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Fairness in access to higher education in Norway: Policy and practice

Elisabeth Hovdhaugen and Tone Cecilie Carlsten

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Preface

This working paper is based on data from the comparative research project “Study on the impact of admission systems on higher education outcomes”. The study was commissioned by the European Commission and carried out over 18 months (January 2016-June 2017) by an international research team. The work included a system level mapping with data collection in 36 countries and a selection of eight case study countries: France, Germany, Ireland, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Romania and Spain.

The Norwegian case study data were gathered by NIFU in the Fall of 2016, and selected findings were published in the comparative report August 2017 by the European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture.

This working paper presents the Norwegian data in a more comprehensive and targeted approach. The aim is to provide insight into perceptions of fairness in access to higher education in Norway, from the system level of stakeholders and from the experience by pupils in upper secondary school and students at the start of their first year of university/university college.

Oslo, September 2018

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Summary

This working paper presents a case study of the Norwegian access system to higher education, drawing on data collected in a larger project commissioned by the EU Commission. Based on interviews with stakeholders at the policy level and in higher education institutions, as well as focus group interviews with pupils in upper secondary education about to apply for higher education and students who just started a higher education degree the Norwegian access system is assessed.

The interviews with stakeholders and users all indicate a common voice viewing the access policy and practice of using grades as a measure of merit in Norway as fair, - or, as little unfair as is possible in such a system. There are several aspects of the system pointing to this conclusion. Most programmes have similar rules for access, and a well-established system which rarely changes ensures that the admission system has been constructed with fairness as a clear intention.

Further, information about the system is also easily available and provided through public information resources owned by the school owners. All students also have access to advising services, which gives all an equal standing in getting various forms of information about access to higher education.

Changes to the admission rules are not done very often. When changes are made, this is decided by the government, and the proposed changes are sent out for a public hearing, where e.g. higher education institutions and student organizations have the right to state their opinion on the proposed changes. In the argumentation from stakeholders it seems as if efficiency in the system is given a higher priority than issues of equity. The common access system implemented in 1994 is seen as a very effective way of administering admission by all stakeholders. Though, if efficiency is ranked above and beyond equity by stakeholder is still unclear.

1 A fair system?

The system of higher education access varies from country to country, and how the system of higher education access is structured differ between European countries. Further, even though admission to higher education often can be viewed as a simple process which occurs at the end of secondary education, the process may in reality start much earlier and, in some cases, also end some time after the higher education studies have begun. Streaming of pupils into different kinds of secondary education, either at lower or upper level, may be one example of the process of access to higher education starting before the end of secondary education. Post-admission selection, with the first exams being decisive for if students' can advance to the second year of higher education or if they have to leave the programme they started, is an example of access restrictions being implemented later in the process.

This paper builds on a research project for the European Commission, conducted from January 2016 until June 2017, which was published in September 2017 (Orr, Usher, Haj, Atherton & Geanta 2017). The study focuses on the impact of schools and higher education institutions on the selection process, and on how students themselves end up choosing a pathway by choosing a specific institution and/or programme of study. The research project intends to map and explore similarities and differences among European systems of higher education access, using the concepts efficiency, equity and effectiveness.

This working paper, on the other hand, focus on the system of access to higher education in Norway, and how the system is perceived by current and prospective students, as well as by stakeholders. A key element is to investigate if the system is seen as fair, in addition to addressing the issues of efficiency, equity and effectiveness. Hence, the working paper builds on data and findings from the Norwegian case study, which was part of a larger project for the European Commission.

1.1 The concept of fairness in education

In Norway, as in other EU countries included in the research project, an explicit aim for the system of higher education access is fairness. Throughout most of

Europe, merit is used for entry into higher education. Merit is defined as the ability to succeed in academic testing during or at the end of upper secondary schooling, acknowledged as entry criteria in higher education institutions (HEIs). As pointed out in the report from the larger research project, other possible definitions of merit, which are in use elsewhere, such as creativity, curiosity or public service (Sternberg 2010, Weisbrod & Thacker 2016) are not used (cf. Orr et al 2017). This is largely because these alternative measures are deemed difficult to assess objectively. They may therefore be seen as potentially unfair: “The use of academic testing is fair in the sense that everyone enrolled in an upper secondary course can take the same test and the results will be seen as objective. However, the results of these objective tests take little account either of the effects on the test-takers of social background or of the students’ actual interests, desires and aptitudes.” (Orr et al 2017:55).

In this working paper, access to higher education is defined accordingly; as being a function of merit measured as the ability to succeed in exams. This is due to the existing structure of the Norwegian system of access, where the main measure of merit are grades from upper secondary school. This approach obviously has a benefit of being “objective” although more holistic approaches might be considered fairer to certain students. Therefore, one aim of the paper, is to take a closer look at how a “fair system” is balanced with objectivity in Norway.

What counts as a fair system is a question of definition. As pointed out by researchers such as Bernstein (1970), Ball (2010), Reay (2010) and Bøyum (2014), fairness issues are widespread in educational research, and educational policy depends on assumptions about what fairness in education is or should be. Still, the question of what counts as fairness is not sufficiently defined and assessed. This is especially the case when it comes to studies of access to higher education (Duru-Bellatt 2012, Zhang et al 2014).

In policy discussions, fairness is often perceived as a measure of educational equity along with measures of achievement and opportunity in education. Balanced with an implicit or explicit understanding of objectivity, fairness is the basis of analyses of the dynamic of excellence and equity (e.g. Bøyum 2014). OECD (2008) defines fairness as one of two dimensions of equity in education. Fairness in this sense, means to make sure that personal and social circumstances such as gender, socio-economic status or ethnic origin should not be an obstacle to achieving educational potential. The other dimension defining equity in education is inclusion (OECD 2008). Inclusion entails ensuring a basic minimum standard of education for all, e.g. that all should have the same opportunity to reach a certain level of literacy and numeracy through schooling.

As fairness has no conclusive definition due to the philosophical and political nature of the concept (e.g. Rawls 1985, Hart 1955), each individual will necessarily

perceive a fair system in a subjective sense. To overcome part of the obstacle of dependence on gaining the satisfaction of the multiple parties involved in the system, shared rules of fairness need to be established. Such an objective understanding of fairness through legal or policy principles lies closer to the concept of justice, i.e. the quality of being fair through predefined measures of action of conforming to a given law.

In this paper, we therefore lean on the definitions above when we present an analysis of the Norwegian system of access to higher education that includes these two main perspectives: The systemic and the individual. In the overall research project, European admissions systems were examined through an analysis of the freedom of higher education institutions to set their own criteria for student selection and the streaming policy in the secondary school systems. Three constructs covering aspects of fairness guided our interviews in the Norwegian case: Equity dimension – inclusion, personal and social circumstances, 2) Efficiency dimension – utilization of resources in the admission system and 3) Effectiveness dimension – practical and technical aspects of the admission system.

We present findings from interviews with stakeholders to frame the discussion in a systemic perspective (chapter 3), and findings from interviews with students in the admission phase between upper secondary education and first year of higher education to illustrate the objective and subjective perspectives of fairness (chapter 4).

First, however, we include an overview of the Norwegian higher education admissions system (chapter 1.2), a short explanation of the methodology of the study (chapter 1.3), as well as a short presentation of the Norwegian system of schooling and higher education (chapter 2).

1.2 The Norwegian higher education admissions system

Formally, educational admission is an institutional responsibility in Norway. Since the mid-1990s, however, the Norwegian Universities and Colleges Admission Service (NUCAS) have been coordinating admission to most forms of undergraduate education at public higher education institutions. Currently the NUCAS system also include most private higher education institutions. Students send in one application, with a ranked list of up to ten programmes of their choice. Hence, it is possible to apply to the same type of programme (for example engineering) at several institutions or apply to different types of programmes at one or more institutions.

Selection is based solely on grades from upper secondary education. Most programmes only require general study competence for admission, which students achieve by completing an upper secondary diploma. Nevertheless, some

programmes, such as medicine or other programmes in the medical field (e.g. veterinary, dentistry, pharmacy), engineering and different types of science programmes require the applicants to have also taken advanced science and mathematics classes as a part of their upper secondary education.

Even though there are generally more applicants than study places, in some less popular programmes not all institutions manage to fill all their places and some institutions have had a reduction in applicants over time (Frølich, Waagene & Aamodt 2011). Most institutions have some programmes that are very popular, where there are many more applicants than places, but all institutions also have some programmes where they accept all eligible applicants (as there are fewer applicants than places).

Further, there is tracking in upper secondary education: when students start upper secondary education, they choose either an academic or a vocational track. Only completion of an academic programme gives access to higher education. Most students who complete an upper secondary academic diploma move on to higher education. However, not all students start right away. In Norway it is quite common to postpone start-up of higher education, as it is more common to have one or several gap years after completing upper secondary education, than to go straight to higher education after receiving the diploma. Below is a table which shows that just over 40 per cent of a cohort go straight to higher education, while the rest wait one year or more (analyses done on cohorts starting in upper secondary in 2006-07) (Hovdhaugen and Salvanes 2015).

Table 1: Frequency of direct vs. delayed transition

| | N | Share |
|--|-------|-------|
| Direct transition | 14637 | 41,8% |
| Delayed transition, 1 year | 12166 | 34,8% |
| Delayed transition, 2 years | 4093 | 11,7% |
| Have not started HE within 2 years after upper secondary school completion | 4093 | 11,7% |

Source: Hovdhaugen, E. & K. V. Salvanes (2015): *Delayed entrance to higher education: increased motivation for studies or just as slow?* Unpublished paper, presented at TIY 2015

According to public statistics, 51 percent of 30-34-year olds have some kind of higher education degree, and an even higher share have entered higher education but not yet completed a degree¹. Hence, most pupils who aim for the academic track and the diploma which grants access to higher education will eventually start in higher education. However, as indicated in the table is the trajectory leading into higher education not always straight. This implies that from most academic upper secondary programmes, quite many pupils choose to go to higher education once they have received their diploma. Within 5 years of starting upper secondary

¹ SSB, statistics on educational levels: <https://www.ssb.no/sosiale-forhold-og-kriminalitet/artikler-og-publikasjoner/norge-pa-utdanningstoppen-i-europa>

86 per cent of those starting the academic track have completed and are thus eligible to start a higher education (Statistics Norway 2017).

1.3 Methodology of the study

The issues mentioned above related to the Norwegian higher education admissions system did have methodological implications for the Norwegian case study. Originally, case study countries were asked to choose one upper secondary school which have a high rate of direct transfer and one school with low level of direct transfer, as well as one highly selective higher education institution, and one less selective higher education institution. However, this does not correspond to the structure of the Norwegian educational system, and Norway therefore had to divert slightly from these requirements. This is described below.

As it is more common to postpone higher education rather than a direct transition, it is likely that this does not differ much between schools. However, we could distinguish between schools where most students are geared at going to higher education, either right away or later, and schools where not all students are likely to enter higher education, even though they have completed the academic programme in upper secondary education. In order to find such a school, we targeted a school outside Oslo. Geography might be important in this case, i.e. students in more rural areas who pursue the academic track in upper secondary education need to overcome more obstacles in order to participate in higher education as they have to move. They might also have less access to good information about higher education programmes available as education exhibitions are usually located in larger cities and towns. Visits from business and industry as well as students and advisors from higher education institutions are also easier to organize the closer the school is to one or more of these institutions.

For higher education institutions, we ran into a similar problem. Selectivity in higher education is not necessarily linked to the institution as such, but rather to the programme. There are a range of programmes that are very competitive to get in to, such as medicine, law, psychology, physiotherapy, nursing, some types of engineering programmes and international politics (a BA-combination of history and political science). Some of these programmes are located at universities, while others are located at university colleges. Conditions related to access is therefore not so much linked to the institution as to the competition between different disciplines/study programmes both within and between higher education institutions.

Since Norway has a less selective educational system compared to other countries, and at the same time a binary system where different types of degrees are taught at different types of institutions, we chose to deviate from the initial set up of focus group interviews. To accommodate this issue, we chose two higher

education institutions, one university and one university college, and conducted interviews in one selective programme and one less selective programme at both institutions. This would give a better picture of the access situation in Norway, as it would cover both selective and less selective programmes. Hence, the original set up by the project organization (Orr et al 2017), focusing on selective vs. non-selective institution, did not fit the Norwegian higher education system and we were thus allowed to deviate from that set up.

The data consist of interviews with various stakeholders and focus group interviews with students. We conducted four interviews with stakeholders, and five interviews with institutional representatives on how they experience the admissions system in Norway. The focus group interviews were done with students in their final year in upper secondary education and students in their first year of higher education. We had three focus group interviews in upper secondary education, and four focus group interviews in higher education.

At the upper secondary schools where interviews were conducted, a study guidance and career counsellor helped us recruit students to participate in the focus group interviews. This resulted in diverse groups, nine to ten students from different programmes and both boys and girls present. At the higher education institutions, we had to recruit students ourselves, usually through a lecture or seminar, and this rendered fewer participants and less diverse groups. However, since there is no way of instructing higher education students to participate, this was deemed the only viable way of recruiting students. The data collection was done Fall 2016.

2 The Norwegian educational system

In this chapter, we provide a short overview of the Norwegian school system and the higher education system as a backdrop for the presentation of the data from the case study in chapter 3.

2.1 The school system

The Norwegian school system consists of 10 years of compulsory schooling and 3-4 years of voluntary upper secondary schooling. The compulsory education is comprehensive and starts at age 6. There are two stages of schooling: primary school (year 1-7) and lower secondary school (year 8-10). Only students in lower secondary school get their performances graded, on a scale from 2 to 6 where 6 is best (1 is the grade for “fail”). There is no element of tracking in compulsory schools; all students follow the same general curriculum. Most students attend state schools, only 3,4 per cent of students in primary and lower secondary education attend a private school (SSB, 2015).

Upper secondary schooling is not compulsory, but most students attend. Out of a cohort of compulsory school leavers from lower secondary education, 99 per cent apply to and 96-97 per cent start in upper secondary education the following autumn (Frøseth et al. 2008). Upper secondary education is divided into two tracks: academic programmes and vocational programmes. The number of programmes in the two tracks have recently been changed and there are now five academic programmes and eight vocational programmes (see www.vilbli.no). In order to gain general access to higher education a student has to complete an academic upper secondary education. Consequently, students who complete vocational upper secondary education, consisting of two years of training in school and a two-year apprenticeship in an organisation or business, do not have automatic access to higher education. But students who start a vocational upper secondary education can choose to switch to the academic track after completing the first two years of schooling, and as such gain access to higher education after completing three years in upper secondary education. The third year these students are taking can be seen as a form of “make-up year”, where they take all the courses which are

compulsory in order to gain regular access to higher education (see below). Slightly more than 70 per cent of students completing upper secondary school within five years of commencing have completed the academic track (Vibe et al., 2012), either through a regular programme or the make-up programme, and are thus qualified to apply for higher education. Most of the upper secondary schooling is organised by the state, but about 8 percent of students attend a private school (Hovdhaugen et al 2014). Private schools are most prevalent in urban areas.

There are social differences both in choice of type of upper secondary programmes, and in completion. Over half of students starting on the academic track in upper secondary education have parents with higher education, while this is only true for about one in four students starting on the vocational track. In addition, students from families where the parents have higher education are much more likely to complete the programme they have started: 82 per cent of these students' complete upper secondary education within five years after commencing, compared to 66 per cent of students from families where the parents have upper secondary education and only 43 per cent of students from families where neither parent has education beyond primary school (Bjørkeng 2013). Still, in the public sphere both tracks are presented as acceptable pathways for students to take; the main difference is that they can lead to different parts of the labour market and can give students different career opportunities later in life.

The current system of programmes in upper secondary education was introduced in 1994. The system was slightly reformed in 2006, as the number of vocational programmes were reduced. Further, in recent years a clearer divide between academic and vocational programmes have emerged (Frøseth et al 2008). Earlier, before 2006, there were some "middle ground" programmes, which were formally defined as vocational, but where students could choose half way through the programme if they wanted to continue on the vocational path or take a specialisation which would give them access to higher education (without having to take the make-up year). However, after the reform in 2006 this opportunity has been reduced.

Upper secondary school use the same grading scale as lower secondary school, a scale from 2 to 6 where 6 is best. Students get a grade in all subjects, and in languages they get two grades: one for written performance and one for oral performance. In addition to the grades set by teachers, students also need to take exams in their last year, and the grade on the exams are also part of their upper secondary diploma. However, as upper secondary school students have three exams (written Norwegian, one other written exam and one oral exam) and at least twelve grades set by teachers in the various subjects they have had through the course of their upper secondary education, exams are not that strong a determinant for access

to higher education. Further, it is also possible to re-sit exams or improve grades after upper secondary education is completed (but it is usually done at a private institution), so students can improve their grade point average if it is not high enough to get admission to their programme of choice.

2.2 The higher education system

Most of Norwegian higher education institutions are public. 85 percent of students attend a public institution which do not charge tuition fees. Hence, 15 percent attend a private higher education institution, and these institutions do charge tuition fees. The largest private institution is BI, the Norwegian Business School in Oslo. There are three types of public institutions: universities, specialized university institutions and university colleges. Formally, these differ in the extent that they are allowed to award PhD-degrees, but historically they have also provided different types of degrees. Long professional degrees (such as medicine and law) as well as general undergraduate/ bachelor's and graduate/master's degree in a range of disciplines would be offered at universities, while university colleges primarily offer professional diplomas of three years' duration (for example in nursing, engineering and early childhood education). Universities offer PhD-education in most fields, specialized university institutions are allowed to provide PhD-education in their field of speciality (e.g. music, veterinary science, architecture), while university colleges historically did not have the right to award PhD-degrees. Student support is provided through a public loans and grants scheme, and students who attend school which charge tuition fees (both in Norway and abroad) can get extra loans to cover the cost of tuition, up to a limit (Opheim 2008).

Norway formally has a binary higher education system, and historically there has been a form of division of labour between universities and university colleges, as they provide different types of degrees. However, this has changed during the last decade as university colleges now have the right to apply to become a university, and since 2005 several institutions have done that. This in turn has put the binary system under pressure and has created general academic drift among university colleges (Kyvik 2009). To exemplify: in 2004 Norway had four universities, 26 university colleges and six specialized university institutions spread all over the country, while the composition of higher education institutions in 2016 was eight universities, 11 university colleges and five specialized university institutions. In 2016, in the area covering the northern half of the country (a distance of more than 1500 km) there were only two institutions: Nord University and University of Tromsø. Both these institutions are the result of mergers among institutions, and mergers among university colleges are also seen as a way for institutions to become eligible to get university status. This has resulted fewer but larger

and more diverse institutions, and short professional degrees are now also found at universities, but only at the “new upgraded” universities.

Compared with many other higher education systems, the Norwegian system have a relatively low degree of hierarchy between institutions. Bleiklie (2005:37) argues that traditional universities in Scandinavian higher education systems can generally be considered “equal in terms of prestige and quality”, as a contrast to the American and English systems where there are clear differences in quality, prestige and selectiveness among institutions of the same rank. The Norwegian higher education system is therefore relatively egalitarian, in the sense that the general prestige of a Norwegian university degree is only moderately higher than a comparable university college degree (Vabø 2002). The regionalisation of higher education, by establishing university colleges as part of the higher education reform in 1994, has also helped to counteract a national hierarchy within higher education (Kogan & Bleiklie 2006:27, Kyvik 2009).

As earlier mentioned, admission to undergraduate education is delegated from institutions to NUCAS, the common admission service and applicants therefore only send one application, with a prioritised ranking of the programmes they want to apply to. Most programmes only require general study competence for admission, which students achieve by completing an upper secondary diploma, while a minority of programmes have specific requirements, usually in the form of particular subjects the applicant have to have taken. The admission is based solely on the grade point average, with extra points for particular subjects, whenever that is relevant. Traditionally have a particular grade in a subject not been a part of the requirements. However, since 2005 there has been a general requirement for student teachers to have at least a grade 3 (on a scale from 1 to 6 where 6 is the best) in Norwegian and mathematics in order to be eligible for admission (With & Mastekaasa 2014). From 2015 this requirement was tightened to 4 in mathematics for all types of teacher degrees. Apart from these special requirements the majority of programmes are open to most qualified applicants. In general, there is limited pressure on applicants to win a place in higher education, with the exception of the most prestigious or popular programmes in the most popular institutions. Hence, most institutions commonly have a mix of selective and less selective programmes. Furthermore, the application patterns in Norway are regional, in the sense that students usually apply to a higher education institution close to home, and most institutions have over 70 per cent of applicants from the region where the institution is located (Frølich et al 2011). However, there is no evidence that the reason for applying close to home is that students want to live with their parents; according to Eurostudent IV data, only 7 per cent of Norwegian students live with their parents, with most students living by themselves or in student housing (Orr, Gwosć & Netz 2011). The only exception to the regional recruitment patterns

is the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), the largest institution providing education in graduate engineering. This is probably due to the status of the institution: the NTNU used to be the Norwegian Institute of Technology, and the graduate engineering education they provide is associated with high prestige. The implication of mainly local recruitment is that the actual competition among institutions for students is not very strong.

There is also an alternative admission schema in Norway, in addition to general admission based on completed upper secondary education. In 1999, the Norwegian parliament passed an access reform in higher education, the Competence Reform, implemented from 2001. One key attribute of the reform is that it gives people without an academic upper secondary diploma who are at least 25 years old the right to be considered for acceptance into a specific study program based on an accreditation of competences, known as *realkompetanse* (Opheim & Helland, 2006, Orr & Hovdhaugen 2014). This accreditation of competences can be seen as a way of creating a “national system for documentation and appreciation of adults’ non-formal and informal competence, with legitimacy in both the labour market and the educational system” (VOX, 2002:5). The admission is for one programme or course, not the entire institution. However, if the student admitted based on accreditation of competences completes the first year of study, formal entrance qualifications are granted, and the student is on equal terms with all other students (Opheim & Helland, 2006). This is a system used by quite few applicants, originally by 5-8 per cent of the applicant pool (Carlsten et al, 2006; Helland & Opheim, 2004; Helland, 2005), while more recent data indicate only 1-3 per cent of the applicant pool use this access route (Olsen et al, 2018). In comparison with other students, those applying based on an accreditation of competences are usually older and predominantly female. In addition, these students are more often from non-educated homes, from the northern parts of Norway and from rural rather than urban areas. In addition to this is it possible for those holding a vocational diploma in a technical trade such as electrician or carpenter to apply for admission to electrical engineering and building engineering respectively, a way into higher education called “Y-veien” (the vocational way). However, the programmes these applicants enter differ some from usual engineering programmes as these are less practical courses and there is a higher focus on courses using more general skills.

In 2002 a new higher education funding model was introduced in Norway which, contrary to earlier models, was performance-based. The previous funding system had been based on planned enrolments (Frølich & Strøm, 2008). The new system consists of three main components: a basic grant (60 per cent of the allocation) and two components based on performance, with 25 per cent based on educational output and 15 per cent based on research output. Research output is

related to the number of academic publications, while educational output is based on the number of credits students complete, the number of graduates and the number of international exchange students. However, one major difference between the two output-based components is that there is no limitation on revenue based on educational output, while research output has a ceiling and is partly based on the redistribution of funds. This implies that an institution can increase its revenue if the average number of credits per student produced increases (Frølich, 2006). This has led to most institutions admitting more students than the number of places they actually have at that institution, in order to make sure that they keep up their production of credits in order to get the performance-based share of the educational output funds.

All in all, the Norwegian access system is recognized by its model of double selection, i.e. at least one pathway through the secondary school system does not lead to a qualification enabling higher education entry (to some part of the system) and higher education institutions can select with some additional criteria to the national standardized ones based on merit through academic testing in upper secondary school.

3 Fairness in access: Systemic perspectives

In this chapter we present the data analysis from the interviews done with central stakeholders in upper secondary education and in higher education in Norway, which represent the systemic perspective of fairness in access. The interviews were conducted according to the international comparative playbook for national case studies, adapted to the Norwegian case. As Norway has no national examination for entrance to higher education, interviews with four key stakeholders were conducted. Of these two were interviews with officials in the Ministry of Education and Research, one interview with officials at the central admissions office and one interview with officials at the Directorate for Education and Training in charge of study guidance and career counselling for students in upper secondary education. Additionally, interviews were conducted with representatives for five universities, representing different types of institutions in the Norwegian higher education system.

3.1 Ministry of Education and Research, Upper secondary education officials

Compared to many other European countries streaming in Norwegian education start quite late, when students start upper secondary school as they choose to attend either an academic or a vocational programme. The informants explained that the system has been like this for quite a while, formalized into the type of system we have today, with two parallel tracks and a range of programmes within these two tracks through a reform implemented in 1994. It did, however, also formally exist before that. The reform of 1994 provided youth aged 16 to 19 the right to attend upper secondary education, and to get one of their three preferred programmes (80-90 percent usually get accepted to the programme they ranked first on their application, Frøseth et al 2008: 65). In 2006 there was a new reform, which reduced the number of upper secondary programmes. These changes mainly affected the vocational track.

When it comes to tracking, the upper secondary education official informed that a guiding premise has been that choices made in lower secondary education should not have any consequences for later choices. The way this plays out is that there is no tracking in subjects in lower secondary education (earlier, about 30 years ago there used to be several types of math, with only one leading to the academic programme in upper secondary), and students can change their choice of second language from lower to upper secondary, though most students tend to continue pursuing the language they started. The policy of choices made in lower secondary education having no consequences for later choices have been in place at least since the implementation of the reform in 1994.

The idea that students should not be stuck in their choices is a general idea, as it is possible for students who have started the vocational track to switch over to the academic track after two years of study and then complete with an academic diploma instead of a vocational diploma. According to our informants, this was also something that was first implemented as a part of the reform in 1994, and the “makeup year” is called “påbygg” (translates to “add on”). It varies to what extent this year is used by students in different vocational programmes. In some programmes it is the most common way to completion, while it is much rarer in other programmes. Students who take the makeup year get the minimum of what is required for access to higher education. The informants explained that the makeup year is seen as a somewhat difficult way to gaining the right to higher education access, as it is very theoretical (students have to take all the compulsory subjects they have not taken in their two earlier years in upper secondary education). This view is further strengthened by the fact that only 60 percent of those aiming at completing the makeup year get a passing grade and a diploma. However, as about half of a cohort start in the vocational track and the majority who leaves with an upper secondary diploma get the academic diploma, a fair share of these students does get their diploma through the makeup year according to the official in the Ministry.

As most programmes in Norwegian higher education only require general admission requirements (“generell studiekompetanse”), all students who holds an academic upper secondary education diploma are qualified to apply to the majority of programmes in higher education. Students can get this both through completion of an academic programme in upper secondary education or by taking the makeup year after completing two years in a vocational programme. However, students who want to access programmes which requires extra math or science have to either complete the science track within the academic upper secondary programme or take science and math subjects to complete their diploma and make them eligible to apply for that programme.

Generally, in the admissions system equity is understood as a form of fairness: similar rules for most programmes and a well-established system which rarely changes ensures that the admission system has been constructed with fairness as clear intention.

3.2 Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, Senior Advisor on Guidance

In Norway, guidance for students have two parts: occupational- and educational counselling and social services (financial guidance for underprivileged groups as well as psychological and emotional well-being). In most schools one person takes care of both functions, but there are also examples of schools which have a division between advisors dealing with occupational and educational counselling, and advisors dealing with financial and psychological counselling (social services). The informants from the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training reported that there are very few directions from the government on how this function should be solved. It is rather up to the school to decide how it should be structured. The common norm is one advisor per 500 students, but in some counties a priority has been placed on this function and thus more resources have been allocated to the function. There are no formal educational requirements to those who function as advisors. In some schools one of the teachers also fill this function.

The responsibility for guidance is placed at the level of the school owner, which for upper secondary education is the county (region). All schools should have a study guidance and career counsellor. In addition to this, all teachers should be available (or able) to give students advise (though mainly educational). The idea is that study guidance and career counsellors only to a limited extent should give advice, they shall rather provide information on opportunities but not state what the student should choose. The school counsellor has the responsibility to offer information to upper secondary school students on labour market opportunities and educational offerings after completion of upper secondary school. Hence, they do inform about higher education. However, they also have the responsibility to inform lower secondary students about upper secondary school options, and the consequences of choices made in upper secondary for the possibility to apply to different types of programmes in higher education. They also arrange visits for lower secondary students to come to the school to get information and a feeling of what attending that should would be like.

As mentioned earlier, advisors are responsible for information on further education, including higher education, as well as occupational or labour market guidance. All schools are supposed to provide the opportunity for students to attend an educational exhibition, and it is also common for schools to invite local business

and industry to inform about labour market options in the area. Some schools also have higher education institutions who come visit. This is usually coordinated and is part of what is commonly known as “the annual university & university college tour”. Hence, higher education institutions in the area come to visit schools, have presentations and stands where upper secondary students can ask questions.

An idea that have been present in policy on advising and guidance the last decade is that guidance has to start early, before upper secondary education. Therefore, there is now a subject called Educational choices/work life (“utdanningsvalg/arbeidslivsfag”) in lower secondary education, where students spend time visiting schools, figuring out what is required in order to get into a specific profession, and what kinds of options they have. As part of this subject, students regularly also take tests, usually online, to help them identify their interests. It is the ambition that guidance should be part of a training and awareness process, and that the guidance counsellor should help students find out what the student’s goal is (educationally or occupationally) and help them reach that goal.

A lot of the information resources provided are public and owned by the school owners, such as www.vilbli.no (on choices in upper secondary education), www.vigo.no (online tool for upper secondary school application), www.utdanning.no (governmental site on education, all levels), and www.siu.no (information on education abroad). The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (Udir) does not recommend using any specific websites, but most guidance counsellors use the public sites.

The interviewee gave a personal opinion on the status of occupational and educational counselling in the EU, as Norway participate in EUROguidance: “EU has a very economic perspective on counselling in general, where the main aim is just to get many students through, but this is not always good for the individual. Some people require more time to figure out what they want to do, and just taking a ‘test of interests’ will not solve this”. This points to fairness as efficiency being less of a guiding principle in the Norwegian access system, which is also evident through guiding services at schools and the norms set for number of students per advisor. This ensure that students have access to guidance counselling, not just to various career tests. Further, there have been attempts doubling the counselling resources at some schools, and as a result upper secondary dropout has been reduced according to our informants. However, it is hard to tell whether this is due to more counselling or not. It is difficult to prove this in a research context, since there are also many other things going on in school that can affect dropout.

3.3 NUCAS: The Norwegian Universities and Colleges Admission Service, Senior Advisor

The Ministry of Education and Research sets the rules for higher education admission. These rules are determined centrally by the government. The purpose is to make sure that the rules are the same for all applicants, and that all applicants get the same information on the requirements for different programmes. The matching process is solely based on grades. Accordingly, the system places a lot of emphasis on academic accomplishments in upper secondary education.

The common system of higher education admission started in 1995. The first year the common system only included the 26 university colleges, but already the year after, in 1996, the universities also joined the system. The system has been used by all public higher education institutions since 1997. Early in the 1990's there were different rules for admission, both between different universities and university colleges, but also among faculties or schools within a university. At one point, there were over a hundred different admissions rules which existed side by side. This put a very heavy information load on applicants. The general idea behind the common admission system was to harmonise admission rules, and to make admission processes easier and more effective both for students and for institutions. However, this changed in 1994, when the new admission policy was put in place. This paved the way for a common application system which today include all public and most private higher education institutions in Norway.

The informants from The Norwegian Universities and Colleges Admission Service (NUCAS) stressed that the access system is decided by the government. Changes to admission rules is not done very often. When changes are made, this is decided by the government, and the proposed changes are sent out for a public hearing, where higher education institutions, student organisations etc have the right to state their opinion on the proposed changes. Hence, institutions influence over admission rules to higher education is rather limited. They can apply to get specific admission rules in a subject, but this needs to be sanctioned by the Ministry of Education and Research. Currently there are some changes made to teacher's education access, and when the rules for admission to higher education changes it changes for all higher education institutions providing that type of degree, regardless if these new rules make recruitment to teacher training much harder for institutions and potentially limit the future number of teachers in that part of the country. However, changes to admission rules are commonly suggested by institutions, and they have taken the initiative to most changes that are proposed. But all changes need to be accepted and recommended by the Ministry of Education and Research.

Using alternative admission schemes, such as interviews, is also something the government would have to sanction for institutions to be able to use it. Admission

to bachelor's education is regulated by law and therefore only the Ministry of Education and Research can make changes to it. A few studies have some form of audition, but this is only restricted to arts or esthetical programmes and there are generally few of those (both in number of programmes and in number of students). This would be an example of a wider definition of fairness than the one focusing exclusively on academic merit through tests, although not widely spread (cf. chapter 1.1.).

Admission rules differ to some extent between programmes, in the sense that some are open to all qualified applicants while others are closed and have a waiting list. The number of places a higher education may offer is no longer regulated by numerus clauses. As institutions have more autonomy they can provide as many places as they like. But most institutions indicate how many students they expect to admit. Further, programmes which requires lab facilities may still have an upper limit to how many students they can accept. Even if institutions do not have a set limit for admission in a given programme, NUCAS does not set a limit. Thus, all qualified applicants receive an offer to attend that programme. Hence, this varies quite a lot from programme to programme and can also vary within an institution. However, some programmes which are very popular have a strict limit to how many students they accept. This is mainly studies in medicine, pharmacy, psychology, law and physiotherapy. At the other end of the scale some engineering programmes can be found. Here all students are accepted. Generally, there are more programmes which accept all applicants at institutions located in more rural areas, and in most cases, these are university colleges rather than universities. However, this pattern might also be linked to the types of programmes which different types of institutions provide. This implies that institutions can decide if a programme should be open to all qualified applicants or if it should be closed (with a fixed number of places), but they cannot influence the rules for admission or the rules for ranking of application, since these are both set by the government. Both these types of rules are regulated by law.

The current government (conservative, in office since 2013) has allowed institutions to implement more specific requirements for admission in certain programmes, such as an increase in requirements for admission to science programmes, by specific grade requirement. At the same time, the government has increased the requirements for access to the teacher training programme. This can be understood as a change from a system that was focused on treating all students the same way, with less autonomy for institutions, to a system with more institutional autonomy but also with increasing differences in access rules. Our informants claimed this to be a change in approach to how the access system is being governed, but they stated that it was unclear what implications such policy may have in terms of how students experience fairness.

In general, according to the informants from NUCAS the strength of the system is that the common system of higher education admission implemented after 1994 is very effective, both for institutions as applicants are only evaluated once, and for applicants as it is a system which is easy to orient themselves in. It is also easy for applicants to see if the evaluation they have received is fair.

3.4 Ministry of Education and Research, Higher education officials

In the mid 1990's, all regulations on admission to different forms of higher education was collected in a governmental statute, and a common application portal was implemented. All the regulations are defined in the statute, and it is not possible for institutions/programmes to have other kinds of admission criteria than the ones which are specified in the statute. The statute also specifies which programmes have special admission requirements, and thus the regulation would have to be changed if admission requirements are to be adjusted. However, the statutes are evaluated each year, but usually there are no large changes, only minor adjustments. The current government have been more open to inviting institutions to evaluate if they need to implement further or more specific admission requirements in any of their programmes.

The level of institutional agency when it comes to admission is quite low, but for some programmes it is more open (mainly creative arts where they have audition or presentation of art folders). These programmes have quite a large agency in defining what kind of admission criteria they need, but this only applies to a minority of students. For most students, it is the general admission requirements which apply. According to our informants, the admissions criteria for higher education have not been discussed very much. As mentioned, however, there is a change in attitude in the current government. A white paper on Quality in Higher Education (published Spring 2017), discusses the topic of introducing more specific admission requirements.

According to the informants working with higher education at the Ministry of Education and Research, the institutions have a quite low level of autonomy when it comes to higher education admission, as this is regulated by the government. This is also mentioned by the other informants mentioned above. These particular informants mentioned a range of benefits of having a common system for higher education admission. Institutions can do the evaluation of applicants for each other, which is efficient both for institutions (as they get less work and can divide work among themselves) and for applicants (who only need to send one application and know the rules for one single system). If one considers opening for a less centralised system, with more local admission with institution specific rules, this

would make the process of applying more complicated for students. Such a system would also raise the question of what would happen to the value of general admission requirements (“studiekompetanse”) if more local admission policies were introduced. The idea behind the general admission requirements is that students should know already at the start of upper secondary education how to fulfil these requirements, and also which studies require more specific requirements, so they can make informed choices about subjects to take in upper secondary education.

The Norwegian admission system is, to a great extent, based on merits, as grades is the basis for competing for a study place. However, it is possible to use interviews in admission to teacher training, but that would be in addition to grades. This exemplifies a quite new practice and has to a little extent been used. Additionally, using interviews is only relevant if there is an actual competition between applicants – if all qualified applicants are accepted there is no point in conducting interviews. Additionally, there is a social equity perspective to this, a predictable system based on grades has less social bias than other admission methods. But removing grades as the basis for admission have never really been discussed. To the extent interview or letter of motivation have been proposed, this is always in addition to grades, not instead of.

The responsibility to recruit underrepresented groups lies with the institutions. For example, there have been measures to recruit male applicants to nursing and teaching, and there are also projects to recruit students of minority background to teacher training and the police academy. NTNU, the technical university, have an on-going project to recruit girls to engineering, and this programme has been running for more than 10 years. A few programmes also give extra admission points for gender (mainly for girls in science, and for boys in veterinary), but there is an ongoing debate about introducing gender admission point in for example psychology. It is the ministry which gives institutions the right to implement or abolish admission points for gender, and there is a formal application process. This is important as everybody has to follow the regulations in order to secure equal treatment of applicants.

The number of study places are usually adjusted on a yearly basis, as the ministry may give some new study places to institutions. This encompass both places that are supposed to be in specific fields where there is an increased labour market need (such as nursing, teaching or science for example), but also “strategic study places” that the institution can divide among their programmes as they wish. After all it is the institution that knows best where there might be a potential for growth, or where there are excess applications. However, the ministry sets a candidate target (“kandidatmåltall”). What institutions are measured by, by the ministry, have changed during the last 15 years. The important issue is what comes out of higher education – the number of graduates who can enter the labour market with a

completed degree. Hence, there has been a move in the funding system from targeting activity at the institutions to targeting candidates (which is output).

The ministry does not have any specific strategies to recruit underrepresented groups, as the responsibility for this lies with the institutions. Several institutions have strategies; but many use it when it comes to programs of teacher education. They aim at keeping the student's interest during the application process, by calling all applicants and by sending them information about the institution and the programme. This contact lasts all the way up until school starts in August. As far as the ministry knows are there few who have outreach programmes to approach potential applicants before the application date, April 15th. It is after the application date, when institutions know who their first priority applicants are they start contacting potential students.

The informants from the ministry thinks the system is effective as it is today, as a centralised system is effective for applicants and for institutions. This implies that changes in the system might make the admissions systems less effective, but if this would increase completion and reduce dropout it may still be worthwhile. For example, might interview be worthwhile, if this proves to be a method that can weed out students who are less motivated, this might prevent wrong choices or reduce dropout. Hence, it might be that a system which is more expensive might still be worthwhile if it reduces other unwanted outcomes of mismatch. The ministry is working on a system which builds on statistics and predictions to try to help students make informed choices of what might be good careers in the future.

Norway has a flexible higher education system, with good financial provisions for students. Compared to other countries (especially Germany) does tracking start late, at age 16. Very many students in upper secondary education complete the general admission requirements from higher education and are thus eligible to start a degree programme. In addition to this are there alternative ways in, and "Y-veien" (those who holds a vocational diploma can get access to specific programmes where their vocational training is relevant) have proven a good instrument for enhanced recruitment to technological degrees. But the ministry is focused on securing quality in admission through this alternative path – they do not want Y-veien to be a second rank way into higher education. Hence, keeping up quality in admission is important to the ministry.

3.5 Interviews with higher education institutions

Generally, through the budget frame all higher education institutions are expected to provide a certain number of study places, but they are free to accept more students than their given number, and most institutions choose to do so. The number

of study places at an institution can rather be seen as the minimum of places in higher education that a particular institution is supposed to provide.

Grades from upper secondary education is the only criteria used to sort applicants, but for foreign applicants adjustments usually have to be made (they have to be evaluated separately, as their grades are not in the national database). Hence, for national applicants the evaluation process is rather quick and easy, and institutions can assist each other in evaluating applicants. For international applicants though, an individual evaluation has to be done for every applicant.

Earlier research has shown that most Norwegian institutions recruit mainly locally, in their region, and the type of programme the institution provide is more important for student choices, rather than institutional reputation (Wiers-Jenssen 2012). However, institutions still have recruitment strategies, though these vary by market position, if they can afford to be selective or if they offer study places to all eligible applicants (Frølich, Brandt, Hovdhaugen & Aamodt 2009).

Methodological note on the interviews

Since the questions focusing on admission and recruitment of students sometimes implies talking to several people at the institution, and the interviews were initially meant to be conducted as telephone interviews, three out of five higher education institutions chose to answer the questions in a written format via email. In one case, the written answers were followed by a phone call to clarify some issues. All answers are reported in the text below.

Selective institution

The informants from a selective higher education institution reported that a given number of study places are funded, and that the Ministry of Education and Research expect the institution to provide this number. They want to have mainly full-funded students, so they do try not to admit too many students. Since they have quite many applicants, on average 3 applicants per study place they could admit more, but because of the enhanced focus on quality of education they try to restrict admissions to admit the number of students they are supposed to take. But there are some guide lines and there is an activity requirement in the professional degrees (medicine, psychology, dentistry, pharmacy). In these programmes the institution is supposed to deliver a certain number of graduates. This is a way for the government to control that institutions are delivering the graduates they are supposed to deliver. In addition to this has there been an increase during the last couple of years in earmarked study places, for example that the ministry gives money to 10 more study places in psychology. Then they have to accept more students in their psychology programme. But apart from this the institution can move study

places between programmes, but that is only rarely done. The board have to approve start-up and close down of programme, while the faculty the programme sorts under can decide to freeze a program, which is not to admit new students that year. Labour market prospective is relevant for new programmes, when departments/faculties propose new programme they are asked to evaluate this.

There is a programme at the institution to recruit student of minority background, MIFA, which has been a special programme for a couple of years but is now an integrated part of the general recruitment work the institution does. The MIFA-project is a cooperation with Oslo municipality, and they work closely with upper secondary schools to recruit minority students to the institution. The primary focus was to enhance the number of minority students in general, and now the focus has shifted to more focus on what types of programmes minority students apply to and try to recruit them to programmes where they still are underrepresented. In addition to this, gender is an important dimension, as there are few boys getting admitted to competitive long professional degrees. Psychology, medicine and odontology have all reported that they have had fewer male students for quite a few years now, and there is a discussion on having extra points for underrepresented gender in these programmes. There are male applicants, but girls have slightly better grades and get the study places (as these are only based on grade competition). The institution has applied to the ministry to get gender point introduced in psychology, but this has not been decided yet.

The institution has a range measure to engage and include new students. During the last couple of years there has been a strong focus on first year students, on academic integration and prevention of dropout. The Faculty of Science works actively with programmes to address this issue, but all faculties have a focus on the issue, that is part of the yearly plan. The institution used to have a common buddy system, centrally organised, but about 2-3 years ago the responsibility for reception of new students was delegated to the nine faculties and their study programmes, and this works well. Local administration of buddy systems also enhances the academic integration. Focusing on good and relevant information to applicants is another measure to make sure students know what they apply to and that their expectations are in line with what they meet.

According to the informants from the selective institution, the system for admission we have in Norway today is quite good, grades are seen as fair. But there are also discussions on using interviews, as there are those who argue that it is hard to always be ranked according to your performance in upper secondary education (as it is upper secondary education grades which are used to access higher education). But, this institution will always have a lot of applicants at degrees in medicine, psychology, odontology and pharmacy. Thus, it is important to find criteria which reflect fairness in access. Introducing interview would be very

expensive and work-intensive for the institution, and it will always be subjective. However, grades are also subjective, it is an evaluation your upper secondary teacher did, but it is based on more than one occasion. An admission interview has to be done in about 30 minutes and this might be hard to do this in a very fair way. Additionally, if we look to other countries, introducing interviews or motivation letters will probably create new business of preparing people for interviews or teaching them how to write motivation letters and then there would be a social element to this, as maybe not everybody can afford to pay for preparations courses. But there are also voices arguing that we need tests, and we have a trial going on in Economics, where the teachers have designed a test which students who apply to the master programme have to pass. This can be done because master programmes have local admission, and we set our own admissions criteria at master level. This is particularly relevant for programmes which have a lot of international applicants. They are using a test which has been developed in the US, for a similar purpose.

Hence, the current system is effective and as the informants see it, it is the best system available. However, the institution would like to introduce extra points for male students in psychology or medicine, as male recruitment to these subjects have gone down over time, but it is still unclear if this will have the intended effects. The discussion on alternative ways of sorting among all the strong applicants in these two fields of study will continue, and maybe interview will be proposed. However, other methods, such as a lottery among those who have grades above a certain threshold would never be used – this would not be considered as a fair form of admission policy. However, there is a challenge of time in admission. Many students applying to these popular programmes come directly from upper secondary education, and their grades are official around July 1st, and the admission process is supposed to be done by July 20th. As there are many highly qualified applicants, it would be hard to conduct several hundred interviews just in a few weeks' time.

Specialist technical institution

The informants from a specialist technical higher education institution described how decisions on the number of study places the institutions provide is based on information from the faculties at the institution. They pass on their estimates based on the budget frame and teaching resources available. The suggestions are coordinated by the central administration and adopted by the board. However, expectations from the ministry are also important as they state preconditions for how budget can be used, and the ministry also sometimes give extra study places to a certain degree which is seen as needed in society (particularly within health-

and social services and teaching). Hence, political priorities set by the government can influence admission at the institution.

National policy states that the foundation for admission to higher education in most cases is general admission requirements. Some degree programmes have extra prerequisites, such as math and science from upper secondary school, and this is true for many of the integrated master's degrees at the institution. Generally, it is the grades from upper secondary education which is the basis for ranking to get access, and the institutions have good qualified student in most programmes. The ranking of students is coordinated by NUCAS for all bachelors' programmes and integrated master programmes. Admission to two-year master programmes are done locally, based on rules that are set locally (but which builds on the national regulations, as the same principals are used). Labour market does not directly affect size of study programmes, but as there has been a reduction in oil/energy activity in the North Sea, the institution has reduced the number of study place in the petroleum engineering programme (but these places are redistributed to other engineering programmes).

The institution has a special programme to recruit girls to technological programmes, and this has been a measure that has been in place for quite a while. There is still low recruitment of girls to these programmes, but the recruitment has improved during the last years, so the programme is seen as effective. We are now planning to start recruitments measures to get more boys to apply to and complete programmes where there is a predominance of girls, this is scheduled to start in 2017. In addition, there was a measure to increase recruitment of minority youth to the institution in 2012. There are also a range of continuing education offers, which are adapted to labour market demand.

The institution is very aware of the value of a good start, and therefore there is range of programmes for first year students. In the beginning many of these focus on social integration and the transition into academia, in order to feel included and to learn good study and time-mastering skills. Through all phases of the student life there are offers of guidance to students, and courses in study techniques, presentation techniques, how to find a job and position oneself in the labour market are offered regularly. In addition to the centrally administered programmes aimed at integration there are also local programmes at the faculties and departments.

A less selective institution

The informants from a less selective higher education institution underlined that they to a high degree could decide freely what kinds of programmes they provide. The estimate of how many study places they can offer is, however, commonly based on the last year's experiences of applications. If there are few applications

in a field over time this may call for either not to offer places in that field, or to close down the programme. Closing down of programmes happens rarely, but in fields with many small programmes, such as humanities and social science, it is also common to restructure programmes on a regular basis, in order to make them more attractive to applicants. Hence, this is not a formal establishment of a new programme, but rather a redressing of an existing one – to make it easier to market.

National policy does affect the institution, at least to a certain degree. This is especially linked to the labour market. There is a national prioritization of fields of study (e.g science and technology, health and teacher education) and the ministry gives earmarked study places within these fields. Hence, then the institution is obliged to establish these places. Labour market is also important, and this is especially visible through the recent change in the local labour market situation. The down turn in the oil industry have had major consequences for university applications – creating a reduction in applications to engineering programmes and an increase in applications to more welfare state oriented professional programmes within health services.

The institution does not have a programme directly aimed at recruiting certain groups (e.g. low SES or immigrant background), but they do offer a one-year course in Norwegian language and culture for immigrants or foreign applicants who do not master the language. The institution has quite a few programmes taught in English at the master level, and there are lots of international applicants to these programme (a little under 2000 applicants to 240 study places). In general, does 13 percent of the student body have citizenship other than Norwegian. However, as the institution is located in an area which have been through a massive change in the labour market recently, and where the unemployment rate is significantly higher than the rest of Norway, there are calls for more continuing and adult education, especially for professionals returning to school to qualify for a new job. The institution has addressed challenges in the social welfare system that effectively hinders participation in continuing and adult education for individual who become unemployed and have by lobbying managed to change some of the governmental rules to create more flexibility and opportunity for continuing education.

The institution has a range of courses and activities geared at first year students. There is a buddy system as part of the welcoming programme, and the responsibility to get buddies for all incoming students and to arrange buddy activities lies with the three faculties and their departments. The welcoming programme, which is called the semester opening week (“semesteråpningsuke”) has social as well as academic aspects.

A rural/district institution

The informants from the rural/district higher education institution informed us that they have recently been merged with two other institutions in the district and admit about 5000 students every year, and now have several campuses spread over a large area. The institution can decide on admission themselves, but this is to a great extent based on experience. The different faculties and department report how many places they expect to fill to the administration and the distribution of study places is formally decided by the board.

Admission is done through NUCAS for all programmes, apart from for a small programme in theatre studies, which has local admission tests. In addition, it is possible to get access through accreditation of competences, and this follows the national regulations. However, most students get admitted through NUCAS, as only master programmes have local admission. Though the institution differs from many other institutions as they have to fight for all students they recruit. Many programmes at the institution do not get filled up, which means that the institution offers study places to all qualified applicants. Further, they are also very active at fairs and have many other types of recruitment measures to get students to apply to the institution. Most applicants and students are recruited locally. However, there are also some popular programmes with many applicants, such as nursing and animal care. At the same time are they struggling to fill all their study places in teacher training, and if this continues there will be a deficit of teachers in the northern regions of Norway. They have informed the ministry about this challenge, and there is an ongoing dialog about possible measures to handle the situation. But rather than changing the admission rules they look at the possibility of making it more financially lucrative for students to get a degree and work in this part of Norway, as students can get discount on loans or improved students financial support.

The institution has quite a few studies which are part-time and where students are not on campus, but meet a couple of times every semester ("samlingsbaserte studier"). This is commonly used as continuing education and is quite popular. Being located in a region with a relative low average level of education compared to the Oslo-region and the national average, just getting people interested in taking a higher education degree is important. This implies that the institutional mission is somewhat different than at other institutions.

The institution has a focus on recruitment and on first year students. All students who is offered a study place at the institution get a call to further urge them to start studying there. They have a programme called "førstesemester" (first semester) which integrate social and academic activities, to make the students feel at home and prosper at the institution, and which is organised by the institution together with student organisations and student services. They even have a special

pick-up service for students arriving at the local airport. It is also an ambition to structure the first semester teaching in a way which facilitates integrating, that students are supposed to work in groups and get to know each other.

The greatest challenge for the institution is not the admission system, but rather the educational level of the population in the region, as there is a lower share of student who complete academic upper secondary education and therefore a lower share of students who are eligible to apply to higher education. At the same time does the region need nurses, teachers and academically qualified graduates to fill positions in local business and industry as well as in the public sector.

Private institution

The informants from the private higher education institution reported that they can freely decide the number of students it accepts as long as there is available capacity in relationship to class size. However, the funding scheme for this institution differ a little from public institutions, as they get their governmental support based on completed degrees. The number of students admitted to the institution is not based on labour market demand, but rather on the expected market interest in the study programmes the institution offers. However, the institution aims at teaching which is relevant for the private sector, and they use private sector lecturers and private sector internships actively as part of the institutional teaching policy.

Even though this is a private institution, they still have to obey by the national admissions policy and the regulations that are in place, and as such they follow the same rules as all other institutions using NUCAS. In addition to this they are allowed to have their own grade requirement as well as required qualifications (including setting prerequisites in a specific previous education). However, they are not obliged to adhere to admissions quotas for certain groups. Therefore, there is no strategy related to recruiting specific groups.

The institution has an internal policy to enhance their international recruitment. The reason for this is a wish to increase the diversity in the student body, by increasing the number of incoming and outgoing students to the institution.

The institution has range of programmes for first year students, focused on social integration as well as academic integration and mastery of studies. Examples are an introductory week, with buddy activities (mainly social), but also activities more geared at students' academic and professional life, expectations management, which is a programme with emphasis on preparing students for the academic experience and what it means to be a student. Further they also have programmes aimed at study mastery and study techniques, individual follow-up of students and different forms of activities and measures to create student engagement. The institution is also implementing a survey to get more information on

how their students experience learning and the learning environment at the institution, as well as to enhance the use of learning across various digital platforms.

One of the strength of the Norwegian higher education system is the national regulations for admission, which all universities and colleges have to adhere by. The system ensures equal treatment of applicants and students can be sure that admission is done in a fair and just way. Another strength is NOKUT, the national quality agency, which ensures that the effectiveness and quality higher education is well documented. However, there are also weaknesses in the admission system. As a private institution they have been struggling with the fact that they until recently not had access to the national database of upper secondary grades, so their admission processes have been more difficult than necessary. However, this is changing now, as they now have access and the national database is integrated into the technical solutions of the institutional admissions system. Admission of international students is also challenging, as it may be hard to verify international applicants' diplomas and papers. Every year the institution conducts manual controls of original documents from international students.

3.6 Summary

The interviews with stakeholders indicate a common voice viewing the access policy in Norway as fair, and there are several aspects of the system pointing to this conclusion. Most programmes have similar rules for access and a well-established system which rarely changes ensures that the admission system has been constructed with fairness as clear intention.

Further, information about the system is also easily available and provided through public information resources owned by the school owners. All students also have access to advising services, which gives all an equal standing in getting various forms of information about access to higher education.

Changes to the admission rules are not done very often. When changes are made, this is decided by the government, and the proposed changes are sent out for a public hearing, where higher education institutions, student organisations etc have the right to state their opinion on the proposed changes. However, the current government is on the one hand opening up for more diversified rules of admission, proposing that institutions can set their own rules, which may have implications both for equality, efficiency and fairness. These proposed changes are based in politics rather than evidence as there has been no formal evaluation done through comparison with alternative ways of administering access to higher education.

In the argumentation from stakeholders it seems as if efficiency in the system is given a higher priority than issues of equality. The common access system

implemented in 1994 is seen as a very effective way of administering admission by all stakeholders. Though, if efficiency is ranked above and beyond equity by stakeholder is still unclear.

4 Fairness in practice: Individual perspectives

In this part, we present our findings of what pupils in their final year in upper secondary education and students in their first year of higher education in Norway experience as fairness in access to higher education.

4.1 Interviews with pupils in upper secondary education

Methodological note on the focus group interviews in upper secondary education

The interview session with pupils in upper secondary education began with a short introductory exercise to familiarise the pupils with the object of the focus group and the study. The pupils interviewed each other using a standardized questionnaire developed by the moderators based on the guidelines in the comparative research study (see chapter 1). The pupils had 4-5 minutes to find out as much as they could from their partner regarding why they wished to access higher education, including their reasons to attend higher education. They had four questions to answer: 1) Are you planning to study after completing upper secondary education? 2) What are you planning on studying? 3) Where would you like to study? and 4) Are you familiar with specific admission requirements? If yes, which requirements? The duo questionnaires were collected by the researchers as part of the data material.

The second part of the data collection session with pupils in upper secondary schools entailed a semi-structured interview covering six questions from the comparative study:

1. *What information have you received about higher education (HE) and when/how did you receive it?* (i.e. have you received information about specific HEIs/courses/the application process? When did you first receive this information? What has your school done to support you in making decisions? Have you had contact with HEIs? Have you sourced information online?)

2. *Who influenced your decision to apply to HE?* i.e. Parents? Friends? Teachers? Other school personnel?
3. *What were the most important factors that influenced your decisions regarding applying for HE?* (i.e. was it the information you received from schools or HEIs? Is it your career ambitions or interests in particular subject areas? Is it the influence of parents/teachers/friends etc.? Do any of these factors affect the way you approach the final months of schooling (e.g. working harder to get good results in a particular subject))
4. *Country specific questions* – How fair to you perceive the Norwegian system to be to you and your peers?
5. *How much do you think you understand the admissions system?* (i.e. do you know the steps necessary to progress from school to your chosen HEI and/or courses? Do you think the process is ‘fair’? Are there changes you think could be made to improve the system?)
6. *Do you have particular fears and concerns as you begin the process of preparing for HE admission?*

This part of the interview session was recorded on tape. In addition, both researchers took notes during the conversation.

In the final part of the session each participant was asked to give brief written answers to the following three questions:

- Did either of your parents go onto HE? Are you male or female?
- What are the most important factors influencing your decisions regarding applying for HE?
- How much do you think you understand the admissions system, especially The Norwegian Universities and Colleges Admission Service (Samordna Opptak)?

The purpose of this third part of the interview session was to capture the views of all participants’ individual experiences and judgments on fairness. The individual questionnaires were collected by the researchers as part of the data material.

The pupils were eager to participate and seemed motivated to discuss the topic of the study both with each other and with us as researchers. The interview session lasted approximately one hour with two researchers present. Both researchers have analysed the data presented below. The interview sessions followed a strict set of guidelines concerning ethical procedure of informed consent and information about data use and data storage.

Upper secondary education, school with high rate of transfer to higher education

The school we selected as a case illustrating a high rate of transfer to higher education is an urban school only providing academic programmes. It is well known for its excellent academic results. Most students who attend this school intend to access a university, and the school clearly states that they are preparing pupils for university, among other things by teaching “academic writing”.

Not surprisingly, in this school all pupils reported that they wished to continue with higher education. Answers varied regarding their choice of study, e.g. between degrees in engineering, music and business psychology. All pupils reported that they saw a bachelor’s degree as an absolute minimum, and that they at least aimed for a master’s degree, if not a PhD later in life. Out of the 9 pupils, 3 of them specified that they wanted to go abroad for an academic degree, or that they “had to” in order to get into a specific study not offered the same way in Norway as e.g. in Denmark or England. The pupils were quite familiar with general admission requirements for their study of choice. They were, however, not as sure when it came to specific admission requirements – in particular for foreign admission systems.

The pupils in this school expressed high expectation to being sufficiently informed, and that the format of the information they currently receive could have been better aligned with knowledge of pupils’ needs. For example, they mentioned that general assemblies with visits from higher education institutions are common, but that they did not care much for lectures by “cool pupils” or “old staff”. They would prefer well prepared one-on-one meetings tailored to their own needs. They also think they should be given information by school teachers and the school counsellors without having to ask for it individually. They claim to have received more information about higher education studies by friends and family, as well as on websites. A couple of the pupils mentioned that when they collect information about a higher education study program, they go straight to websites with university rankings to see which university is ranked higher making this more attractive to them. When it comes to information about the admission process they know they will receive more information later in the semester. They will receive this technical information through the school counsellor and maybe some of the teachers. All in all, most of them think information should be given sooner than what is offered today.

All pupils indicated that what their parents think is very important to them when it comes to this decision. They would like their parents’ approval. They appreciate that their parents have strong opinions about choices of professions and higher education, and they report that they respect and value their parents’ informed expertise. This gives them a realistic picture of a lifelong career tailored to their own ambitions, talents and interests. As one of the informants said: “No one

knows me and my context better than my parents anyway.” All agreed to this observation. Being provided with other options for influence by the researchers, the pupils claimed that public role models were not influential on this choice, but that they follow discussions on market economy in the media. They are concerned that they choose a profession where human labour will not be replaced with technology in the future. What friends may think of career choices is judged at somewhat important, but never as much as parental influence and involvement.

All of the pupils were also concerned that work should be meaningful – for themselves and for society. The work should challenge their competence and give opportunities for continual improvement of their own knowledge and skills. As one of them said: “One can always do better!” They would also be reluctant to choose a higher education leading to a job without much variation. They look for ways to travel and grow in spirit. They were particularly reluctant to mention income as an important factor in choosing a career. Materialistic aims should not be part of this discussion, as far as they were concerned. However, it was self-evident that they would be able to provide for a future life.

The pupils claimed to be well informed about The Norwegian Universities and Colleges Admission Service (Samordna Opptak) and knew the system to work well and be fair. They mentioned that the interview session took place “a bit early”, as detailed information about this would be given to them 3-4 months after our visit. They were confident that they would be sufficiently informed at that point.

The pupils expressed a general interest in discussing the question about the fairness of the system of access into higher education, putting the Norwegian system into perspective. They expressed skepticism to the perceived equality between good grades in school and being a professional in a more specialized field of work such as music or in a profession where “people-skills” may be just as important as knowledge of academic disciplines. As an example, they criticized the new admission requirement in mathematics for the Norwegian teacher education. Here they saw no immediate connection between being a good music teacher and the need for a B in upper secondary education mathematics. What they also saw as unfair is that the school system today puts too much weight on written exercises, i.e. that the assessment practices are too one-sided. Some had heard of research stating that this favours girls in upper secondary education. They were positive to the fact that grades may secure equal opportunities for all but questioned the side effects of subjective opinions among teachers when grading. When it came to possible unfair grading practices, the pupils mentioned that it was possible to get a “second opinion” from another teacher. They were, however, reluctant to challenge their main teacher in this way, and would normally refrain from this opportunity. They also added that they in general viewed their teachers as good teachers, and that their interest in putting the schools’ practices in perspectives

was not a serious criticism – in fact, they were very proud to be pupils at this school and were concerned to contribute to the school’s good image in the community.

The pupils did not have any particular concerns preparing for the HE admission process, except for having sufficient money to realize dreams and plans for studying abroad. All pupils answered that their parents had an academic degree. There was an exception where one parent was an artist, without a high graduate degree, which was not necessary to get a job a couple of decades ago. All pupils emphasized the need for meaningful work as the most important factor influencing their decision to apply for higher education – for themselves, for their families and for society.

Upper secondary education, school with lesser rate of transfer to higher education

The school we selected as a case illustrating a lesser rate of transfer to higher education is a rural school. It is described by the school counselor as having a lower rate of pupils going directly to higher education and possibly also to higher education in general. The pupils face more obstacles towards entering higher education than the group of pupils mentioned above, as fewer in this school have parents with academic degrees. In addition, as the school is remotely located from universities and university colleges, the pupils will have to move to attend higher education.

All pupils in the focus group at this school reported that they wished to continue with higher education. When it came to the question of what they were planning to study, answers naturally varied considerably from one individual pupil to another: “I have absolutely no clue”, “enter military service”, “psychology” or “a BA-degree”. Concerning the questions about place of study and specific admissions requirements, answers included “I don’t care where I study, it seems exciting no matter where I would go, but I have no clue about the admission requirements.” Another pupil answered: “Any English-speaking country”, while a couple were more specific and answered: “The University of Oslo” and “the Norwegian University of Science and Technology.” Of the 9 pupils, 2 of them specified that they wanted to go abroad for their BA-degree. With the exceptions of the pupil without “a clue”, all pupils were quite familiar with *general* admission requirements for their study of choice. They were, however, not as sure when it came to *specific* admission requirements. For admission to the military officer training, physical tests and theoretical requirements were mentioned. For a BA-degree in marketing at the University of Oslo, no specific grade point average was known to the pupil, just that a requirement was a “high GPA.” For the studies at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, the pupil knew that a specific level of mathematics was required as well as a GPA equivalent to a B.

The pupils claimed to be reasonably well informed about access to higher education. Partly through the school counsellor, but mostly through websites dedicated to the purpose of informing about admission systems from the national authorities. The pupils had also received information about school subjects that are required for certain studies from their first year in upper secondary education (two years prior to our interview session). They knew they were going to receive more information closer to the application deadline, but some were eager to learn more details at an earlier point in time. All in all, most of them expressed that information should be given sooner than what is offered today.

All pupils, except one, indicated that they were “on their own” when it came to decisions about accessing higher education. One pupil who had an alternative explanation, explained that her parents were highly involved in the decision to get a degree from higher education. The other pupils mentioned that their parents were more indirectly influential, through their own professions and support. However, they were quite clear that this is their own choice, and that they know that their parents will support them should they choose such different occupations as “a priest or a taxi driver”, as one pupil put it. All agreed to experiencing this kind of parental support.

Concerning the most important factors influencing decisions regarding applying for higher education, the pupils were very reflective in their dialogue and comments to each other. They were all concerned that working life is long, and that it is important to experience all those years as meaningful and as part of lifelong learning. Good colleagues and opportunities to travel were priorities mentioned by most. In the sense that income was important, it was mentioned as part of being a reliable citizen, partner and parent in a future situation.

The pupils were well informed about the Norwegian application system provided by The Norwegian Universities and Colleges Admission Service (Samordna Opptak) and knew the system to work well and be fair. They mentioned that the interview was conducted “a bit early”, as detailed information about this system would be given to them 3-4 months after our visit. They were confident that they would be sufficiently informed at that point.

It was difficult for the pupils in upper secondary education to answer the question about a fair system of access in Norway, without comparative international knowledge of differing admission systems. Therefore, we put the Norwegian system into perspective for them by contrasting our own system to that of some other countries, such as the USA, South Korea, Germany and England. It was then more apparent to our group of pupils what we were talking about and trying to get their judgment on. The pupils felt that the Norwegian system based on grades give teachers too much power. Some of the pupils reported that they viewed grading to be unfair, and that it is also unfair that only some pupils are drawn to participate

in national examinations. When talking about solutions to perceived unfair grading practices, pupils said that in theory it was possible to get a “second opinion” from another teacher at the school. In practice, however, they were hesitant to do this, as they feared they would lose their teachers’ support and trust. The pupils discussed alternatives to the Norwegian admission system, and a couple suggested interviews as part of the admission processes. Some protested to this, concerned that this would be based on very personal preferences by the people from the higher education institutions. In this part of the interview session, it became clear that although pupils agree that the Norwegian system of access in general is to be perceived as fair, what counts as fair is not well defined (cf. chapter 1.1.). The pupils did not have any particular concerns preparing for the HE admission process but were naturally excited and a bit anxious about moving away from home for the first time.

In the individual part of the interview session, most pupils reported that it was natural for them to apply to higher education as their parents had an academic background. Only one pupil answered that his parents did not have a degree from a university or college. Another pupil reported that one of his parents had a higher education degree, while the other was a farmer without a degree from a higher education institution.

All pupils emphasized the need for meaningful work as influencing their choice of applying for higher education. Level of income was also mentioned. This question showed that pupils put their own interests, talents and ambitions first, and mention the alignment to parental guidance and values second. The need in society for different jobs was not in the forefront in these answers at this level.

The pupils who were most unsure about what to study after upper secondary education, mentioned a need for more information from higher education institutions about career opportunities. The majority of pupils agreed that they had sufficient information about the admissions system in itself. One pupil, however, answered: “Neither yes nor no”, specifying a need to know more about the labour market and the reality of a typical workday/workload. 4 pupils answered “no” – i.e. that they did not have sufficient information. Their reasons for answering in the negative was related to application systems, deadlines, how many schools they ought to apply to and admission requirements. The pupils did, however, believe that a lot of their remaining questions would be answered during the upcoming months. The school counsellor also told us that this kind of practical training in applying is given shortly before the application deadline, i.e. 4 months after our visit to the school. The pupils also pointed out that if we had had the opportunity to visit them in the Spring semester, they were certain they would have been given more information from the school.

Upper secondary education, school with lower rate of transfer to higher education and a high percentage of pupils with a minority background

After the first two required cases, we decided to add another school with a lower level of transfer to higher education among those who have graduated from upper secondary education. This urban east-end school is known for a high percentage of pupils with minority background. The school also offers a program for pupils having a vocational education to take a general program qualifying for higher education studies. We asked in particular to meet with some of these pupils, as a complement to our two former cases. We started the interview session with a conversation with two school counsellors, before we met with 3 pupils; 1 boy and 2 girls. The pupils were selected by the school on a volunteer basis.

All pupils reported that they wished to continue with higher education. Regarding the question about what they were planning of studying, answers these pupils provided deviated from the former groups, as all were very certain about their future career paths. Two of the pupils wanted to get into pharmacy, and one into computer engineering. They were reasonably certain about the institution of their choice as well as the particular admissions requirements. This knowledge and certainty was stated to be related to their earlier experience in a vocational programme.

The pupils were eager to tell us they had received excellent information – both upon arrival at the school and continuously throughout their studies. This was important to them, as they were more or less creating their own individual paths within an otherwise standardized system. They said that the school always had a solution for them if they noticed they needed extra study points – either they would be guided to take this in a private system or the school would create a school subject to make sure they had a qualifying offer. All in all, they were very pleased with the opportunities for guidance and help.

The pupils had already acquired work-life experience or practice from the first year in upper secondary education, so in a way that was the major influence to continue with studies. Also, their family were important for all three. Their experience from the labour market was mentioned as a decisive factor of influence on their decision to apply for higher education. Having had the experience of working as an assistant, one of them wished to become her own boss. Also, a higher education would enable her to go deeper into processes of the profession and not just perform instrumental tasks. Another reason here was a steady income, being able to provide for a future family.

Similar to the previous groups of pupils, this group also claimed to be well informed about the Norwegian application system provided by The Norwegian Universities and Colleges Admission Service (Samordna Opptak), and that they knew the system to work well. These pupils were, however, a bit concerned that there

was a difference between learning at work, learning in the classroom, learning at home and what they had to perform in a written form in an exam. Within this group, the concept of fairness seemed to be more discussed in relation to issues of inclusion. Overall, they seemed to agree that the Norwegian system is fair for all but questioned what counts as 'fair' and 'unfair' for all. Accordingly, these pupils were more concerned than the two former groups to get good enough grades to get in to their higher education institution of choice. They were also concerned that they would lose motivation in the admission process if they got a B or a C in the upcoming exam. Then they knew they would not get in to their desired programme and would have to take a private exam – which would compete with their time spent on working and earning money. This dilemma was not mentioned by either of the two former groups of pupils.

In this school, pupils reported that a high share of parents did not have a higher education graduate degree. Similar to the other two groups, however, all pupils emphasized the need for meaningful work. Level of income was also mentioned. The need in society for different jobs was not in the forefront in their answers.

The students reported to have enough information about the admissions system also in their individual written replies on the final questionnaire and repeated the fact that they did not think they needed more information.

4.2 Interviews with students in higher education

Methodological note on the focus group interviews in higher education

The interview sessions with the students had the same structure at the sessions with the pupils. It began with a short introductory exercise to familiarise the pupils with the object of the focus group and the study. The pupils interviewed each other using a standardized questionnaire developed by the moderators based on the guidelines in the comparative research study (see chapter 1). The students had 4-5 minutes to find out as much as they could from their partner regarding their reasons for applying for higher education, their initial experiences of higher education, and how it has differed at all from the expectations of higher education they had before commencing their studies.

The second part of the data collection session with students likewise entailed a semi-structured interview covering six questions from the comparative study:

1. *Do you feel you had enough information regarding HE to support you in the application process?* (i.e. Did you trust the information you received? What other types of information would have been helpful?)
2. *Who influenced you the most in applying for HE?* (i.e. in the end, how important was advice you got from parents? How important was advice received from

teachers? How important was guidance e.g. from school counsellors (on academic and non-academic support))

3. *What were the most important factors in helping you make the decisions regarding applying for HE? (i.e. How important was the influence of parents/teachers/friends? What were the key deciding factors? How did the decision affect your last months at secondary school?)*
4. *Country specific question - How fair to you perceive the Norwegian system to be to you and your peers?*
5. *What are your views on the admission system in hindsight? (i.e. Was it difficult? Was it fair? What could be improved?)*
6. *What are the biggest worries you had at the start of your studies? (i.e. Are you worried about money, is financial aid shaping the decisions you are taking now? Are you worried about your ability to succeed academically?)*

This part of the interview session was recorded on tape. In addition, both researchers took notes during the conversation.

In the final part of the session each participant was asked to give brief written answers to the following three questions:

- *Did either of your parents go onto HE? Are you male or female?*
- *What were the most important factors in helping you make the decisions regarding applying for HE?*
- *What are your views on the admission system in hindsight?*

The purpose of this third part of the interview session was once again to capture the views of all participants' individual experiences and judgments on fairness. The individual questionnaires were collected by the researchers as part of the data material.

The students were eager to participate and seemed motivated to discuss the topic of the study both with each other and with us as researchers. The interview session lasted approximately one hour with two researchers present. Both researchers have analysed the data presented below. The interview sessions followed a strict set of guidelines concerning ethical procedure of informed consent and information about data use and data storage.

Higher education, university, selective programme

As an example of a highly selective programme in a highly selective institution we conducted focus groups at a university. The case was an introductory course for students of medicine/odontology.

To the question if this was their first choice of study four students answered yes and two no. The ones who answered yes to this question mentioned that this particular institution was close to home and family, that the city itself is attractive

and that the university is renowned. For the study programme itself, reasons included a wish “to work with teeth and people.” Two of the students answered that they were not quite sure why they chose this study: “I simply wanted to give this a try” and “I tried something else before this, and that didn’t work out very well.” Four of the students claimed that the experience so far matched whatever expectations they had of higher education before they started. One student reported that the study was less demanding and more motivating than expected, while another reported that it was more demanding and less motivating than expected.

The students reported that they had enough information about higher education to support them in the application process, but they reflected somewhat on the upper secondary school system and how it works. They mentioned that information should be given in other formats and to different times. What could be included in this information is the information that life experience between upper secondary education and higher education is of great value. The pressure to go directly into higher education is overwhelming for some, and some of these students mentioned that a small “break” in life has given them invaluable insights they would not get from academic studies alone.

When it came to the question of who influenced them the most in applying for higher education, they referred to their own interests, particularly from experiences in working practically in parents’ dentist offices or similar. Money or salary was not a reason given for applying to this type of higher education degree. The most important factors helping them to make the decisions regarding applying for higher education was the same for most in this group: “If you want to go into medicine, there is no alternative way in.”

All students in this group mentioned that The Norwegian application system provided by NUCAS (Samordna Opptak) seems to work well. They viewed the admissions system to be fair and the practicalities easy to manage.

The biggest worries they experienced at the start of their studies were related to being enrolled in a highly selective program in a less selective institution: All mentioned the gap between upper secondary education studies and higher education studies. The fact that they were coming from an organized learning environment with teacher-structured lessons and homework to a learning environment where they felt on their own.

All students in this group had parents with an academic degree except one. Only two of them came to this study programme directly from upper secondary school, and the others had one or several years behind them with Folkehøgskole (Norwegian boarding schools with no grades, no rigid curriculum and no exams, but with additional study points for access to higher education), military service, a first year of higher education in another study programme or worklife experience.

The most important factors in helping these students make the decisions regarding applying for higher education was varied, including “high status occupation”, “meaningful job”, “safe future”, “wanting to work with people”, “caring for others”, and “trying something new.”

On the third and final question asking if they had sufficient information on the admission system seen in hindsight, all answered “yes.”

Higher education, university, less selective programme

As an example of a less selective programme in a highly selective institution we conducted focus groups at a university with students from an introduction course open for all new students across different programmes. As this was a group having classes at the end of the day, recruitment was challenging. We were lucky to recruit two female students from this group.

To the question if this was their first choice of study both students answered yes. As for the first group these students also mentioned that this particular institution was close to home and family, that the city itself is attractive and that the university is renowned. It was important to them that the university was “better” than a university college. Another reason for choosing this particular university was knowledge that they have leading researchers in the students’ fields of academic interest. The experience so far seemed to have matched an expectation of what to be expected in the life of a scholarly community.

All in all, both students felt they had had enough information to support them in their application process through the university website. One of the students came from abroad, and naturally had a bit more difficulty making sure the former educational background matched Norwegian requirements. But all in all, this seems to have been no problem.

Regarding who influenced them the most in applying, the clear answer was family and a general academic interest. The most important factors in helping them make the decisions for applying, was that they “only” had a general study program from upper secondary school. With this diploma it is “not possible” to get a job without a higher education degree. Most importantly to them, the students had never considered NOT going into higher education. The aim for both was a PhD.

As for the former group of students, these also mentioned that The Norwegian application system provided by NUCAS (Samordna Opptak) seems to work well. They viewed the admissions system to be fair and the practicalities easy to manage – even from abroad. They were a bit concerned that all potential students get enough information in general that would help them match their academic potential with educational opportunities. As such, these students dwelled more into the topic of fairness as a concept than the former group.

These students had no worries about higher education in particular. The students reflected on the fact that they belong to a privileged group of young persons in the world. They have never experienced lack of money at home and have had parents who enjoy knowledge development and community work. It seems to have been self-evident for them to “pass” the access system and complete their studies. Right now, the aim was not work, as they stated, but rather enjoying the studies themselves, i.e. listening to well-known professors, discussing concepts and theories with fellow students, and making new friends from all parts of the world.

Higher education, university college, selective programme

As an example of a highly selective programme in a less selective institution we conducted focus groups at a university college. The particular case was physiotherapy education. This is the programme that is most competitive to get admitted to (a GPA of 49-55 on average is required, of a maximum of about 60). Recruitment was also challenging in this case, but we ended up with a group of four students.

To the question if this was their first choice of study two students answered yes and two no. The ones who answered yes to this question mentioned that this particular institution was urban and deemed a good institution for pursuing an interest in working with human beings and the body – something that “had always been an interest.” Those answering no used the exact same reason as the student stating it was a first choice – it is urban and a good institution for this particular study. Three of the four reported that experience match expectations, while one student stated that the study program exceeded all her previous expectations.

The next question regarded the information acquired to support the students in the application process. These students were a bit older and more experienced than those in the former group, and as such more time had passed since they had been in upper secondary school and in a formal program. They did remember they had some information, but that it probably could have been more targeted to match both work-life and their own academic potential. They still felt they had enough information through different institutions’ websites.

What was influencing them in applying for higher education was life experience - that higher education is important to get a job. They also mentioned their families as an important influence in this decision-making process. As for all groups – both the beforementioned in upper secondary school as well as the former in higher education, to work on something meaningful was seen as a major drive in applying for higher education. They also stressed the need to get a steady job and a reasonably income. They mentioned that they were unsure about the labour market after they graduate, and that this uneasiness influenced them a bit. Still, they were all certain that this was a right choice of higher education study for them. They agreed

that this study programme was for those “who are doing this authentically, with a sincere wish to help people.”

As for the former group of students, these also mentioned that The Norwegian application system provided by NUCAS (Samordna Opptak) seems to work well. They viewed the admissions system to be fair and the practicalities easy to manage. In accordance with their view that this programme should be for idealistic people aiming to help others, they expressed some concern that high grades may not be the most important indicator of fairness. Working so closely with people, other personal qualifications than academic merit may be overlooked in such a system as the Norwegian focusing on grades from upper secondary school.

Concerning potential worries, they likened the group of students from medicine/odontology as they mentioned the gap between studies in upper secondary school and higher education studies: The fact that they were coming from an organized learning environment with teacher-structured lessons and homework to a learning environment where they felt on their own.

In the individual part of the interview session all students marked that their parents had an academic degree. Information was mentioned as a primary factor in helping people to make decisions regarding applying for higher education. As one student wrote: “Lack of information can close your eyes for matching study programmes and good institutions. Sufficient information will let you make more informed choices. In that sense, information – in whatever form – is a major factor in helping students make decision about accessing higher education.”

Higher education, university college, less selective programme

As an example of a less selective programme in a less selective institution we conducted focus groups at a university college – the case being Kindergarten teacher education. This programme has a particularly low grade point average to get admission, and there are no extra requirements for access. There were four female students in this group, recruited by the student advisor.

To the first question asking if this was their first choice of study all answered yes. They mentioned that this institution was close to home, that they had good experience with this particular university college from other encounters. It was also mentioned that this institution is known to be a good place to study for this profession. Reasons provided for attending this study program was “to work with children”, and “to get a secure and steady job.” However, only one out of the four stated that the experience matched the expectations. One reported to have had no particular prior expectations, while the two others reported that the studies were much more demanding than they thought. This was especially the case when it came to academic writing.

As for the former group these students were also more experienced. Thus, they had no direct memory of what their career guidance in upper secondary school had been like. As for the former group of students, these also mentioned that The Norwegian application system provided by NUCAS (Samordna Opptak) seems to work well. They viewed the admissions system to be fair and the practicalities easy to manage.

When it came to the factors that influenced them to apply for this programme, those with most years of work experience from a Kindergarten said that were influenced by their pedagogical leaders in the Kindergarten. Other than that, life situation and family were the major contributors to their own decision-making. In Norway, they mentioned, it is not possible to get a steady job as a pedagogue in a Kindergarten without a formal education. This means that without such a specific degree you will have to apply for your “own job” each year, in constant competition to outsiders qualified for “your job”. Also, the wage difference is considerable with or without a formal qualification. This was mentioned as the major contributing factor for staying in the programme, even though the academic writing was challenging them too much.

For this group, two of the students answered yes to the question if their parent had an academic degree, while one answered no. In one case only one of the parents had a higher education degree.

Their biggest worries were not surprisingly the academic writing. They already had two essays to deliver, and the course in academic writing was placed after those tasks in the curriculum. They would have preferred to attend such an important course at the beginning of the semester.

4.3 Summary

The analyses of the data from the interviews confirm results from earlier studies on higher education access, especially when it comes to social differences. Even though there are many public sources of information on higher education, and most schools have an advisor, parental guidance and support is still important. Particularly in cases where parents have higher education, their role as a source of information on access to higher education is deemed essential. Concern about income or financial resources is not as visible a motivator for accessing higher education as the concern for a meaningful future working life and possibilities for variety and lifelong learning.

In summary, the interviews with pupils in their final year of upper secondary school and students in their first year of higher education indicate that all participants in this particular study find the Norwegian system of access to higher education to be fair. Or – the more correct conclusion is perhaps to state that they all

consider it unfair to some, but of all thinkable solutions it is still the most fair system to all. Even though the suggestion of various alternative modes of admission came up (particularly interview), the groups usually concluded that admission based on only grades was the fairest system. Hence, this implies that the objectivity of the established shared rules of fairness seems to be acknowledged by all.

However, this is also partly linked to the position of the student. All students interviewed have already gained admission to higher education, and they are thus a selected group. What is seen as fair and unfair is not an issue that is dominating the pupils' and students' discussions and concerns. Rather, it seems that through the shared rules of fairness the challenges of one-sided testing and what this may entail for inequality are accepted as inevitable. These findings seem to indicate a need to look further into what counts as fair in a system more or less exclusively based on academic merit as we only have had a small, strategic sample available within the frames of this study.

Still, when we examine the Norwegian case in comparison to the other national cases in the comparative study our data is part of, we see that the Norwegian system shows a particular strength in having a clear set of rules of 'fairness' and a well working admissions systems that allows people at the policy and practice level to communicate well in ensuring equity in higher education access.

5 Conclusions

The Norwegian admission system is centrally organised through a common application portal and grades from upper secondary education is the main measure to compete for a study place. Generally, both the structure and aligned measures are seen as fair, efficient and effective by all parties: stakeholders as well as students both in upper secondary education and higher education.

There are several elements of the system which contributes to it being deemed fair. The first is that it is perceived *transparent*, with information generally available through public resources. Students with educated parents do have an edge in the sense that they can get parental advice in addition to the publicly available information, but still the intention of the various information sites is to put everyone on equal footing when considering applying to higher education. The second element is the *stability* of the system, that it has been the same for a long time. Students therefore have access to information about the grade point average required for that programme and how stable these criteria have been over the past few years. The *common rules for access*, as it is generally the completion of an upper secondary diploma which gives access to higher education, is a third commonality which contribute to perceived fairness.

Institutions, as well as students and national authorities, see few other good ways of organizing higher education admission than the current system. Some suggest using interviews but most also comment that this likely would contribute to more social inequality in admissions, or at least would introduce new elements in the evaluation that can be considered less “objective” than grades, as all other ways of doing admission is seen as introducing elements of subjectivity in the evaluation. It would also require more resources and therefore be a less efficient and effective method than the current one.

In conclusion, there is strong agreement among stakeholders, pupils and students that admission based on grades is an efficient, effective and also equitable way of structuring the system of access to higher education. Hence, the system is seen as fair to all parties. Although all informants agree that there are elements of unfairness in the way pathways to higher education is governed by academic merit, they still consider the current alternative as the most fair.

The issues of effectiveness and equity are dominating the perceptions of the pupils and students in their answers, while in the argumentation from stakeholders, it seems as if efficiency and effectiveness in the system are given a higher priority than issues of equality. The common access system implemented in 1994 is seen as a very effective way of administering admission by all stakeholders. Though, if efficiency is ranked above and beyond equity by stakeholders is still unclear. This is also an issue that must be seen in context, as the Norwegian education system is a comprehensive and reasonably equitable system in the first place. However, the current system is under pressure: The conservative government has, through a bill before the Parliament (Stortingsprop. 64) Spring 2018, opened up for institutions to set their own admission requirements, which are stricter (e.g. a particular subject from upper secondary school or a particular grade).

Changes to the admission rules are not done very often. When changes are made, this is decided by the government, and the proposed changes are sent out for a public hearing, where e.g. higher education institutions and student organizations have the right to state their opinion on the proposed changes.

Statements from the hearing process indicate that institutions are to a large degree skeptical to the proposed changes and call for coordination and more guidance. The suggestion did not get the majority of votes in the Parliament Summer 2018. Our findings also show that these concerns are already attended to in the current system. The discussion about what is a fair access system is, however, still ongoing.

Compared to other higher education systems, the Norwegian one has a quite high rate of non-completion among undergraduates. The majority of students leaving a study programme before degree completion do so to transfer to another programme and are thus not dropouts, as they do not leave the system (Hovdhaugen 2009). After the introduction of the Quality reform in 2003, there has been a strong focus on student success in Norwegian higher education. As a result, institutions are working constantly to maintain and improve their programmes for social and academic integration of new students. All institutions have these types of programmes and have had them for quite a while, and they are seen as an important part of their work to enhance retention (Hovdhaugen, Frølich & Aamodt 2013). The interviews with institutions show that this is still seen as very important, and even though different institutions have chosen different ways to organise this they all prioritise the work. This perceived fairness of the system, in addition to the work done on integrating new students, enhances the image of an equitable admissions system which focuses more on students' potential to succeed irrespective of their social background.

Provisions in Norwegian higher education is to some extent driven by student demand, if there is a high demand in a particular field, if applications are going up more study places will be made available to accommodate to student choice (Grøgaard & Aamodt 2006). At the same time, institutions are labour market sensitive in the sense that they continuously evaluate the market for their programmes. If a programme has no applications or low application rates for a long time, programmes may be closed down. Some programmes are more labour market sensitive than others, and in these programmes an economic downturn may affect both application rate and labour market chances for student after degree completion. For example, is it visible in the data that the economic downturn affects students' applications patterns. At the same time, institutions are stating that it is hard to reallocate study places within the university. It may be a difficult decision to take study places from one field or programme and give to another. Therefore, the process of analysing this is usually allocated to the faculty or department level, as they must size their programmes themselves. The partly performance-based funding ensures that programmes that are too small or do not have enough applicant over time will slowly "die", as they are not economically viable. At the same time, some programmes may have a special status, as the only or one of the few in the country in that specific field, and these programmes are usually protected, even though they may have few applicants. However, for these programmes the institution or the government have to allocate money to restore the programme.

But all in all, the Norwegian admissions system can be seen as effective since new demands of society and the labour market are reflected in the study programme portfolio of institutions. If this economic approach to educational selection is fair to the individual student's interests, ambitions and talents is another question that would need further research to answer.

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