

Student mobility between Norway and England: end of the one way street?

By Rachel Sweetman

Last year saw a record number of Norwegian students heading overseas, with 22,000 studying abroad in 2010-11. The UK was the most popular destination, ahead of the USA, Australia and Denmark. While the flow of students between these two countries offers an important link, it is one that is highly asymmetrical: in recent years, around 3,000 Norwegians students have flooded to the UK, while around 350 UK students have trickled into Norway. This imbalanced relationship reflects a significant difference in the role that student mobility has played in the two countries. It is however a relationship that may be undergoing some substantial changes in the years to come.



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A case study may serve to exemplify how things have looked from the Norwegian perspective. Harald Vabø describes how three generations of his family came to cross the North Sea and study in England. The reasons motivating the Vabø's decisions from the 1950s to the present day, are typical of the history between the countries. Norway's students had no option but to take their university education abroad before 1811, when the first University was established in Oslo. After the long period of foreign rule, Norway's higher education (HE) system developed late and fairly slowly, contributing to an acute lack of places after the Second World War, so Norwegian students set out to learn the skills needed for a rapidly developing society abroad. The post-war decades saw nearly half of Norway's medicine and civil engineering graduates train abroad. Britain became a prime destination, as more young Norwegians spoke English as their second language, and it offered an easier journey than much of Europe. Harald's father was a classic example of the time, going to Sunderland in the mid 1950s to train as a civil engineer, and returning to Norway to work in the booming public infrastructure sector. When his own turn came to study in the 70s, competition for technical and engineering places was still fierce, and instead of changing courses when he was unable to get a place in Trondheim he set off for Sunderland.

Today, Harald credits his time abroad with helping him gain communication skills and a knack for handling international working environments that many of his technically accomplished peers did not have. His daughter has also chosen England, studying architecture in

Kingston, London. Indeed, while the North East of England remains important as a hub for engineering links between Norway and the UK, London-based universities and business schools have become incredibly popular: where better than the local global city for young Norwegians to earn their business stripes?

In contrast to this history of outward travel, British students have long been reluctant to study overseas. European exchanges show twice as many students come into the UK as flow out, and numbers of outgoing students fell by nearly a third from the mid-1990s to the mid 2000s. Norway attracts only small numbers of British students; indeed, as a student in Oslo, meeting a fellow Brit was always quite a shock, while American, German and Dutch students were much more present on campus. The dominant attitude to student mobility among UK universities seems to be that, having done so well in bringing the world to their campuses (with the second most internationalised student population after America) why should any British student leave?

This imbalanced relationship reflects language, history and convenience, but also policy. Internationalisation has been central to Norwegian HE policy, which has stressed the role international links are expected to play in driving up quality in research and education. In line with this, the Norwegian loan system (Lånekassen) has long provided generous support for students studying overseas and even subsidies for those going to prestigious or competitive institutions.

Meanwhile, the internationalisation agenda in UK universities and colleges has been dominated by the growing importance of international students as a source of revenue. In 2004 HEFCE found that while attracting international students was embedded in institutions' strategies, few promoted outward mobility. As tuition fees have risen steeply in England (more than in Wales, and dramatically more than in Scotland), institutions have

become adept at international marketing. Foreign students have become big business, and are estimated to have generated around £2.9 billion for universities in 2010, nearly 10% of total revenues.

Both Britain and Norway have had reason to go with the (largely) one way flow of traffic between the countries, but that may be about to change. In the last few years, efforts have shifted from facilitating student exchange towards bilateral partnerships between institutions, often involving shared industrial interests, such as the marine sciences, oil and extractive industries, as well as in technical skills needed for wind and other sustainable energies. A recent Norwegian imitative seeks to encourage students to look beyond safe, English-language destinations, with new incentives for those taking up courses in the BRIC countries, offering a boost to language skills and links with key trading partners beyond Europe. Meanwhile, the rising fees may deter the inflow of Norwegians to English universities. England is now the third most expensive country for international students to attend, after Australia and America. It looks even more expensive when other countries are stepping in to offer popular courses in English, and at a fraction of the cost. East European countries have become major sites for Nordic students on medical and vocational courses. One such student in Slovakia, after spending his student years eating out every night and living like a king off his student loan, wondered aloud why anyone stayed in Norway for university.

While competition for Norwegian students is increasing, there are also signs the new fees or up to £9000 a year may overwhelm English students' hesitancy to study overseas. Dutch universities have already reported large influxes of English students' applications for 2012. Norway is affected by these changes. The only remaining country in Europe to offer tuition-free higher education to foreign students, Norway has upped its international offer in recent years, with more than 170 Masters programs taught in English, and an increasing range of English-taught undergraduate programs now available. The University of Oslo saw a 60% increase in applications to its self-financing masters programmes, and Trondheim's Norwegian University of Science and Technology reported a 45% growth. It is inevitable that the high cost of living in Norway, which tended to deter inflows of students, will be being carefully weighed up the low fees, generous provision for post-graduate students and, good employment prospects.

The established one way street in the relationship between Norway and England may be about to see some pretty drastic changes.



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