmus+ programme Centres of Vocational Excellence.²⁰

¹⁸ Statistics Norway 2018/36 Ådne Cappelen, Bjorn Dapi, Hege Marie Gjefsen, Victoria Sparrman and Nils Martin Stølen: *Framskrivinger av arbeidsstyrken og sysselsettingen etter utdanning mot 2035* (in Norwegian only).

¹⁹ NHO's skills barometer survey 2020. NIFU report 2021:4.

²⁰ https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/actions/centres-of-vocational-excellence_en

The scheme will focus on tertiary vocational education and be concerned with how vocational colleges can be further developed, while retaining their distinctive nature, and at the same time involve other educational levels, labour market participants and expert environments.

The Government will start by announcing a call for applications for trials, based on the SFU scheme in higher education, which yielded good results in the university and university college sector. The initiative should be evaluated before a possible expansion of the scheme.

Centres of excellence for tertiary vocational education will help to raise the level of academic competence and the quality of education and training, strengthen cooperation across educational levels, increase recognition and recruitment, and raise the profile of Norwegian vocational colleges and vocational education and training in the European context, with the emergence of Centres of Vocational Excellence.



The Government aims to

- **establish a pilot project involving a centre of excellence for tertiary vocational education, where vocational colleges in partnership with the labour market and expert environments are given an opportunity to develop projects that promote academic development and find new answers to skills needs in the labour market**

Focus area 4: Higher skills requirements in the labour market must be met by offering study programmes at a higher level



The pace of change in today's labour market places increasing demands on skills development. The academic requirements are increasing, and in addition to a subject area, you must be knowledgeable about both digitalisation and sustainable solutions. It is important that society recognises that skilled workers can have highly specialised knowledge and skills, and a high degree of responsibility and autonomy, also within vocational study programmes. The Government takes a positive view of tertiary vocational education being given the opportunity to offer study programmes that give students a higher level of competence than is currently the case. Based on a comprehensive review, it will therefore consider whether some tertiary vocational study programmes can be placed at a different level than the current Level 5 of the National Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning. The Government will also help to ensure good transitional paths between tertiary vocational education and higher education by allocating funds for collaboration projects.

The National Qualifications Framework

The National Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (NQF) describes what students, at different levels of their education, are expected to have achieved after completing the education. All study programmes are classified at levels two to eight, with completed lower secondary education at Level 2 and completed PhD at Level 8. Tertiary vocational education is currently placed at Level 5. In Proposition 47 to the Storting (Bill) (2017–2018) on the Act relating to tertiary vocational education (the Vocational Education Act), the Government stated that the Ministry of Education and Research was planning a review of the NQF.²¹ NOKUT started the process in 2021.

²¹ Proposition No 47 to the Storting (Bill) (2017–2018).

The European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF) is an EU system that facilitates mobility and recognition of qualifications by classifying them by level. The EQF contains eight reference levels that cover the whole range of qualifications from the basic Level 1 to the advanced Level 8, which largely comprises PhDs. The EQF is open to include qualifications obtained through both studies and work experience, but the national authority (in Norway, the Ministry of Education and Research) must guarantee the quality assurance of the qualifications referenced through the national qualifications framework. Norway participates in the EQF through the EEA Agreement, and the NQF was referenced to the EQF in 2014.

In the NQF, levels 6–8 are reserved for higher education. This means that university and university college education must have learning outcome descriptors that correspond to the overriding descriptions adopted for these levels. The learning outcomes for tertiary vocational education must be at NQF Level 5. This means that the learning outcome descriptors for all tertiary vocational programmes that are accredited must be harmonised with the overarching learning outcome descriptors for Level 5 in the NQF.

Evaluation of the NQF

The Ministry of Education and Research has tasked NOKUT with evaluating the NQF. The framework was adopted ten years ago, at which time it was assumed that it would be evaluated when it had been in effect for some time. The Ministry announced a full review of the NQF²² and underlined that all elements of the framework are interconnected and should be seen as a whole.

Over the last few decades, national qualifications frameworks have been developed and implemented all over Europe and should be compatible with the EQF. The national qualifications frameworks for higher education are also compatible with the Framework of Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA).

One of the topics in the evaluation is the question of whether some programmes of tertiary vocational education should be placed at a higher level than the current Level 5. The first step was to conduct a study of the possibility of introducing parallel sets of level descriptors for the upper levels of the NQF.²³ The study plays a role in the evaluation process.

²² Proposition to the Storting No 47 (Bill) (2017–2018), p. 58.

²³ Mikaela Almerud, Maria Ricksten, Amanda Bengtsson Jallow, Ida Pettersson & Göran Melin (2020): *Utredning om mulig parallell struktur i nasjonalt kvalifikasjonsrammeverk for livslang læring* (in Norwegian only).

Several of those who provided input to the Ministry of Education and Research argued that a restriction of the level classification gives rise to challenges in developing or revising study programmes to meet the labour market's ever-increasing competence requirements.

If tertiary vocational education is placed at a higher level than Level 5, it must be done without leading to academisation of the vocational college sector. It is therefore important that any parallel level descriptors and requirements are designed to reflect the distinctive nature of tertiary vocational education. NOKUT's work on a comprehensive review of the NQF will form the basis for assessing how a classification of tertiary vocational education at a higher level can be designed and fit into a revised qualifications framework, in line with the two different structural models outlined in the feasibility study.



Expedient transitions between tertiary vocational education and university and university college education

Students looking for alternative pathways through the education system should be given as predictable and expedient transitions as possible. Good procedures should therefore be established for transitional arrangements between study programmes at vocational colleges and universities and university colleges.

The midway evaluation shows that there is still a need for improving transitions from tertiary vocational programmes to university and university college programmes in the same or equivalent subject areas. There are currently systems in place in, for example, maritime programmes and engineering programmes that facilitate a transition from tertiary vocational

education to higher education. In 2021, Diku announced a call for applications for up to NOK 7.5 million for collaboration projects between vocational colleges and universities or university colleges for the purpose of developing good transitional arrangements between tertiary vocational programmes and relevant higher education programmes. The Government will consider necessary adaptations that will promote lifelong learning and provide for better transitions between higher education and tertiary vocational education.



The Government aims to

- **take a positive view of the intention to classify some tertiary vocational study programmes above the current Level 5, but will await the NQF evaluation before making a final decision**
- **help to ensure good transitional paths between tertiary vocational education and higher education by allocating funds for collaboration projects**

Implementation and follow-up

This strategy sets out a direction and ambitions for work in the vocational college sector for the years ahead. The Government and the Ministry of Education and Research will follow up the strategy in relevant processes. Measures that have budgetary consequences will be considered in the annual national budgets. The funding system for vocational colleges is currently being evaluated. Amendments to acts and regulations are followed up in the normal manner.

In order for the goals of the strategy to succeed, it is important that government agencies such as NOKUT and the new Directorate for Higher Education and Skills (HK-dir) provide support and guidance to the vocational colleges, and that supervision and accreditation of tertiary vocational education help to raise the quality of the programmes.

It is also a condition that the county authorities, as school owners and managers of government grants for vocational colleges, help to ensure that tertiary vocational education is further developed as a supplier of skills to regional business and industry. As school owners, it is also important that the county authorities help to develop vocational colleges through expedient management and an active ownership policy.

In order for the goals to succeed, the labour market, through private and public sector enterprises and their organisations, must also invest in tertiary vocational education. This requires enterprises to seek collaboration and make requirements of vocational colleges through their skills plans and recruitment strategies to ensure relevant, high-quality study programmes.



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