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Internationalization, diversification and quality in higher education

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**Internationalisierung, Diversität,
Hochschule**

■ *Allgemeiner Teil*

Deutschland als Bildungsexportland

Materialistische Pädagogik – Hans-Jochen Gamms
erziehungswissenschaftlicher Ansatz eines kritisch-
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Internationalization, Diversification and Quality in Higher Education

Abstract: This article analyzes internationalization as it relates to diversification and quality in higher education in the Norwegian system following the Bologna Declaration. Considering horizontal and vertical levels of stratification of the higher education system, we find that international activities are very unevenly distributed; the highest concentration of internationalization we find at Master's and PhD levels. Differences are also identified horizontally between various types of institutions and academic disciplines. Natural sciences and technology, the most research-intensive disciplines, tend to be more international than humanities and social sciences. This study concludes that the new modes and policies of internationalization are more likely to become institutionalized if they coincide with the teaching and research related activities and interests of the academic staff. This study is based on national statistics, results from a survey sent to members of the academic staff in higher education, as well as policy documents and reports.

Keywords: Internationalization of Higher Education, Diversification, Quality, Bologna Process, Geographical Recruitment Patterns

1. Introduction

The internationalization of research and education is an important trend in the Nordic countries. Norway has been very active at the European level, despite the fact that the country is not a full-fledged member of the European Union (Gornitzka & Langfeldt, 2008). Following the goals of the Bologna process, Norway has invested a significant amount of time and money to ensure that all students have the opportunity to gain experience from studying abroad (Kehm, Michelsen & Vabø, 2010). Also due to free public higher education and lucrative financial arrangements for PhD students, the proportion of foreign students and researchers seeking to come to Norway is rapidly growing. Nevertheless, both in terms of mobility and the amount of teaching and supervision conducted in English, the level of internationalization touches upon typical patterns of diversification in higher education.

The highest concentration of internationalization is found at Master's and PhD levels, and the highest share of foreign students at universities. Differences are also identified horizontally, between various areas of study and academic disciplines. Natural sciences and technology, the most research-intensive disciplines, tend to be more international than humanities and social sciences, for example.

For central political authorities, the internationalization of higher education is increasingly seen as a strategy for quality enhancement in higher education. We argue that the concept of quality in higher education is ambiguous. Given that internationalization

is seen as significant for quality, it appears that activities labeled as international help maintain typical patterns of social stratification and thus contribute to the unequal distribution of resources that are significant for quality.

It is argued that significant features of the national institutions, regulations and policies are crucial for our understanding of internationalization and diversification of higher education in general and the effects of the Bologna process in particular. Furthermore, the practices of academic staff represent a particularly important condition for the implementation of policies for internationalization.

One recent survey (Kyvik & Wiers-Jenssen, 2014) gives us a unique opportunity to study the new forms of internationalization in the wake of the Bologna process from the vantage point of academic staff.

As an initial step various statistics regarding international student mobility in higher education in Norway are examined.

2. Theoretical Approach

It is a common sociological perspective that higher education is stratified between mass and elite education, different types of institutions, and graduate and undergraduate levels (Parsons & Platt, 1973). Most often, patterns of stratification also correspond to distinct social recruitment patterns (Bourdieu, 1988).

Nevertheless, the higher education system is subject to more or less constant processes of diversification. This is particularly true at a time when higher education is expected to contribute to a growing number of policy objectives, ranging from research quality to industrial relevance. Current processes of diversification typically include research universities concentrating their efforts toward excellence and other elite-oriented initiatives.

In an analysis of internationalization initiatives following the Bologna process and how it interacts with diversification processes in higher education, various sociological perspectives on change in higher education can be applied, thus providing different approaches to the kinds of factors that have the greatest influence on the development of higher education.

The higher education sector is facing many of the same challenges and demands with respect to increasing globalization and international standardization worldwide (Djelic & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006; Drori & Meyer, 2006). Against that backdrop, focussing a system perspective is crucial, emphasizing that changes at a national level must be understood in relation to increasing demands from the coordination of supranational bodies like the European Union.

But what happens in the interaction between policies for internationalization and the system of higher education?

According to Musselin (2000), higher education should be understood as national configurations constituted by specific combinations of, and interaction between, various logics related to institutional (universities), academic (profession) and public (gov-

ernment regulations, policies) entities. The systems are products of the interests of the members of the academic staff who research and teach there, and of the national political authorities responsible for higher education. Musselin further claims that national policy objectives continue to play an important role in shaping or reshaping the system within the context of globalization. This is clearly visible with regard to attempts at an international standardization of grade structures in higher education, as implemented with the Bologna process. As we will return to the meaning of the Bologna process, reforms for the internationalization of higher education are best understood as the result of a complex interaction between external and internal processes, between academia, politics, and the market. Basically, it is also important to bring insights from the perspective of implementation of public policy as it typically manifests itself in higher education.

Furthermore, it is reasonable to expect that internationalization and the way it works will have to be seen in light of the distinctive features of the national configuration of institutional and academic structures. Also to be considered are the substantive and thematic profiles of various study programs, such as the extent to which the curricula are vocational- or discipline-based and the extent to which the institutions are oriented toward international research. Clark (1983) emphasizes that academic disciplines are the driving force in the diversification process. Knowledge specialization and fragmentation operate through disciplines, and through them institutions move toward greater complexity and diversity. These processes are more important for the outcome than formal central and institutional policies.

Members of the academic staff perform core activities in higher education – research, teaching and supervision. The views of the academic staff represent an important condition for the implementation of policies for internationalization and, hence, an important empirical indication of the effects of the Bologna process. Nevertheless, with some exceptions, the views of academic staff on international activities in higher education have rarely been subject to systematic empirical investigation (Huang, Finkelstein & Rostan, 2014).

3. Higher Education System Features

Norwegian higher education is shaped within the context of a young nation (the oldest university was established in the capital Oslo in 1811), having a small population (approximately five million inhabitants), and an oil-producing economy with good conditions for the realization of welfare state policy objectives.

With large differences among academic fields, the university system has been significantly influenced by the German Humboldt tradition, which has partly resulted in a strong emphasis on, and justification for, research-based instruction (Kehm et al., 2010).

Although Norwegian higher education operates in principle as a binary structure, universities and colleges do not function as separate qualification pillars, but rather as an integrated sector where undergraduate studies from a college are basically recognized as

equivalent to universities. Colleges are also required to conduct research and many also offer graduate degrees. Given such features of the college sector, university colleges is their preferred term.

Among its accredited institutions of public higher education Norway has seven universities in which disciplinary areas such as medicine, law, humanities, social sciences et cetera constitute separate faculties. In addition there are nine so called specialist universities offering education in certain areas such as architecture, music, and business-administration; 22 university colleges; and two national colleges of art. With the exception of a relatively small private sector, all higher education institutions are state-funded. Approximately 86 percent of students are enrolled in public institutions.

The number of students is spread relatively evenly between universities and university colleges, but the universities have the highest number of students at the Master's and PhD levels as well as a much wider variety of study programs.

The state is an important actor in funding, regulating and steering the system. In line with international trends, however, more market-oriented modes of governance have been introduced in higher education, characterized by more autonomous governing bodies at the institutional level, relying upon strategic management methods and incentive-based funding (Bleiklie, Enders, Lepori & Musselin, 2011).

4. Implementing the Goals of the Bologna Process

In the wake of the Bologna process, Norway introduced the Bachelor's/Master's degree structure in 2003. A few areas of study (theology, teacher education, psychology, medicine, and veterinary studies) were exempted from this reform. The duration of studies, as well as the quality and efficiency of teaching and learning, had been a concern since the mid-1980s. The number of students had increased at all levels, yet the percentage of failed exams held constant. For the central authorities the aims of the Bologna process represented a timely and legitimate opportunity to abolish the old study structure and replace it with a degree system and type of organization of study more efficient for dealing with the needs of a mass system of higher education (Gornitzka, 2006). The aim for Norway to participate more actively in European student exchange programs also created the need for studies suitable for partial studies abroad and in general more internationally standardized studies and degrees (Vabø, 2007).

5. Foreign Students in Norway

The number of foreign students in Norway has roughly tripled since the turn of the millennium and was estimated at over 21 000 in 2013.

The most important reasons for this are courses taught in English and free education, but scholarship programs, educational quality and labour market as well as societal qualities are also important aspects of Norway's attractiveness as a place of study.

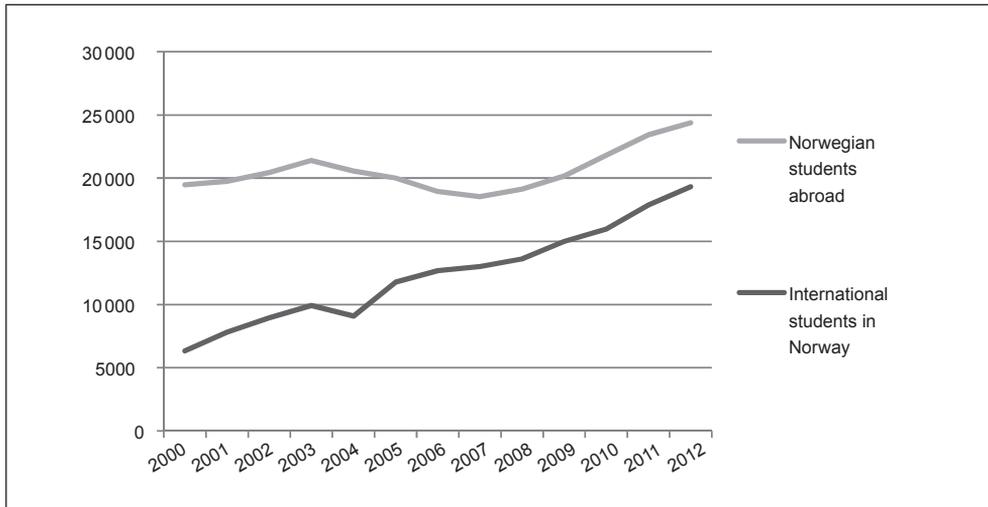


Fig. 1: Norwegian students abroad and international students in Norway 2000–2013 (sources: Norwegian state educational loan fund and Database for statistics on higher education)

Foreign students come from a wide range of countries. The majority come from Europe; the largest groups of incoming students currently come from Sweden, Russia, Germany, and China (Figure 2). Many European students take part in shorter exchanges, while the majority of students from developing countries complete full degree programs in Norway.

A large proportion of those who study in Norway participate in organized exchange programs: for example, many European students enrol in the ERASMUS program. There are also a number of bilateral agreements between Norwegian and foreign universities, as well as programs aimed at students from developing countries and certain partner countries.

We find considerable variation among institutions in terms of the number and the proportion of foreign students. These reflect typical patterns of diversification as the largest universities have a high share of foreign students. The proportion is, however, highest at the relatively small art colleges and lowest at university colleges. Indeed, there are even a few examples of university colleges that have a high proportion of foreign students.

Foreign students are found in most types of study programs. Business administration programs are most popular, and there has been rapid growth in the number of foreign students in this area over the last few years (Kyvik & Wiers-Jenssen, 2014).

In part this growth is an intentional development, the result of policies designed to internationalize education. The creation of more courses taught in English and various scholarship schemes are examples of instruments of this policy. Changes in the funding of higher education by means of introducing incentive-based financing in which production credits and scientific publishing matter more, have also contributed to the in-

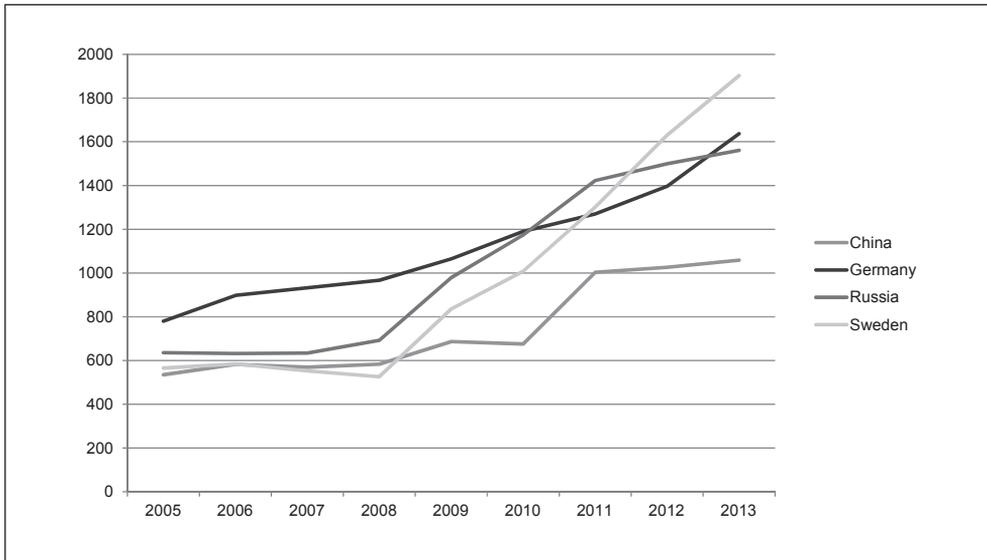


Fig. 2: Number of foreign students in Norway from the top sending countries sending the highest number of students to Norway 2008–2013, fall semester (source: Database for statistics on higher education)

stitutions' efforts to attract foreign students more actively than in the past. Most other European countries have introduced tuition fees for students from outside the European Economic Area: this also applies to our neighbours Sweden and Denmark, but in Norway education is still free. The development is also related to labour and other forms of migration patterns; a number of students with foreign citizenship have basically come to Norway for reasons other than enrolling in higher education.

Three out of four Russian students in Norway are women, and most are registered at higher education institutions in northern Norway. About a third of these Russian students, many of whom are undergraduate students in Circumpolar Studies, work online and rarely or never physically attend Norwegian institutions. Online education of foreign students as a target group is a relatively new phenomenon in Norway. This can be considered an innovative measure with large market potential. But it has been questioned, amongst others from representatives of central policy, to what extent such a development is consistent with the policy objective of the central authorities in which internationalization will or should contribute to improving the quality of Norwegian institutions and to 'internationalization at home'. One can also question whether such offers are competitive in the long term, given that free online education from prestigious foreign universities (Massive Open Online Courses – MOOC) is on the rise (Wiers-Jenssen, 2013). In ensuing public debates the involved academics have argued that the benefits from educational collaboration between northern Russia and Norway contribute to enhancing mutual cultural understanding as well as improving business

cooperation between Norway and Russia.¹ This example illustrates different rationales for internationalization among various stakeholders in higher education.

6. Old and New Modes of Internationalization

Unlike many other Western countries, Norway has traditionally had a relatively high proportion of their student population abroad, with relatively few incoming students. The proportion of the student population completing a full degree abroad has been approximately six to seven percent in recent decades. In addition, those who pursue part of their training abroad currently represent about three to five percent of the total student population. A high percentage of outgoing students have benefitted from a generous study support system administered through the Student Loan Fund (Wiers-Jenssen, 2008).

Academic staff and students have become increasingly mobile, moving across borders for reasons related to their work and studies. Norway has a growing number of international students and staff (Børing & Gunnes, 2012), and academics also publish more and more internationally (Piro, 2011). This increase is due to several factors: political goals at the national and supranational level, international research and student exchange programs, better technological and infrastructural solutions, researchers' and students' own motivations and needs, and lower travel expenses. Internationalization of higher education, at least in the public political rhetoric, is often associated with positive expectations of higher quality through greater diversity of topics in teaching and research. Internationalization of both research and higher education is all about being at the forefront of knowledge in a globalized competitive economy and establishing international networks and collaborative relationships (Kyvik & Wiers-Jenssen, 2014). International activities have become an indicator of performance. In reality, however, it is not always easy for international activities to work well. Norway has debated the use of English as the standard academic language – if and how, and at what level it should be supported. From a democratic perspective it has been argued that there is a need to maintain the use of Nordic languages in order to secure common access to scientific knowledge (Simonsen, 2004).

In contrast to “old” internationalization, typically initiated by academic communities and individual staff members, “new” internationalization is characterized by formalized institutional efforts (Trondal, Stensaker, Gornitzka & Maassen, 2001). In Norway we find unique institutional strategies in that regard – for instance, prioritized areas for international cooperation. Overall, institutions have to implement whatever type of international activity is required of them to meet a certain national “standard”. Although Norway is not a member of the European Union, a major aim for the central authorities is to take an active part in European activities for enhancing mobility and cooperation within higher education and research (Ministry of Education and Research, 2004–2005). Many of the efforts to internationalize student activities are marked by

¹ *Aftenposten*, 4 March 2014.

competition over students and financial resources – such as establishing study programs taught in English. Economic and strategic public policy justifications for internationalization have dominated academic arguments (Frølich, 2008).

For many years after the implementation of the Bologna process, the increase in the number of incoming and outgoing ERASMUS students was rather modest despite generous co-funding from the central authorities, which was meant to stimulate and increase participation. During the last decade there has been a significant rise in the number of formal agreements regarding staff and student mobility made with institutions of higher education abroad. However, many of these agreements have not been actively applied. In other words, there seems to be a gap between the practices and preferences of academic staff and students on the one hand, and the public policies for internationalization of higher education on the other. The first research-based evaluation of the Quality reform in Norwegian higher education found that a minority of staff considered student mobility as a very important factor for quality enhancement in higher education. In this survey of academic staff the respondents were asked to rank mobility of staff, institutional cooperation, mobility of students, and strength of market competition in relation to their importance for quality enhancement in higher education (Michelsen & Aamodt, 2006). A decade later the practices and viewpoints of academic staff were surveyed again, although with slightly different questions.

7. Viewpoints of the Academic Staff

In 2013 a survey was sent to 8000 members of the academic staff in universities and university colleges in Norway (response rate approximately 50 percent) (Kyvik & Wiers-Jenssen, 2014). Among the topics covered was the extent to which teaching and supervision in English took place. Furthermore, their views on the relevance of the exchange agreements of the institutions and the impact of international student mobility on issues such as study and learning environments and academic outcomes were also surveyed. We analyzed how the proportion of academic staff who teach and tutor in English and other foreign languages varies in relation to institutional types, educational levels and academic disciplines.

As illustrated in Figure 3, slightly fewer than half confirm that they teach or supervise in English or other foreign languages (45 percent in English, three percent in an additional foreign language). The proportion of academic staff teaching or tutoring in English is significantly higher at universities compared with the university college sector (29 percent). This must be seen to some extent in the context of educational levels as there are more who teach and tutor in English at the PhD and Master's levels than at the Bachelor's level.

If we look at the Bachelor's level where colleges have their educational center of gravity, we find large differences between university and college employees. Among academic staff at universities and colleges, 56 percent of those who teach and tutor at the Bachelor's level do so partly in English, compared with 20 percent of the academic

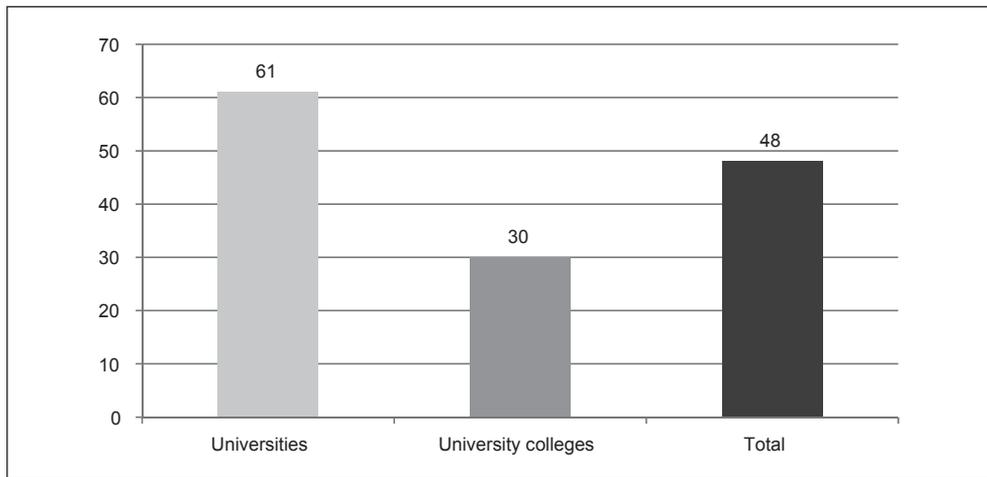


Fig. 3: Proportion of staff teaching or supervising in English – type of institution (source: NIFU)

staff at university colleges. Differences in the degree of internationalization, the indicator being the use of English as the language of instruction, can thus be identified between institutions even within the same educational level. Different practices between disciplines can be observed: the highest proportions of specialists who teach in English are in mathematics and science, technology, agriculture, fisheries, and veterinary medicine. The lowest proportion is found in medicine and health sciences, including vocational health professions such as nursing. At the undergraduate level we find the lowest percentage of staff teaching or tutoring in English (29 percent). The humanities and social sciences have relatively low proportions of staff who teach in English regardless of educational level.

Subjects and disciplines are also driving forces in differentiation processes in general. In the first instance, this means that internationalization is defined differently in different academic contexts. In courses related to welfare state professional practices, i. e. health sciences, social sciences, and humanities, English is less present as the language of instruction. However, the international orientation of the disciplines in science and technology can be seen in light of their international validity and relevance.

We also asked those who teach in English to estimate how much of their teaching and mentoring takes place in that language. We found that it is primarily at the Master's and PhD levels that much of the teaching and supervision takes place in English.

As illustrated by these patterns, comparisons of the degree of national harmonization to EU/Bologna standards of internationalization should be based on agreements about which levels of higher education to compare. Concepts of convergence and divergence are relevant when we highlight the importance of the Bologna process in relation to the internationalization of higher education in general and to diversification processes in particular. There are shared beliefs about to what extent higher education systems are

subject to convergence or divergence, and about what levels of the system it matters most to change (Kogan, Bauer, Bleiklie & Henkel, 2000/2006). Convergence at the policy level does not automatically mean convergence at the higher education system level as a whole. As illustrated by our survey data, a country's systems approach might lead to convergence in some areas, such as graduate level and particular academic disciplines, whilst distinct traditional characteristics are preserved in other parts of the system.

8. Internationalization and Quality Enhancement

As regards policies for internationalization of higher education, there has been a shift toward a greater focus on the need in Norwegian educational institutions for improving quality through such measures (Ministry of Education and Research, 2008–2009).

Thus, it is interesting that a majority (61 percent) of the academic staff who answered the questionnaire were completely or somewhat in agreement with the statement *“My academic community has exchange agreements with foreign academic groups of a high standard.”* This finding particularly applies to respondents from the humanities, medical and health sciences, as well as fishery, veterinary, and agricultural sciences. Policies for internationalization serve the interests of different scientific fields in different manners. However, a fine grained analysis of differences between research disciplines and study programs is lacking.

In the survey, two questions were asked that revolved around outgoing students, dealing with their assessment of professional dividends and return of competence for their own learning (*“Students who go abroad gain considerable academic outcomes from their time abroad”*). A majority answered that this was the case. The members of the academic staff were also asked whether those who had been on exchange programs provided valuable expertise to the learning environment (*“Students who have been on exchanges contribute valuable expertise to the environment of the study program”*). About half of the respondents agreed with this statement. Particularly those who worked in the health sciences and the humanities expressed the view that students who had been on exchanges abroad had gained the greatest positive effect in academic outcomes, and that they contributed the most expertise to their learning environments. The members of the academic staff in technological disciplines were more sceptical about this.

There were fewer respondents who believed that those who had been on exchanges contributed to the learning environment (*“International students enrich the learning environment of the study program”*). This may indicate that exchanges had greater professional importance for the students rather than for the academic environments within which they were studying.

A majority believed that international students enriched the learning environment of the study program, and there were very few who disagreed. Looking at the results, we found most respondents from the humanities, mathematics, and natural sciences agreed. Those who taught in English, and thus had experience with international students, were more positive than others; 71 percent in this group agreed with the statement. Among

those who taught English only 51 percent agreed, but it must be noted that 20 percent in this group answered „do not know“.

Although many among the academic staff were positive about what international students had to offer, we saw that 29 percent believed that facilitating instruction for this group of students created problems (*“Agreements for international students create problems in conducting teaching”*).

Thus, it seems there were some challenges with regard to facilitation. In particular, those working in agriculture, fisheries, and veterinary subjects perceived this as problematic; 46 percent agreed with the statement that facilitating instruction for international students created problems. This group of employees, however, constituted a relatively small number, so the results should be interpreted with care.

Faculty and students from abroad are likely to affect the learning and teaching culture, but we do not have any systematic knowledge on how and to what extent changes are beneficial in terms of quality enhancement. New perspectives are brought in, contributing to internationalization at home. At the same time, we have seen that faculty members reported challenges related to facilitation involving foreign students. Teaching in English was reported to not necessarily improve quality, and adjusting programs to students from different backgrounds and learning cultures may have been rewarding, but also challenging. The effect of an influx of foreign students and faculty needs to be investigated further. Without seeking to engage in a larger discussion regarding education and social inequality, we note that international capital is distributed differently among students in higher education. The distribution seems to reflect the social and intellectual valuation hierarchy that otherwise characterizes recruitment patterns in the sector. The relationship between quality and internationalization is, as we have argued, ambiguous. The concept of quality is complex as there are many different measures of quality (Gibbs, 2010). To the extent that internationalization in higher education produces higher quality in terms of additional resources, broader thematic orientation, richer study environments, broader international networks and experience, it also means that the quality reinforcing effects of internationalization are unevenly distributed among students.

9. Conclusions

The data analyzed in this article indicate relatively high levels of goal achievement in terms of students and academic staff taking an active part in international activities: mobility, teaching, and supervising in English.

We find, however, that such activities are very unevenly distributed; the highest levels are at the Master’s and PhD levels. This helps to explain why staff and students at universities are more active in international activities than students in the college sector. Vocational and professional education is hampered by strict study structures, content requirements and obligatory periods of practice and placements. Differences are also identified horizontally among various areas of study and academic disciplines. Natural

sciences and technology, the most research-intensive and internationally-oriented disciplines, tend to be more international than the humanities and social sciences.

This leads us to conclude that the new modes and policies of internationalization are more likely to become institutionalized if they coincide with teaching- and research-related activities and interests of the academic staff. At the same time we can assume that these patterns also reflect increasing globalization and internationalization of societies and markets in present times. These affect Norwegian higher education in particular as the system has no tuition fees and, Norway is characterized by a good job market and attractive living conditions.

As shown in the article, internationalization in higher education is also differentiated in the sense that some countries of origin such as Russia, Sweden and Germany are highly represented among foreign students.

It appears reasonable to believe that this pattern indicates that new forms of internationalization have become more relevant in research-oriented disciplines and levels of study. This confirms the common notion that political goals can best be achieved by matching the policy goals and objectives of the actors involved. Different levels of internationalization correspond with typical structures for diversification in higher education; between mass and elite institutions, between higher and lower levels, and between research and practice orientations. A plausible hypothesis seems to be that the internationalization process helps to reinforce patterns of social stratification, a prestige hierarchy in which resources are unevenly distributed among different educational segments.

Diversification of internationalization in higher education necessarily has quality implications. The concept of quality is, however, complex as there are many different measures of quality, and we suggest that this issue needs to be explored further through more in-depth and qualitative studies.

All in all, we find that internationalization of higher education in the wake of the Bologna process takes place in complex interplay; the transmission of supranational and national policy aims seems both to interact with and to contribute to strengthening the horizontal and vertical structures of diversification of the higher education system. Investigating practices of academic staff as they differ between institutions, scientific fields and disciplines, is crucial for understanding the nature and development of internationalization in higher education.

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