



The merger of non-university colleges in Norway

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Abstract. This article discusses the merger of 98 vocationally-oriented colleges into 26 state colleges in Norway. The mergers, which took place in 1994, have in many ways proved to be a successful reform. The colleges now have more competent administration and professional leadership, and they have become far more visible and acquired a higher status. Still, several of the aims of the reform – to improve teaching and research and to make the colleges more cost-effective – can so far not be said to have been fulfilled. In addition, many academic staff feel that the new colleges have become bureaucratised, that the identity of the individual vocational programmes have been weakened, and they blame the reform for a general retrenchment in financial resources.

Keywords: implementation of higher education reforms, merger, non-university colleges, Norway, Norwegian state colleges, vocational higher education

Introduction

In 1994, the non-university higher education sector in Norway underwent a major reorganisation when 98 vocationally-oriented colleges were amalgamated into 26 new state colleges. These encompassed the previous colleges of teacher training (25), engineering (15), health education (27), and social work (3), as well as the regional colleges (14), and various other institutions offering a specialist range of teaching programmes (14). The purpose of the reorganisation was to enhance the quality of administrative functions and academic work through the creation of larger administrative and academic units, to break down barriers between the former colleges, and to develop new and broader study programmes. In addition, economies of scale would yield more efficient use of physical resources.

The decision to restructure this sector has its roots in a Royal Commission set up in 1965 to assess various aspects of the higher education system. This Commission proposed that all non-university institutions in each of twelve regions should be administratively and organisationally integrated, and that the core of the new institutions was to be located in a study centre. The main arguments for this integration were that a study centre would offer students a

broader choice of courses, a broader and better milieu for teaching staff, and a better utilisation of buildings, libraries, and student welfare installations. The issue of integration was, however, abandoned by the Ministry of Education, mainly due to resistance from some of the colleges concerned and their affiliated professional organisations. To remedy this situation, joint management boards were established in 1976 for these institutions in each of 17 regions. However, these boards had limited power and legitimacy, and most colleges found it more efficient to try to influence their situation by direct contact with the Ministry rather than by addressing the regional boards. Thus, the non-university higher education system continued to exist almost as fragmented as before.

The reorganisation issue was revitalised by a Royal Commission set up in 1987 to evaluate the goals, organisation and priorities of higher education and research. The Commission pointed out several reasons as to why the earlier attempt at regional reorganisation had failed. First, the functional division into educational categories based on links to the professions intensified the local geographical disintegration of institutions. Further, the various vocational courses were administered by different offices in the Ministry of Education, and partly even by different ministries. Arguments for coordination were opposed by the colleges, and arguments for mergers were defeated by local political interests. Secondly, the various colleges had different study traditions, curricula, course structures, and staff members with heterogeneous obligations and rights. Thirdly, these earlier mergers attempts had resulted in disputes concerning qualifications, and in some cases in personal conflict. The Commission stated that the significance of such problems had been overemphasized, and that the time now was ripe for reducing the number of independent colleges through mergers within each region.

The white papers that followed supported the Commission's recommendations. Right from the time when the proposal to integrate all college education into study centres was launched, the Ministry desired to have fewer institutions to manage. The large number of colleges which the ministry had under its auspices had created considerable capacity problems. Seen from the viewpoint of the Ministry, the regional boards were a poor compromise. It was for this reason that an amalgamation of institutions was included as one of the premises in the Commission's mandate. In 1993, the government decided that the existing colleges in each of the regions should be merged into new units, named state colleges. The historic and most comprehensive reform of Norwegian higher education became a fact. In the meantime it had taken almost 30 years from when the proposal for mergers had first been aired until 26 state colleges were inaugurated. The assumption for bringing about this reform was also considerably different in 1993 than at the end

of the 1960s. The weaknesses of the college system were manifest, and the political opposition to such a change in the educational system had become considerably less. In this respect Norway places itself within an international trend aiming at reducing the number of many small, specialised, single-purpose colleges, and creating a smaller number of larger, multipurpose, multidisciplinary institutions (Goedegebuure and Meek 1997).

The overall objectives of this reform can be split up in several sub-goals (Kyvik 1999):

1. To create larger and stronger disciplinary units
2. To enhance contact and collaboration between staff across different teaching programmes
3. To create a common educational culture in the new colleges
4. To offer students possibilities to combine subjects in new ways
5. To create better organisational conditions for adaptation to changes in societal needs and demands and for development of new courses
6. To make the college system more cost efficient
7. To improve library and ICT services
8. To improve the quality of administrative services.

Another aim of the reform, though not officially stated, was to prevent the two largest regional colleges from achieving university status. These two colleges had for many years attempted to become universities, but the Minister of Education was very intent to curb the tendencies to 'upward drift' and to limit the number of universities to the four established institutions. By establishing a binary system with two distinct higher education sectors, and by amalgamating these colleges with the professionally-oriented non-academic colleges in each of their regions, he hoped to put an end to their university ambitions.

A main purpose of this article will be to discuss to what extent the outcome of the reform has met with expectations.

The article is based upon a major evaluation of the Norwegian merger process and the outcomes of this reform (Kyvik 1999). Data on the effects of the reform were compiled primarily through a survey undertaken in 1997/98 among the academic staff at the state colleges. In total, 71 per cent of the faculty members in the relevant staff groups answered the questionnaire. In addition, about 300 interviews were undertaken with academic and administrative leaders in the colleges as well as with key informants in the Ministry of Education and in other state agencies. Finally, statistical data were compiled to investigate the issue of cost-efficiency in the new colleges.

The reform in a national context

The reorganisation of the non-university higher education sector has to be viewed in a broader national context in order to understand the objectives of the reform and the processes that took place. At the end of the 1980s, to a larger extent than hitherto, higher education institutions came to be regarded as regular state agencies subject to a common steering system. This change in thinking was widespread in other European countries and came to influence Norwegian public policy in important ways. This applied in particular to the 'new public management' ideas developed by the OECD, and in line with the recommendations by this organisation, the government introduced a general programme for renewal of the civil service. The main steering principle was that rules and standard procedures should be given less emphasis as steering instruments, while decision-making authority and administrative tasks should be delegated and decentralised from the government to the individual institutions. This measure presupposed, however, the introduction of a more detailed planning and reporting system than before to ensure that the institutions produced the expected results with a minimum of resources.

The thought was that when local agencies acquire greater autonomy in determining how these goals were to be achieved, the results would be better and resource use would be more cost-effective. There would thus be conformity between the changes in the steering ideology and the demands of subordinate agencies for local autonomy and extended authority in the use of the resources available. Further, increased importance would be attached to a market orientation, either through increased demands for self-financing, or through the introduction of market and quasi-market mechanisms in the day-to-day operations. The condition for the implementation of these governmental objectives was that the governance and the management system in the colleges be strengthened. This could best be achieved by creating larger institutions.

The college reform can scarcely be considered as an internal sector reorganisation process seen in this perspective. It is an integrated part of the state administration reforms of the 1990s where joint and uniform management implements were developed along with a common set of regulations pertaining to all public activity. The standardisation process which had been introduced in administration during the 1990s was also to be of considerable significance for the management of the college sector and organisation of the colleges' activities.

Another important reform that affected the college sector in vitally important ways was the inclusion in 1996 of the state colleges under the same act as the universities. In addition to regulating the relationship between

central authorities and the higher education sector, the act gives a common framework for the organisation and governance of these institutions. Furthermore, the act links the institutions through “Network Norway”. This concept presupposes that the higher education institutions will be further developed within a national integrated system. “Network Norway” will require closer co-operation and a better division of labour on teaching programmes and research between the various institutions of higher education. Further expansion should go together with specialisation so that every state college can set national standards in at least one particular programme.

According to the Act on Universities and Colleges, the universities shall be responsible for the major part of basic research, and be given main responsibility for graduate education and research training. The state colleges shall be responsible for a wide variety of professionally and vocationally-oriented teaching programmes, and in addition take on some of the university programmes for basic and undergraduate education. Within certain fields, where the universities do not offer similar programmes, the new colleges should offer graduate education. Concurrently, the colleges should undertake research, preferably connected to practice within specific fields, or to problems particularly relevant to their region. Highly competent research environments with adequate depth could also play a role in graduate and postgraduate education in collaboration with a university or a university-level college.

The Act on Universities and Colleges also led to large changes in the governance of the new state colleges compared to the way most of the earlier colleges had been governed (Dimmen and Kyvik 1998). Prior to the mergers, academic leadership and the management of the colleges were organised in various ways. At some colleges the practice was similar to university regulations with elected academic leaders and a permanent director. Most of the colleges, however, were headed by a rector who was appointed by the Ministry upon the recommendation of the regional board. The rector thus was both the academic and administrative leader of the institution. According to the new Act, the state colleges now elect boards and academic leaders at the institutional level, the faculty level, and the department level. The Act also introduced the principle of ‘divided leadership’ at all levels, emphasising a clearer division of labour between academic and administrative leaders. In principle, the elected leaders are not superior to administrative leaders at their level, and they do not have responsibility for preparing issues of their boards, nor is it their job to implement resolutions which have been taken.

Implementation of higher education reforms – analytical perspective

Reforms usually build upon an instrumental and rational understanding of implementation processes. Certain goals are to be realised through particular measures. It is presumed that changes in organisational structure, authority relations, and communication patterns will lead to the desired results. Many years of accumulated experience in implementation studies and evaluations show, however, that the expected results of public initiatives are often not attained, or that they are strongly modified in relation to their original objectives.

Numerous studies of implementation processes have therefore tried to identify the most important variables decisive for a successful implementation of reforms or new programmes (O'Toole 1986). Though these studies later have been criticised for their top-down perspective on implementation, and also for not specifying a coherent model of implementation processes, their analytical approach can still be fruitful in analyses of reforms in the public sector.

In their seminal study on the implementation of higher education reforms in Europe, Cerych and Sabatier (1986) applied this approach. Special emphasis was put on the analysis of goals, their comparisons with outcomes, and the factors affecting policy implementation, particularly the attainment of formal goals. On the basis of this and other studies, the following factors seem to be particularly relevant in the analysis of implementation processes.

Objectives of the reform

The objectives are obviously the starting point for the analysis of implementation processes. Are goals clear and consistent, or vague and contradictory? Is the envisaged degree of change in organisational structure and in the behaviour of the staff large or modest? Clear and unambiguous goals combined with small changes are usually regarded as easier to implement than large changes characterised by diffuse and complex objectives. However, the lack of clear and consistent goals of reforms is probably more the rule than the exception in the higher education sector, and there are also examples of successful reforms whose initial goals were manifold and non-consistent (Kyvik 1981; Gornitzka et al. 2002).

Adequacy of the causal theory underlying the reform

Cerych and Sabatier (1986) observed that many higher education reforms have been based on false assumptions. In line with Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), who argued that decision-makers should base new programmes on

an 'economic theory of implementation', they emphasized the importance of an adequate causal theory, or a set of assumptions about means and ends. They stated that if goals are to be realised, it is important that causal links be understood, and that the agents responsible for implementing the reform have jurisdiction over sufficient critical linkages to make possible the attainment of the objectives. This is a recommendation that puts high cognitive demands on policy makers, since it is generally very difficult to foresee all problems or unintended effects that may arise in advance.

The degree of commitment to reform objectives among those charged with its implementation

Reforms are not self-executing; someone has to be in charge of their implementation. It is generally regarded as important for goal attainment that those agents that are responsible for the implementation of the reform are highly committed to their task. Cerych and Sabatier (1986) particularly emphasize the importance of having a strong leader – a so-called 'fixer' (Bardach 1977) – committed to the reform. Such 'fixers' were also present in most of the higher education reforms they studied. However, their role was usually limited to policy formulation and adoption and restricted to the early phase of the implementation process. Cerych and Sabatier therefore suggest that many difficulties that arose later could have been overcome if the 'fixers' had been in charge for a longer period.

Inter-organisational relations

The relationship between important organisations in the implementation process is another important factor in implementation studies. In most cases, implementation of major reforms requires action from several and frequently many organisations, and takes place in political systems where power and authority are shared among different units. The most important relation is between the government agency responsible for initiating the reform and the affected institutions. National agencies usually have various steering instruments at their disposal for carrying out measures in line with their intentions. Similarly, the affected institutions may apply various techniques to hinder or delay the implementation of public reforms. In addition, many other organisations are involved in one way or another in the implementation of a reform.

Organisational culture and traditions

Organisational culture and traditions are also important for understanding the relationship between intentions and results. Organisations have a history, and over time key norms and values become incorporated in their patterns of behaviour (Clark 1972). The culture institutionalised in an organisation often represents a conservative element when internal or external actors attempt to change organisational behaviour (Brunsson and Olsen 1993). When public measures strongly contradict the norms and values of an organisation, and which are shared by the majority of its members, it may be difficult to carry out the implementation process in line with its intentions. This can be particularly difficult in higher education organisations where professionals have a large degree of discretion as to how they carry out their work (Dunleavy 1981).

Political, economic, and social conditions

General political, economic and social conditions have been shown to be important for the relationship between objectives and results. If there is general political support behind the reform, the chances are higher that its results will accord with its intentions, more so than if the reform was forced through despite political opposition. In addition, many studies stress the necessity of sufficient economic resources to accomplish a reform. Political measures are often undertaken, however, without sufficient economic consequence analysis. Furthermore, economic conditions change continuously, and it is not unusual that it will be difficult to put through a measure in line with its original intentions. Political support for a reform may also change over time, due to new power constellations or to changes in priorities.

In conclusion, implementation literature questions the possibilities of putting public policy into effect under the conditions of hierarchical steering based upon an instrumental and rational causal relationship between objectives and desired results. This point has become increasingly pertinent during the last ten years or so where a change in public policy from hierarchical steering towards institutional self-regulation has taken place. The control aspects and steering possibilities of the traditional top-down approach is therefore often changed to an approach that emphasises the adaptive and innovative capacity of the organisation or agency that is the target for public policy initiatives (Gornitzka et al. 2002). In such cases, the implementation process may be understood as the struggle between different interest groups attempting to push through their own interests, and where consultations and bargaining more than hierarchical authority decide the outcome.

The implementation of the reform

We can broadly distinguish between two stages in the implementation of this reform; the merger process conducted by the Ministry of Education, and processes taking place in the colleges after the mergers in order to accomplish (or counteract) the objectives of the reform. The first stage – the restructuring of the non-university college sector – can be regarded as a set of organisational changes undertaken to achieve the various academic, administrative, and economic goals. First, the number of colleges was reduced to one fourth. Next, the internal organisation of each of the new state colleges was decided upon through the division into faculties and departments as well as by the establishment of new administrative structures. Finally, a university-like management system was introduced in accordance with the new Act on Universities and Colleges.

In the second stage – after the state colleges were established – it was generally the responsibility of the individual colleges to implement the measures necessary to fulfil the academic, administrative and economic objectives of the reform. This is also in line with the predominant steering model. The responsibility for the implementation of public goals should be left to subordinate units. The processes taking place in the individual colleges after the mergers are, however, not examined in this article.¹

The reorganisation was a result of a long and extensive political decision-making process which was undertaken according to a Parliamentary Resolution. The reform process was instigated by the Ministry of Education in order to implement this political resolution. In the Ministry, a small group of dedicated people was established to carry the mergers through. The regional boards for higher education were asked to organise the amalgamation process in their region according to directives and lines of guidance developed by the Ministry. In the first phase, the main issue was to come to an agreement on which institutions were to be merged within the various regions. The regional boards were the driving force in this process. They had worked for many years for closer regional integration of the different higher education institutions in their regions. The various colleges were less enthusiastic, but accepted somewhat reluctantly the inevitable outcome of this process. Still, some colleges worked actively to avoid the amalgamation, but for a variety of reasons. Some argued that the distance to the administrative centre of the new state college would be too far, while other colleges feared that their ambitions to be granted university status would be effectively stopped by the incorporation into a state college. The Ministry directed the merger processes, but negotiations between the regional boards and their affiliated colleges gave room for local adjustments.

The state colleges now have more than 70,000 students and about 7,700 members of staff, of whom approximately 5,000 occupy academic positions. The colleges offer a total of 500 teaching programmes of 1–4 years' duration; 2–4 year programmes in professional and vocational fields, and 1–1.5 years university courses. Fifteen of the colleges also offer academic programmes for a higher academic degree, most often in collaboration with a university. In addition, three colleges offer doctoral training in specific subjects. Half of the colleges have programmes only in professional fields, while the other half offer programmes in both professional and academic fields. This difference in academic profile is an important feature of the state college system. Most of the professionally oriented colleges are intensive in teaching and instruction, while other colleges put more emphasis on lecturing and independent studies as well as on research.

A presumption for most of the objectives of the reform to become realised was that the state colleges were co-localised. However, the geographical location of each of the 98 original colleges made it politically unacceptable to move all programmes within each of the regions to a single centre. In most cases teaching still takes place at the sites where the original colleges were located, even though those institutions have been merged into one common institution. Many of the colleges are in fact superstructures of faculties located far from each other. Even though thirteen of the colleges have their faculties located within the same municipality, only nine colleges are located on one campus. Thirteen colleges have their faculties dispersed throughout a number of different municipalities. Nine of these institutions are located in more than two municipalities. In this study we shall apply the concept *multi-campus* colleges to the nine institutions that have campuses in three or more municipalities. A logical hypothesis is that multi-campus colleges are more expensive to run than co-localised institutions, and that it is also more difficult to achieve collaboration and integration across programmes at such colleges. On the other hand it is difficult to sort out which problems are due to geography, and which problems are due to cultural differences between members of staff with backgrounds from various former colleges and with different professional identities.

The merging of colleges also implied a shift in administrative principles of non-university higher education. Traditionally, this sector has been organised according to functional specialisation, meaning that the various types of institutions offered specific programmes as parts of national professional educations (for instance teacher training, engineering, nursing and social work). These colleges were administrated by separate offices in the Ministry of Education, and their educational profiles were outlined by different national boards, one for each professional education, to secure national norms and

standards. The reform now implies a stronger regional integration of the programmes through the merging of institutions based upon their geographic location.

After the establishment of the 26 state colleges, the next phase in the reorganisation process was to come to an agreement on the faculty structure within the individual colleges. The expectation was that previous boundaries between different kinds of education should be toned down, and that there would be a higher degree of academic integration. Difficult negotiations took place at the various colleges, though the different actors knew that the Ministry was to accept the proposal for a division into faculties. At most colleges the majority of the former independent institutions wanted to continue as separate faculties hoping to avoid becoming split into different organisational units. The final outcome of this process is a diverse picture of faculty divisions. Many colleges have organised their activities in faculties that are responsible for a wide range of subjects; others are organised in faculties with a relatively unified profile, for example nursing education; yet others have established faculties with related activities such as health and social work education.

Concurrently, the location of the administrative centre for each state college had to be determined, as well as the size of the central administration compared to the size of the faculty administrations. The location of the administrative centre was a conflict-ridden process at some of the multi-campus colleges. Another controversial question was the size of the administrative staff at the administrative centre. The Ministry determined that the central administration should be fairly large in order to keep the new institutions together, and to enable the decentralisation of decision-making authority from the Ministry to the individual colleges. A precondition for this policy would be to strengthen the capacity and competence in the central administration to the detriment of the faculty administrations. The faculties, on the other hand, wanted to keep as many administrative staff as possible.

Outcomes of the reform in relation to objectives

In general, a major problem in evaluation analyses is at what point in time the effects of a reform should be measured. In very many cases specific dates are not stated at the outset, and it is often difficult to agree when a reform is or should be implemented. Some objectives of a reform may also be more long-term than others, adding to the disagreement. Another problem with goal-attainment analyses is that results are often ambiguous. Results are often interpreted in different ways, and various interest groups may have different opinions about the consequences. Such problems are also present

in this study. The survey was undertaken only three and a half years after the mergers had taken place, and academic staff in the state colleges, the academic leaders of these colleges, and the Ministry of Education in some cases, had different opinions about the outcome. We have therefore tried to assess the extent to which the measurable effects are in line with what was intended, more than the degree to which objectives have been fulfilled.

Effects of the reform on academic work and study conditions

One of the aims of the reform was to change teaching, research and educational processes in the college sector. Through the merging of small colleges into larger units, possibilities for adaptation to changing societal needs and the development of new courses, as well as new combinations of teaching programmes, should be improved. In addition, the restructuring was meant to enhance opportunities for closer contact and collaboration between staff across different teaching programmes, and to be conducive for the development of a common educational culture in the new colleges. The question is, however, what may be expected after such an extensive change process and, not least, when the large differences in educational culture between disciplines and teaching programmes are taken into consideration. The colleges that were merged were very different from each other with regard to programmes, staff competence and research activities. A general experience from other mergers is that it takes a relatively long time before academic gains may be achieved (Harman and Meek 1988; Goedegebuure 1992; Skodvin 1999).

An important objective of the reform was to enhance contact and collaboration between staff across different teaching programmes. The survey indicated that 40 per cent of the staff collaborated in teaching and 10 per cent in research with colleagues at other departments within their faculty, and that 25 per cent collaborated in teaching and 10 per cent in research across faculty borders. We do not have corresponding data from before the reform such that we could ascertain any general increase in the level of cooperation. However, one fifth of the staff report that joint classes cutting across disciplines have increased. Furthermore, close to 30 per cent said that the possibilities for cross-disciplinary research had improved as a consequence of the reform. In addition, almost 50 per cent of the staff thought that joint cross-disciplinary classes should increase further. In summary, it appears that there is general approval among the staff concerning this objective of the reform, the large academic differences between faculties and teaching programmes taken into consideration, and the given base-line of the reform – an enforced merger.

Because the survey was undertaken no more than three and a half years after the mergers were initiated, and that there is no reason to expect much collaboration across departmental borders, this can be viewed as a positive

result. At the same time the question may be asked as to the extent to which this is an expression for genuine interest in interdisciplinary cooperation, or whether this cooperation is first and foremost regarded as having as its objective that of releasing time for R&D work, or to reduce education costs.

The three most common reasons for a lack of co-operation in teaching were “bad administrative prerequisites” (69 per cent), “cultural differences” (58 per cent), and “geographic distance” (53 per cent). In total, 68 per cent of the staff at the multi-campus colleges stated that the reason was geographic distance compared to 40 per cent at the co-localised colleges. In general, there are also more people at the different multi-campus colleges than at the co-localised colleges who stress cultural differences as an obstacle to cooperation.

Another aim of the reform was to develop a common educational culture across former institutional and disciplinary borders. However, it is difficult to establish a common disciplinary culture in institutions based on widely differing courses and with dissimilar traditions for research and education. The tension between traditional professional and vocational norms for teaching and research, and academic ideals is embedded in the new colleges, and there is a long way to unite different traditions.

A third objective is to expand the courses available and the possible combinations of subjects for students. It follows naturally that when the available studies increase as a result of the merger process, the opportunities also increase for establishing courses with different combinations of subjects within the same college. This had been possible previously, but within the same region. On the other hand, the possibilities for organising a degree or professional course on a new basis and within the same study period does not appear to have been significantly improved. This objective soon came into conflict with the demand for preserving nationally coherent programmes in teacher training, social work, health education, engineering, and economics and business administration. For all these professional educations, new national framework plans were introduced after the launching of the reform, making it difficult for individual colleges to make innovations across study programmes (see Norgård and Skodvin 2002). As an example, it proved to be difficult for students to combine teacher training with courses in economics and business administration without extending the total period of study time.

In this area we find an example of a ministry desiring to realise two objectives simultaneously – both increased local flexibility, and universal national standards – something which is difficult to achieve. Accordingly, it is not sufficient that the organisational structure alone is adapted to new subject combination possibilities. The culture and traditions which charac-

terise the individual vocational courses and which are incorporated into the national plans are themselves a hindrance to the achievement of these aims in this connection. Nevertheless, 25–30 percent of the staff consider that the courses offered and the combinations of subjects have improved following the reform. For example, during the period 1988–1999 resolution to establish almost 200 new study programmes at the colleges were invoked while fewer than 15 courses were permanently withdrawn. Even though these were largely extensions of existing courses, and to a lesser degree represented new professional lines, the number in itself is witness of the colleges' ability to adapt and to develop courses in an increasingly market-oriented system. Furthermore, it may seem as if the potential for co-operation in teaching and research is somewhat greater at co-localised colleges than at multi-campus colleges. Academic staff were asked if joint teaching across disciplines/study programmes had increased compared to the situation before the reform. Even if the figures do not show a consistent picture, there is a general indication that such teaching has increased somewhat more at co-localised than at multi-campus colleges. The possibilities that this difference will increase further in the coming years is also high. The first years after the college reform have mainly been used to establish a well-functioning administration, but we will have to wait a while until we are fully able to assess the outcome of the reform. In the long run it is possible that greater differences will emerge between co-localised and multi-campus colleges, considering that the conditions to create joint teaching across disciplines and study programmes may be better adjusted at the former type of colleges. One factor to be considered in this connection is, however, the relatively detailed national plans for professional study programmes that by themselves may limit the scope of such activities.

In conclusion, weakly developed social and professional networks appear to be the major obstacle to the development of academic co-operation across disciplinary boundaries. The reasons for these problems are primarily cultural differences between staff in vocational programmes and faculty in more academically oriented study programmes, but also the fact that many of the courses are very different in character, and in many cases offered at different locations. There are accordingly limitations to the extent to which academic synergy effects may be achieved in the new colleges.

Effects of the reform on college administration

The restructuring of the college sector was also an *administrative* reform. As a link in the development of management by objectives in administration, the decision-making authority and administrative tasks were to be delegated from the Ministry to the colleges. This assumed a renovation of the joint

administration at the colleges in order to increase the quality of the administrative functions. In addition, a more competent college administration should relieve academic staff of administrative tasks, and also improve the quality of administrative services. This objective was to be achieved through the expected economies of scale in the new institutions. The Ministry in particular addressed the question of the organisation of the administration at multi-campus colleges, especially in those cases where distances between campuses were fairly large. It was pointed out that geographical distance and size were probably the most important factors required to be taken into account for the creation of the administration in the individual college. The ambition was that the administrative services should be of high quality in all parts of the college despite distances to the central administration and the size of the academic departments.

From a governmental perspective the amalgamated colleges have increased their administrative capacity and developed much more professional administrations than the individual institutions had before the reform. This conclusion is shared by the academic and administrative leaders of the colleges. Academic staff, however, report a rather negative view of the administration. The majority maintain that administrative routines have become more complex and more bureaucratised than before. Most colleges now have three administrative levels compared to two prior to the mergers, and this organisational change in itself contributes to longer time being devoted to administrative procedures. In addition, the aim of reducing the time academic staff use for administrative tasks has not been fulfilled, contributing to the frustration felt by many staff members. The two administrative functions that the government explicitly stated should be improved – library and ICT-services – are, however, reported to have become substantially improved.

There are considerable differences between the colleges in the way the administration is organised. Some colleges have a small joint administration; others have concentrated most of their administrative resources to a joint secretariat. These differences are considered to depend partly on the variation of size and geographical co-localisation. For multi-campus colleges the central administration constitutes 44 per cent of the total administration on average, while the corresponding figure for co-localised colleges is 72 per cent (Skodvin and Kyvik 2000).

Economic effects of the reform

A third goal of this reform was to increase *cost efficiency* in the college sector. The government first and foremost aimed at reducing expenditure per student through economies of scale in teaching, and a more cost-effective use

of premises and administrative staff. This objective was, however, primarily based on the assumption that an optimal utilisation requires co-localisation.

To judge from the signals from the Ministry and from theoretical considerations about greater administrative problems at colleges with geographically separated campuses, it should be expected that this group of colleges would have a larger administration than co-localised colleges. Nevertheless, the differences between the different categories are relatively small, whether we look at the ratio between academic and administrative positions, ratio of the administrative positions to the total number of positions, or number of students per administrative position.

In line with its assumptions of economies of scale in the amalgamated colleges, the government anticipated the effects in the annual budgets. For the period 1994–97 expenditure per student decreased by 2.2 per cent. Consequently, the objective of a more cost-efficient college system was achieved, but mainly as a consequence of other factors than those upon which the reform was based. The colleges objected to this way of reasoning and claimed that the economic situation for the colleges as a whole had deteriorated in the same period.

Administrative costs have, however, not been reduced compared to the situation before the reform. This is mainly due to increased governmental demands to all public administration for better quality and professionalism in administrative work, the introduction of more detailed governmental rules and regulations, and the delegation and decentralisation of decision-making authority and work tasks from the state level to the colleges. In addition, the introduction of a university-like steering system in the college sector with elected boards at faculty and department level implied a considerable work load on part of the administration in the preparation of documents for the board meetings. Moreover, transaction costs are probably higher in the new than in the old college system due to a more complex organisation structure.

Cuts in expenditure seem accordingly to have affected teaching volume, especially in programmes with the historically highest teaching load. However, this tendency is not only due to tighter budgets, but also that academic staff have deliberately increased their efforts in research (Kyvik and Skodvin 2002).

Effects of the reform on the higher education system

The amalgamation process in the Norwegian non-university sector resulted in the creation of a binary higher education system. Even though the government's policy documents state that the division between the university and the college sector should remain, differences have in many ways decreased. The two sectors are now regulated by a common Act. Teaching in the college

sector is supposed to be research based, and the university academic rank system has been implemented in the college sector.

There is now an ongoing public discussion whether the binary system should disappear in favour of a unified system – an upgrading of the state colleges to universities. For many years there has been a clear tendency towards “academic drift” in the college sector. Postgraduate education (at master degree level) already takes place at half of the colleges, and the Ministry of Education has recently decided that colleges meeting specific criteria of staff competence and breadth in programmes may confer PhD degrees in these programmes.

From the colleges’ point of view, a natural next step will be the achievement of university status. A government-appointed commission on the future of the Norwegian higher education system has indicated the possibility of upgrading some of the colleges to universities. For many years two of the largest colleges have worked towards university status, and in each of the two regions, several colleges have started the discussion whether they should merge into larger units in order to qualify for such status. The creation of a binary system in 1994 to curb university ambitions in the largest regional colleges will in this respect probably not turn out to have been an effective measure.

Conclusion

In merger processes we may distinguish between *voluntary* and *forced* amalgamations (Goedegebuure 1992; Harman and Meek 1988). The Norwegian reform is a typically *forced* merger process. Few staff supported the idea enthusiastically, and several colleges tried to avoid being amalgamated with neighbouring institutions. One of the main reasons for this resistance can be found in the character of the previous colleges; institutions with different tasks, aims, and cultures were supposed to collaborate in the shaping of a new and larger organisation. Yet, the merger of 98 colleges into 26 new institutions was effectively executed by a handful of people in the Ministry of Education and the regional boards for higher education. The Ministry was very intent on reducing the large number of small colleges under its direct control, leading to capacity problems within the Ministry itself. Furthermore, the regional boards finally saw their chance to accomplish their plans for an integrated higher education system at the regional level. The general political agreement on this reform made it impossible for the reluctant colleges to avoid being merged with other local institutions.

Most of the other aims of the reform – to improve teaching, research and study conditions, and to make the colleges more cost-effective – can so far

not be said to have been fulfilled. In addition to the several reasons for this, discussed above, weaknesses in the underlying causal model for the reform should be emphasized. The Ministry based its argumentation on the assumption that the creation of larger institutions would lead to economies of scale as well as being more conducive to high quality teaching and research. Secondly, the Ministry argued that changes in organisational structure and physical location of staff and education programmes would have positive effects on collaboration patterns. It is, however, possible to advance theoretical arguments which both support and contradict these presumptions. In addition, the empirical foundation for the causal model is ambiguous.

First, former studies do not give a clear picture of large academic units as superior environments for teaching and research, even though they offer larger breadth (Astin 1991; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991; Martin and Skea 1992; Johnston et al. 1993). Second, changes in formal organisational structures do not necessarily lead to the expected effects on human behaviour. According to institutional theory, norms and values are embedded in organisations and represent conservative elements. The extent to which change might take place would be dependent on the degree to which the objectives of the reform are consistent with, or break with, established patterns of behaviour and identities of the staff (Brunsson and Olsen 1993). In those cases where organisational culture and traditions are very dissimilar, possibilities for the creation of new and fruitful contacts are much smaller than in those cases where different units and persons share a common set of norms and values.

In addition, neither theoretical arguments nor empirical studies unambiguously support the assumption of economies of scale in large higher education institutions (Blau 1973; Brinkman and Leslie 1986; Gornitzka et al. 1998; Kyvik 1999). This relates to costs for instruction as well as for administration. The reason for this is that size has two opposite effects on the expenditure level. Increased size of an institution will tend to reduce costs due to economies of scale. On the other hand, large colleges are more complex than smaller ones, and the larger the organisation, the more resources are needed to coordinate and control the activities (Mintzberg 1983). These contradictory effects might, in fact, neutralize each other, and the net effect of increased size could be small. This conclusion would be particularly relevant to the multi-campus colleges.

Even though several of the objectives for more integrated and cost-effective colleges have not yet been achieved, the restructuring of the non-university higher education system has in many ways proved to be a successful reform in the eyes of the Ministry of Education. The number of institutions subject to the Ministry was substantially decreased, and the

colleges have a more competent administration and professional leadership. In the faculty attitudes towards the reform are more mixed, due to a fear of weakening the identity of the individual programmes. In addition, many staff feel that the new colleges have become bureaucratized, and they blame the reform for the general retrenchment in financial resources.

There is little doubt that the college reform has radically changed the Norwegian educational system. First and foremost, the college sector and the individual state college have become far more visible and acquired a higher status than hitherto, both in a national context and in the different regions. Further, placing the university and college sectors under the same Act has brought the two sectors closer to each other while simultaneously making a formal distinction between them. This in itself has created a tension – and a challenge for the Government and the higher education institutions in the years to come.

Note

1. See Norgård and Skodvin (2002) for a discussion of institutional processes at one of the colleges.

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