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PLATFORM ON WELFARE POLICY

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WELFARE POLICY PLATFORM

1. Introduction

Higher education benefits for both the society and the individual. Everyone should enjoy the same fundamental right to a higher education. This should be free of charge, with good financial support schemes and welfare services in place to assist students. The government has a responsibility to ensure that everyone has equal access to education.

2. Responsibility and management

Responsibility for student welfare services is shared between the government, higher education institutions, the municipalities where these are located and student welfare organisations. The services offered by student welfare organisations should be considered a supplement to public welfare services, not a replacement of these. This, because student welfare services target the specific needs that students have. While the responsibility for administrating these services lies with student welfare organisations, the government has the primary responsibility to fund them.

2.1 Higher education institutions

It is in the interest of higher education institutions to enhance the welfare of their students, in collaboration with both student welfare organisation/s and the local municipality. All higher education institutions should provide a free health clinic as part of the student welfare organisation's welfare services. Such clinics should be considered to be non-profitable services offered by student welfare organisations.

2.2 Student welfare organisations

Student welfare organisations must ensure that services are freely available and affordable, accommodating the needs of the students. These needs must be identified together with the students at a local level.

All higher education institutions which are approved by the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) must be affiliated with a student welfare organisation.

Student welfare organisations are funded by the government, supplemented with the proceeds from their own activities and the students' term fees.

Student welfare organisations are non-profit companies and are therefore exempt from the following taxes and expenses: tax liability on their primary activities, value-added tax on sales at student canteens, property tax and stamp duty, as well as municipal fees.

Student welfare organisations should also be permitted to run activities aimed at people other than students. All proceeds from such activities should go towards student welfare.

Student welfare organisations must be run by students and their resolutions able to be decided by a simple majority. Each student welfare organisation is responsible for training the student representatives on their own board.

The Ministry of Education and Research, together with the National Council of Student Welfare Organisations (*Samskipnadsrådet*), have a joint responsibility for laying the foundations for a good standard of education.

Significant changes in structure and operations should be carried out with the students' interests in mind. It is up to student welfare organisations to decide whether services should be merged or whether responsibility for individual services should be shared between organisations. Mergers should always be carried out with the aim of maintaining good quality welfare services for students, and must not compromise these.

Term fees are paid by the students for the benefit of all students. The aim of the fee is to cover expenses associated with student welfare needs in each individual welfare organisation. While it is the students in each organisation who set the fee, changes to fees must be approved by the Ministry of Education and Research.

Long-distance students and students engaged in professional training are normally entitled to pay term fees to the closest student welfare organisation to where they live (or have training). A student with affiliations to several educational institutions only has to pay term fees to one student welfare organisation.

2.3 The municipalities and county administration

The municipalities in which higher education institutions are located have a responsibility for organising services for the students living there.

These municipalities must co-operate with student democracies at the institutions within their borders. A strategy for welfare services must be prepared together with the student democracies.

The county administration also has a responsibility for student welfare, primarily in terms of organising public transport adapted to the needs of students. Students should be entitled to a minimum discount of 50% on fares for public transport.

Municipalities and county administrations in regions where higher education institutions are located should reflect their status as student municipalities, inviting student democracies to comment on plans and issues which affect students. There should be student discounts on entry fees to cultural and sporting events.

Student housing and other real estate properties which are owned or allocated by the student welfare organisations should be exempt from property tax. This does not apply to property which is not directly connected to student welfare, and which is primarily intended to provide a source of income.

2.4 The development of student welfare

Students, student welfare organisations, higher education institutions, the government and local authorities should co-ordinate their activities to ensure that welfare services for the student population are integrated, and address current needs.

All higher education institutions hold a survey to map their students' health and well-being every fourth year, in collaboration with student welfare organisations.

Every fifth year, a national survey examining living conditions among students in Norway is carried out. The Ministry of Education and Research has responsibility for the survey, but students, via the NSO, are involved in formulating the questions. The survey is carried out by an independent party.

Government funds which are provided to student welfare organisations in connection with mergers must be increased significantly, to ensure that such changes are carried out in a manner which safeguards student welfare services for the present and future.

3. Student finances

Equal rights to education is a fundamental principle in Norwegian higher education policy. The government has the primary responsibility for opening up higher education to everyone, regardless of their socio-economic status. Tuition provided free of charge, financial support through the Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund (Lånekassen), student housing, integrated health services, child care, exercise facilities, and student discounts are all important factors which help make it possible to pursue full-time studies.

There must not be tuition fees or user charges at public higher education institutions in Norway. The NSO uses the term 'user charges' to refer to school fees and expenses charged by the education institution in addition to term fees. This includes fees connected to obligatory activities, copyright, copy expenses, or mandatory purchases of study materials.

The education institutions must have all study materials available for loan. Purchases of study materials should be covered by financial support from the Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund, and all books on the syllabus should be available at a low, fixed price. Students at both public and private education institutions who incur extra costs as a result of professional training should be compensated by their institution.

3.1 Educational grants and loans

Educational grants and loans must provide an equal opportunity for higher education, in accordance with the actual costs of living for students.

The NSO believes that financial support for students should be universal, and is therefore opposed to financial incentive schemes being offered on an individual basis, beyond the ordinary conversion of loans to grants. Consequently, the NSO is not in favour of increased conversion of loans to grants conditional on completing courses within prescribed time limits or attending selected courses.

3.1.1 The Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund

Educational grants and loans should be distributed by the government via the Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund, and this should be formalised in law. The Loan Fund must be run by a Board. There should be student representatives on both the Board and the Complaints Committee. The services of the Loan Fund should be readily accessible, and assistance and information should be provided free of charge.

There should be no age limit placed on travel grants provided by the Loan Fund for trips within Norway and the Nordic Region. Students who have registered a change of address as a consequence of moving to the location of their education institution must still be allowed to apply for travel grants. The travel grants should be indexed to a greater extent to the actual costs of travel, as opposed to the number of kilometres travelled.

The Loan Fund must establish an independent, specialist commission for reporting and inquiry, with the authority to make recommendations concerning the effectiveness of the support scheme, and how it can best be developed to protect and further its primary aims.

3.1.2 Determining the payment of educational grants and loans

It should be possible to live on educational grants and loans without having to do paid work or seek other forms of financial support. The sum of the grant and loan must reflect the cost of living for the student, and must therefore be indexed to the basic rate (G) in the National Insurance Scheme (*Folketrygden*). The annual sum of combined grants and loans should correspond to 1.5 x G, distributed over eleven months. The Loan Fund usually pays a higher amount in the first month of the term. We believe that the system should be more flexible, allowing students to choose to have the sum paid in equal amounts or all at once.

Students should have the right to educational grants and loans for a period of eight years, and they should be able to apply for an extension to this period if they can prove their progression has been delayed for special reasons. Students who study part time for a degree, should have the right to grants and loans over a ten-year period. Full-time students who are delayed in their studies by 60 credits (which normally represents one year), should still be allowed to receive an educational loan. Under special circumstances, the education institution must make adjustments to the course progression plan of the individual student, to prevent them from quitting. This should allow them to complete their studies in a satisfactory manner. In such cases, the student should still be able to receive the educational loan, even if the delay extends beyond 60 credits.

3.1.3 Conversion scheme

There should be a two-part scheme of financial support, in which 60% of the educational loan is converted to a grant as the student earns credits.

3.1.4 Income limits and means testing for educational grants

A limit must be set for how much income a student may earn before this affects the amount of educational loan which is converted to a grant. This limit must be regulated each year, in accordance with general developments in wages.

The educational grant and allowance for dependants must be means tested in connection with personal income and net income from capital. Interest earned on home saving accounts for young people (BSU) is not included in this sum. Non-realizable assets should

not affect the conversion of loans to grants.

3.1.5 Financial support for studies abroad

All students should have the opportunity to study abroad. The financial framework of the Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund must make it possible to complete full or part-time studies abroad, without having to finance this privately.

Allowance must also be made for students to carry out part or all of their education at institutions that demand tuition fees. The portion of the grant which is allocated towards tuition fees should be the same for those studying for both bachelor or master degrees.

The Loan Fund should provide support for all of the years spent studying for a bachelor degree abroad, both three and four year courses.

There should be a financial support scheme which provides funding for up to two semesters (one year together) in language studies prior to beginning a degree abroad. It doesn't matter if the language course is undertaken in a different country to the degree, as long as the same language is used.

3.1.6. Financial support schemes for students with children

Students who have children or give birth while studying should receive parental allowance, dependant allowance, parental benefits and have the right to parental leave. These rights also apply to students who receive support from an employer.

The Loan Fund must allow for extensions to parental allowance in cases where it is necessary.

Students with children should receive financial support equivalent to 2 x G over a twelve-month period, until the youngest child is twelve years old.

Students who give birth after completing their studies but before they have worked for six months, should have the right to support from the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV).

It should only be necessary to have been registered as a student for three months before one can receive a parental allowance.

3.1.7. Students with disabilities

The Loan Fund must provide financial support especially tailored to the needs of students who are disabled, ensuring that they have the same opportunities for higher education as other students.

Students with disabilities should receive financial support for twelve months. The amount of support they receive should be indexed to the basic rate (G) of the National Insurance Scheme, equivalent to 2.5 x G.

3.1.8 The repayment process

Students must be allowed to choose whether to have fixed or variable interest on their educational loans. Interest shall not begin to accumulate while they are still studying. Repayment of the educational loan shall not start before six months have elapsed since completion of studies. It should be possible to apply for 36 deferments of payment during

the loan repayment period without having to give a reason. Deferments beyond this must be means tested. Interest on educational loans should not begin to accumulate until six months after the student has completed studies. The Loan Fund should grant interest-free periods in accordance with means tests.

Repayment of educational loans should take into consideration low-income earners. For those whose income falls below the Loan Fund's limit for an interest-free period, it should be possible to cancel part of the loan. This scheme must, however, result in lower individual repayments, not just a shorter loan repayment period.

The educational loan should be cancelled completely after a period of twenty years with low income. The income limit should be calculated out from factors such as the current poverty line and the size of the household.

The Loan Fund must not charge a premium on interest to cover the costs of defaults on loans and running costs.

The economic model used for calculating interest on the educational loan should allow for adjustments to the level of deductions. This is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Research.

Students who take on compensated, sabbatical positions should be allowed an interest-free period for the time in which they have served. There should be no time limit placed on this arrangement.

3.1.9 Extensions to the period of financial support

The NSO believes that all students should have the opportunity to study or participate in summer courses. The Loan Fund should provide support to students who wish to follow this option. A portion of this support should be converted from a loan to a grant when the course is completed, in accordance with the Loan Fund's general conditions for conversion of educational loans to grants.

3.2 Calculation of points for the old age pension and eligibility for welfare services

Students should be given pension points also for the time spent studying in higher education institutions. A student who completes sixty credits should receive the same number of points as someone who earns an annual income of 1.5 x G.

When calculating other welfare services, education should count at the same rate – that is, sixty credits is worth 1.5 x G income.

3.3 Reading lists, study materials and equipment

Student welfare organisations on campus should offer study materials to students. Students who must purchase equipment and materials to use in obligatory tuition should receive a grant to cover these costs. It is the responsibility of the educational institution to ensure that students do not have to pay for photocopies. Reading lists and study materials should be available to all students at a reasonable price; an important condition of this is that specialist books should have a fixed price. All books on the reading list should be available on loan at the institution's library. Student welfare organisations' own bookshops should offer the best prices to students, and develop electronic and digitised study materials.

3.4 Government discounts

Student discount on train fares should be increased to 50% on all journeys.

4. Student housing

Provision of student housing is an effective political means to secure equal rights to education, regardless of students' geographical, economic and social situation.

4.1 Building and availability

The national degree of coverage for student housing should be at least 20%; however, local conditions must also be taken into consideration. In areas with a limited amount of housing on the private market, the degree of coverage should be higher. Until this goal is reached, at least 3,000 new student residences need to be built each year.

There should be a housing guarantee for international students, but in special cases, this must be evaluated against the student welfare organisation's total coverage. The housing guarantee should be seen as a part of the institution's investment in internationalisation. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the institution to secure housing for international students.

Each individual student welfare organisation needs to have guidelines for deciding which students to prioritise when allocating student housing.

Student welfare organisations should have a common practice when following up waiting lists.

4.2 Funding for student housing

The student welfare organisations must receive funding from the government to build housing for students. Inexpensive loans and subsidies help to keep down living costs for students. The student welfare organisations should be the main supplier of student housing. Student housing foundations and other non-commercial operators may supplement the student welfare organisations, and should be eligible to apply for government subsidies to build student housing.

Government funding should cover 50% of the total costs of buying and developing the land and construction on student housing projects.

Student housing projects must be quality assured by the Norwegian National Housing Bank (*Husbanken*). The cost framework and government funding for building student housing must be sufficient to guarantee good quality while keeping the final rental price as low as possible. The cost framework must be adjusted in accordance with changes in price and wage inflation.

A government guarantee for continued funding must be given for approved and on-going building projects.

4.3 Design and standard

The student welfare organisation must ensure that student housing provides for students with different needs – singles, couples, families and the disabled.

It is the student welfare organisation's responsibility to inspect and maintain the buildings. Funds should be set aside for regular maintenance, to prevent greater expenses being required later. The normal expected lifespan of a building is fifty years.

When applying to build student housing, the student welfare organisation must also plan for setting aside funds for maintenance. Providing the organisation can document sufficient inspection and maintenance of buildings, they can also apply for funding for a complete renovation. If the building has exceeded its normal expected lifespan, this should be documented. Funds for renovation should come out of the unit quota.

There should be special building standards for student housing, which take the students' life situation into account. Student housing should be exempt from regulations governing 'lifecycle housing' (that is, housing suited to people of all ages and function levels), given that the target group as a whole does not have this need. When building student housing, however, all housing units should have visitor access for disabled people. Government funding must reflect this extra cost incurred by the student welfare organisations.

Student housing should be treated as a distinct form of housing in planning and building laws, and defined as a special measure in laws and regulations.

4.4 Allocation of student housing

The Ministry of Education and Research has responsibility for prioritising the building of student housing where the greatest need exists. When allocating funding for student housing, the following factors should be taken into consideration: the price and availability of student housing on the private market, and the number of international students and other students who have moved to the area to study. Student welfare organisations should be entitled to favourable loans through the Norwegian National Housing Bank.

4.5 Municipal responsibilities

The municipalities where higher education institutions are located should give student welfare organisations the right of pre-emption on land that lies close to the institution, or land in central locations. These municipalities have a responsibility to offer land for building student housing, either for free or at a low price, to student welfare organisations.

These municipalities must not impose sequential requirements for infrastructure or demand substitute land when student housing is going to be built.

These municipalities have a responsibility to carry out administrative procedures efficiently when handling applications for the construction of student housing. This includes changes to the regulation of existing land and buildings.

4.6 Students as tenants on the private rental market

The government must stimulate the construction of more, affordable rental properties, as well as contribute to regulation of the existing market.

The municipality must prepare the way for increased availability of private rental housing, by making the application processes easier and creating less bureaucratic red-tape for the conversion and opening of rental housing.

All municipalities need to have a sufficient number of non-commercial rental properties. These

properties should be available at a lower price than those on the private market.

Standard contracts that provide security for students and, at the very least, comply with the Tenancy Act, should always be used.

5. Student health

Student health covers all health factors connected to the living conditions of students, and how these conditions impact on students' risk of ill health. Student health should be defined as a concept in its own right, and taking into consideration how life as a student can promote both good and poor health, and the ways in which this occurs. The promotion of good health and the prevention of illness among students should be seen in the light of relevant research on student health.

To ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to participate in higher education, it is necessary to provide a publicly-funded health service, easily accessible to students and tailored especially to their needs. It is also important to see student health in relation to the total duration of a course of study. Access to good health services for students in the early stages of tertiary studies may help prevent mental health issues later.

Preventative health measures for students also includes access to physical activities and nutritional advice. The public funding of health services administrated by student welfare organisations should be legally enacted, through the creation of authorised posts in the health sector. Health personnel employed by student welfare organisations to work directly with students should be authorised to seek reimbursement from the health authority that the student is affiliated with.

The student welfare organisations have responsibility for student health services, but these should only function as a supplement to the public health service. The municipality where the educational institution is located has a responsibility to inform students about health services on offer.

The student welfare organisation should function as a supplement to the public health service.

5.1 Mental health

All students should have ready access to mental health services. Higher education institutions should co-ordinate their student counselling services with the mental health services provided by the student organisations and those of the municipalities.

The government budget must allocate funds for the expansion of mental health services for students, via the proper authorities.

There should be a special service for students with more serious psychiatric conditions, making it possible for these students to carry out higher education. These services should be funded by the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration and should be a co-operative effort between the public sector and the education institutions.

5.2 Dental health

Dental treatment for students should be considered a part of general health services and included in national health insurance. Until this happens, there should be a 75% discount on dental treatment for all students, regardless of their age, place of study and residence.

The student welfare organisations can either subsidise dental health services or offer a reimbursement for dental expenses.

5.3 Support scheme in case of illness

Students should be eligible for a sickness benefit from the Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund. This should also apply to those who are on partial sick leave, regardless of the percentage this entails.

The right to sickness benefits should not be cancelled because the student receives sickness benefits or a work assessment allowance from NAV during the same time period. Students should be able to receive support from both the Loan Fund and NAV.

Educational institutions should offer flexible alternatives to standard course progression, as well as teaching and evaluation methods which make allowances for shorter or longer periods of illness. Students who become ill have a right to postpone exams during the term in question.

5.4 Students and addictive substances

When it comes to prevention of physical and mental illnesses, it is important to work with students on the issue of addictive substance use. This should also contribute to a sense of belonging in the student environment. To create a more inclusive student environment, it is important that higher education institutions have a clear policy on the use of addictive substances, which should be reflected in their strategies and daily routines.

It is important that the municipalities, student welfare organisations and educational institutions all co-operate in dealing with this issue, giving students sufficient information and working together on preventative measures.

6. Students and social rights

Good conditions for studying on a daily basis, including financial support towards living expenses, should be the right of all students.

6.1 Students who receive a government allowance

Higher education institutions must accommodate students who receive a work assessment allowance from NAV. The demands for course progression must be adjusted to meet the needs of the individual student.

6.1.1 Students who receive unemployment benefits

Unemployed people should not lose their right to unemployment benefits if they wish to take a single module at a university or university college.

6.2 Students with children

Higher education institutions should offer flexible alternatives to standard course progression, tailored to the needs of students with children. There should be daytime alternatives to

obligatory activities and tuition which takes place in the evening.

6.2.1 Parental leave

Students who have children should be allowed to continue to pay term fees and retain their student status while they are on parental leave.

Students with children should be entitled to the same number of weeks of parental leave as ordinary employees.

6.2.2 Teaching and evaluation methods

Students who have children should be entitled to postpone exams during parental leave, and also if they must remain at home to care for their children during illness. Students should be entitled to have an early exam in the event of an oncoming birth.

6.2.3 Student day-care centres

Student day-care centres must be adapted to the needs of the students, with flexible opening hours and special insight into the daily routine of the student. Student day-care centres must allow for flexible admission procedures, not limited to specific times of the year.

The financial framework of the student day-care centres is a government responsibility, which should be included as an independent item in the budget of the Ministry of Education and Research.

Government subsidisation of student day-care centres should be the same as public day-care centres.

6.3 International students

International students should have access to the same welfare services as their Norwegian counterparts. Higher education institutions and student welfare organisations have responsibility for the inclusion of this group of students.

6.4 Insurance

All students should be offered accident and disability insurance, subsidised by the government.

7. Student volunteer work

It is the shared responsibility of the government, municipalities, higher education institutions, student welfare organisations and local student democracies, to encourage and bolster student interest in doing voluntary work.

Higher education institutions and student welfare organisations can contribute to the effort by offering free training, suitable premises, and financial support for daily operations or one-off events.

Laws and regulations which have a bearing on student volunteer work must not create practical or financial obstacles to volunteer operations.

Educational institutions should make allowances for students who hold honorary positions, such as allowing them to seek leave, giving exemptions from obligatory activities and being flexible in arrangements for on-the-job training. Students who have been granted leave

should be entitled to retain student status. Higher education institutions, together with the students, must decide which honorary positions qualify for special treatment.