

**Key-note CHAIN5 Sep 22<sup>nd</sup> 2022 by  
former Minister of Higher Education and Research Henrik Asheim**

**INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER**

Thank you very much for the invitation to your annual conference, and thank you for letting me speak about something close to my heart – the importance of building quality and capacity in higher vocational education and the reform this sector has been going through the last five years here in Norway.

Let me start with the big picture.

We know that technological development, digitization and the green shift will lead to certain jobs disappearing, new ones appearing, and work tasks changing.

This is resulting in increased demand of formal competence, and new competence for those who already have a basic education.

Higher vocational education has a unique and important role in this.

Higher vocational schools are essential to succeed in making education available to people in all phases of life, and in all parts of the country.

Because higher vocational education work so closely with the labour market, you can act quickly when demands changes and we need to scale up new or existing study programmes.

At the same time, more traditional higher vocational study programmes are also becoming increasingly specialised, and the duration of some higher vocational school educations increases in line with the need for further professional deepening.

All of you here probably share this opinion and are good ambassadors and advocates for the change in the attitudes and ambitions we must adopt when it comes to higher vocational education.

We have seen a very positive change over the last decade in Norway regarding to how people look at higher vocational education.

And I believe The Norwegian Council for Higher Vocational Education with all its partners would agree with me when saying that looking back ten years - the changes have truly been huge.

From being a part of the education system that was a bit overseen – to being an important and integrated part of the system.

From being an education for the few, the numbers had surpassed 25 000 students last year.

From being fragmented, with a high number of smaller schools, to consolidation and a great effort of combining increase in capacity with raising quality and strengthening support systems.

So, how did we get here?

## **REPORT ABOUT HIGHER VOCATIONAL EDUCATION**

I would like to take you back a couple of years. In 2014 when my party was in Government, we received a report about the status of higher vocational education in Norway.

The report pointed towards several concrete challenges:

- Higher vocational schools had an unclear placing and a lacking status in the Norwegian education system
- The stakeholder's ownership was weak
- We needed to strengthen the quality of education

- We did not have a satisfactory governing of the higher vocational school sector, including and made greater by a fragmented sector
- And we had insufficient funding and we needed to renew the system of funding.

In addition to these challenges, the report also gave us a range of more detailed things to change or correct in the following years.

## **WHITE PAPER**

This report resulted in a white paper in December 2016 called “Professionals for the future” with close to 50 measures. Our goal was to establish agreement across party lines in Parliament for a reform of the sector.

The vision in the white paper was shortly put, that in the long term, higher vocational education should grow to be a stronger and larger part of the Norwegian education system.

We summed up the actions in four goals to help us achieve the vision of a more attractive educational level with higher quality and outreach.

These goals were:

- Students should experience engaging teaching, and succeed in completing their education
- The professional communities shall have updated and practice-oriented knowledge and competence
- The higher vocational schools shall offer education that the labor market needs, and the students find attractive
- The sector shall be well organized, with clear ownership and governing.

We wanted to increase the student numbers, build larger professional collegiums and make higher vocational education more visible and more attractive to both students and businesses.

It was important for us that the higher vocational schools are up to date on the needs of the business world, so that the students get the relevant skills needed. Therefore, we wanted to create new sources of funding, development of quality in existing study programs and establish new courses matching the present needs of the labor market.

This proposed reform of higher vocational education should be seen as a clear and obvious statement, and call to action, from the Norwegian government.

The reform laid also the grounds for a nationally coordinated system of application and enrollment to higher vocational education, with the aim to make this process easier and more visible to potential students.

The actions outlined in the reform was in total an ambitious step towards a renewed and brighter future for higher vocational education in Norway.

This message went out to both the labor market and businesses, to the sector and its schools, and to potential future students: Higher vocational education will be an important part of securing competence for the future and enabling the green shift needed.

There was a common understanding that these goals only could be reached by a great lift for higher quality, more robust teaching staffs at the schools, satisfying financing and governing, and a strengthening of student welfare systems.

## **THE NEW LAW**

After the Parliament had given its support and adopted the white paper, we started working with a renewal of the act governing the higher vocational education.

We took the important step of formally making higher vocational education equally regulated and acknowledged in the same manner as traditional higher education.

We also wanted to strengthen the students' rights and harmonize them more to the students' rights at universities and university colleges. We suggested giving them voting rights at the school boards, access to the student welfare organizations and making it easier to transfer from higher vocational education to study programs at universities and colleges.

The new law was also important for everyone working in higher vocational education, giving them a better framework and a more precise organizational positioning in the educational systems.

## **THE NEED OF MORE INFORMATION ABOUT HIGHER VOCATIONAL EDUCATION**

Working with both the white paper and the proposition changing the law we saw that we needed even more information about higher vocational education.

We included students in yearly surveys about a range of subjects from quality to social and economic issues.

We started to gather information about dropouts, and where the students went after they finished their education.

And we got a comprehensive overview of the teachers at the higher vocational schools and their competence. As a result of this we established a higher vocational teacher education at Oslo Metropolitan

University to educate and give supplementary pedagogical education to those working in higher vocational education. This was a great opportunity for teachers to increase or update their knowledge.

Another important aspect of the political debate has been *how* we talk about higher vocational education.

With the enactment of the bill passed in 2018, we started calling it "higher vocational education" and the higher vocational school students' learning outcomes would be named "credits" in the same way as in higher education.

This was in some way a symbolic change for many people, but I would argue it created a substantial change in the debate, perception and attractiveness in regard of higher vocational education.

## **EVALUATION OF THE REFORM**

The first evaluation of the reform came last year.

The evaluation told us the actions we took through the reform has had great importance to increase the status of higher vocational education. It has been important both for the students, for the employees and for the perceptions of the public.

Although the effort to increase the publics' understanding of the role and growing importance of higher vocational education will have to persist over time.

The evaluation also told us that after only four years, out of the nearly 50 actions outlined in the reform, 33 was already implemented and 9 nearly implemented. In other words: The speed in renewing the sector has been great.

## **NEW STRATEGY**

After the evaluation, I, as a minister, presented a new strategy for higher vocational education called “Furthering growth and quality”. We looked at the years behind us and the evaluation, and pointed out some ambitions to accelerate the next steps needed to further strengthen higher vocational education.

The strategy has four priority areas.

- Facilitate for further growth.
- Give the higher vocational schools greater freedom to decide for themselves what study programs to start up and make a better framework for internationalization and mobility
- Stimulate excellence by establishing two new centers of excellence in higher vocational education
- Look at whether certain higher vocational educations should be placed at the same level in the qualification framework as bachelor's educations, but as independent higher vocational school levels.

This strategy wanted to underline once again that the higher vocational schools should continue to develop as an important supplier of needed competence to the labor market through relevant, high-quality education.

In order to achieve this, it is important that the work on quality in education continue.

I am proud that the reform and the strategy has been a priority for us throughout all eight years in Government.

One example on how quickly our schools turns around when the needs of competence are shifting is something we established called “sectoral programs”. This is cooperation at its finest. The higher vocational schools are partnering up with partners from the confederation of enterprises,

trade union and businesses in the labor market to create specially adapted education and lifelong learning within a broad range of business sectors.

Another great example of this kind of cooperation and modus operandi in the sector is initiative of “the higher vocational school for industries”.

Here the partnerships of trade unions, enterprises and higher vocational schools have in close cooperation created short, flexible educational offers that can be combined with work and family life. And the government followed up on this with financial support to take up several hundred more students.

The need to educate more people with higher vocational competence was a priority to us.

In the national budgets we upped the financing to accommodate almost 3000 more students since 2018. I know many have wanted more, but it was a substantial increase in a short period I am happy that we found room for.

And there are always the question of how to make great leaps in capacity combined with an ambition of also raising quality at the same time.

I know very well that the schools in Norway are working hard and doing a great job of managing this.

This sequence of perhaps seemingly egocentric bragging was not my intention of trying to take all the credit for the last years development.

I will argue that the raise in political awareness and increased funding is also a sign that you are doing great work of putting the money to good use and filling your societal role and responsibility.

And that our shared ambitions, enthusiasm and hard work have paid off and given solid results.

Next year we will receive the concluding evaluation of the reform. I'm pretty sure that it will tell us a lot has gone in the right direction and that this sector is in greater shape than ever before.

Higher vocational education in Norway is in my opinion a much more visible and acknowledged part of the educational system now, than it was ten years ago.

The evaluation will probably also tell us that there are a lot more to be done.

What we called a reform-period is perhaps done. But the growth and development-period are still ongoing.

The higher vocational education sector in Norway has proven its ability to be agile, powerful and driven in the pursuits for delivering the present and future needs of competence to businesses all around the country and I applaud you for it.

Before I close, I must touch in on an aspect I have not spoken as much about in this keynote. The vocational training in elementary school and the high school levels.

To see this growth continue in the higher vocational education we need to prepare the youth for vocational training and education from an early age.

The school system in Norway, and perhaps in several of your countries, are too much directed towards preparing the pupils for further academic studies at universities and colleges.

One of our political priorities for the next years must be to make sure vocational studies are something both pupils, parents and counsellors see as both possible, attractive and of great status.

To go on to a vocational education should not only be an option presented to pupils who fail in the traditional school system. It should be something that all pupils consider seriously and get to test out if suits them.

If we succeed with these kinds of changes in elementary and high school levels, we hopefully can create even greater and more diverse recruitment to higher vocational schools in the future.

That is also one of the main tasks we all must try to accomplish.

I want to close by saying to you that I still will be your great supporter and cheer team in the years ahead.

If you succeed, we all succeed.

The competence you provide to the workers and businesses everyday builds our countries and economies.

The need for your schools and your teaching is greater than ever.

I hope you have a great annual conference and that you go home with even more passion and encouragement.

Because the work you do is important and meaningful, and the society applauds you.

Thank you!