



Letter from Norway

Words **Marit Granheim**

The new term in Norway has started with educational reforms that put a more formal emphasis on identifying competence in learners

A new curriculum was waiting for Norwegian teachers and students as they went back to school in August. It is part of the Knowledge Promotion scheme, a major reform to the education system that starts with the introduction of a new curriculum for compulsory education. The aim of this reform is to keep the skills and competencies of young Norwegians in line with the rest of Europe and Scandinavia (science, technology and foreign languages will have a stronger presence) and to create a more streamlined education system that includes kindergarten, compulsory education, upper secondary education and adult education.

We shall be backing up our plans with extensive spending on training – teachers and school leaders will benefit from a 3 billion Norwegian Kroner spend (about £30 million) on courses about our new approach.

We are also operating a scheme called

Norway's evaluation and exam system

The reforms mean that pupils will be assessed in the basic skills of reading, arithmetic and English at year 5 (age 11) and year 8 (age 14). Pupils at year 2 (8 years of age) will be assessed in reading. League tables of schools will not be published – only the school has access to their own results.

National exams and practical or oral exams are held in selected subjects at 16 and 19 when students have finished lower and upper secondary education.

Students receive annual grades between one and six (the highest) from their teachers starting in lower secondary education. The grades are used for entrance to the different tracks in upper secondary education. From upper secondary education they are combined with externally marked exam results to gain a place at university.



Kompetanse-reform, which is as it sounds in English, a way of emphasising competence and using it as an umbrella for knowledge and skills for teachers and school leaders.

Reading and writing

Stressing competencies means teachers will be encouraged to think in terms of whether the pupil “is able to” perform the basic skills such as reading and writing. The previously implicit focus on competencies is explicit in the new curriculum. Distinct learning targets that describe the desired competence for each subject have been developed throughout primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education and training.

In Norway compulsory education runs from six-16. This first phase is known as primary education, and runs until 13 years. Then pupils move into lower secondary education until they are 16 years old. We have 617,000 pupils at this stage in 3,209 schools across the country.

Following lower secondary education, each individual has a statutory right to three years’ of upper secondary education from 16-19 years. We have 168,000 pupils at 462 schools in upper secondary education which was made a statutory right for adults born before 1978. So in keeping with our principle of lifelong learning, adults are able to go back to school. We also support those who leave school at 16. A counsellor from the local follow-up service will contact them at their new workplace, to check that they are being given opportunities and to let them know that they can return to education if they wish.

One of the major differences between the Norwegian and English curriculums is that we do not specialise in a handful of subjects from 16 years. Even those in upper secondary education have to study about 25 subjects including our two official languages: Norwegian and New Norwegian. The former is influenced by Swedish and Danish (these countries once ruled us) and the latter is

created from the different dialects spoken in Norway. It is the official language; for example 25 per cent of government documents have to be written in New Norwegian.

However, even though our upper secondary students have a broad education it does not lack focus. We are very proud of the vocational route that our students can follow in our upper secondary schools, where since 1994 all 16-19-year-olds study under the same roof. Students can choose from nine vocational study programmes and combine study and two years’ apprenticeship, or if they want to follow an academic route they can follow one year of academic study after a two-year vocational course. All learning has a purpose so if a student is working on health and social studies any foreign language study is aimed at learning relevant healthcare vocabulary.

Adaptable employees

Our enthusiasm for vocational education has come from the realisation that industry wants people who are flexible and adaptable, not only those who have academic ideas. We have even changed our name to reflect this – my department was previously known as the directorate for primary and secondary education but think that “education and training” better reflects our aims.

We share some of the same concerns as schools in the UK, such as a rise in obesity. Children have traditionally brought packed lunches but now some schools are introducing small cafeterias to provide healthy snacks or fruit, and getting rid of vending machines. Perhaps we need to borrow Jamie Oliver to start a healthy eating campaign!

Marit Granheim is head of international programmes in Utdanningsdirektoratet, the Norwegian directorate of education and training. She was speaking to Stephanie Sparrow.