

Main results from the project Nordic Fields of Higher Education

There is much evidence suggesting that a special model for higher education has developed in the Nordic countries during the second half of the twentieth century. This model is characterized by largely publicly-owned systems, which are relatively closely regulated by the state, include high levels of public funding and no tuition fees, and have strong influences from egalitarian traditions. In such models, higher education has also been seen as an important pillar in the welfare system, not only through the emphasis on broad and equal access, but also by educating the professionals needed for the development of the welfare state.

During the last three decades higher education systems in the Nordic countries have undergone important changes. The Bologna process has been implemented. The number of students has increased drastically, partially through the establishment of new institutions. Internationalization has become a more integrated part of the national systems and an increased emphasis on efficiency, competition and market orientation has been apparent. In short, the systems appear to have been transformed from cohesive and standardized systems, administered largely within the state, into more diverse and complex national and international higher education landscapes.

The project Nordic Fields of Higher Education, funded by NordForsk, has investigated these current changes of the traditional Nordic model of higher education by focusing on organisational aspects and student recruitment patterns, as well as the interplay between the two. We believe that recruitment patterns offer a key to understanding the effects of restructuring in national systems of higher education, as changes in recruitment patterns over time provide us with indicators of changing valorisations of higher education programs, fields and types of study, and institutions. Analysing recruitment patterns also makes it possible to evaluate the function of higher education in relation to the welfare state, evidencing the role it plays in democratic goals related to equity.

The project has compared organisational structures and recruitment patterns across Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, as well as between several disciplines and higher education institutions within each country. The under-utilized and unique statistical resources that exist in the Nordic countries have provided robust data for analyses of the whole population of students in each country, and investigations of structural changes over the last three decades.

Our main findings suggest that the Nordic countries alongside some common general characteristics have developed quite different national models of higher education over time. Denmark and Finland are characterised by a typical binary system where shorter vocational and professional study programmes are offered in the college sector, and longer academic studies in the university sector. Norway and Sweden have on the other hand opted for more unified systems, where different types of higher education institutions and programmes are integrated in one system. The Bologna model has been implemented in different ways and with varying time frames in the four studied countries. There has been an increased focus on internationalisation of higher education which has challenged some of the pillars of the Nordic model of higher education, where Denmark and Sweden have introduced tuition fees for students from third countries. As regards governance, measures have been undertaken to strengthen institutional autonomy within all national systems, implying that collegial modes of steering have largely been replaced with managerial ones. Denmark and Finland have introduced the most 'extreme' versions of autonomy reforms, as higher education institutions are now being organised as independent foundations.

With regard to the overall expansion of the higher education systems, the four countries have seen similar developments, with a very extensive growth since the mid-twentieth century which has

concentrated to two larger waves, one in the 1960s and one in the 1990s. At a finer level, examining the last three decades, developmental traits that the Nordic countries have in common have been identified: there has been an enormous growth in social science, business and law, and this field is the largest in terms of student numbers at the end of the observation period (around 2010). This growth seems mainly to be driven by a rapid expansion of business administration. Another big and growing field in all the Nordic countries is health and welfare. This development may also be viewed as a reflection of increasing demand. The field of education has increased numerically and decreased relative to other fields in all four Nordic countries. The development in humanities and arts has been similar to that of Education in Denmark and Norway. The field of science, mathematics and computing has developed unevenly, with a substantial increase in the subfield of computing up until the burst of the dotcom bubble in the early 2000s, followed by an initial decrease and then a small increase in the last couple of years. One can also notice a difference between fields most closely related to the private industrial sector and fields oriented towards public sector such as Health and Education, where the conjunctures for the former, especially technology and science, varies more than for the latter.

In the Nordic countries the institutional structures of higher education have changed considerably during the years of expansion and massification. In addition to the growth in numbers and size of institutions, the general trend has been one of overall diversification. This stands in contrast to the situation before the 'education explosion' after the Second World War, when the basic structures of the university systems were quite similar, with larger universities accompanied by specialised institutions of engineering and business, as well as small institutions of fine and industrial arts. During the post-war expansion new universities and university colleges were established. They usually had a strong regional mission and character. Some of these types of institution have later expanded and gained university status.

Yet another conclusion here is that the homogenisation imposed by the Bologna process on the four studied countries has meant very different things for each of them: a less complex system in Sweden, shorter programmes in Norway, a strengthening of the bachelor's programme in Finland, while Denmark has been rather unaffected since it had already introduced the Bologna structure in 1993, several years before it was initiated.

Finally, we can conclude that when the Nordic systems of higher education are analysed as fields of higher education, that is, as structures structured by the resources possessed by the students attending different programmes and courses at specific institutions, a fairly similar pattern emerges across time and space. The fields of higher education in the four studied Nordic countries are all characterised by a dual structure. The first axis describes the division of men and women and separates education in technology and natural sciences from education aiming at professions in health, education and caring. The second axis displays a social hierarchical dimension with social groups rich in economic, social and cultural assets in contrast to groups with small such resources. This latter dimension also differentiates the traditional universities along with prestigious professional schools and long and selective professional programmes at the pole of students from well-to-do homes from regional university colleges and colleges of health science and shorter non-selective professional programmes at the other pole.

The different dimensions of higher education investigated in the project – the organisation, the expansion and the enrolment patterns – follow somewhat different logics. While both the organisational changes and the expansion phases are profound in all four countries, the social structures remains very stable over time and are surprisingly similar across nations. This puzzle will be dealt with in the conference.