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***Funding Systems  
and Their Effects on  
Higher Education Systems***

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## Executive Summary

In 2002 Norway introduced a new performance-based funding model for higher education in response to growth in the number of students and costs of higher education. The model aims to improve education as measured by the credits and graduates produced, increase research as measured by research publications, and enhance external relevance as measured by external funding. The model is still being developed. Formal explicit links between the funding system and national higher education policies have been established as a result of a recent reform in Norwegian higher education (the Quality Reform).

The various stakeholders have identified several intended and unintended effects of the funding system on higher education and on the core tasks of teaching and research. According to the Ministry of Education and Research, the performance-based funding system will improve the quality of research and higher education, as these are best safeguarded by means of a funding system that emphasises results.

The Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions (the Rectors' Conference) has identified several elements in the financing system that contribute to the development of HEIs. Incentives are viewed as a means of encouraging institutions to increase the quality of their educational programmes and research and to implement more structural changes. However, the Rectors' Conference acknowledges that a funding model with financial rewards could produce unintended effects and advocates monitoring the consequences.

The Norwegian Association of Researchers (the Researchers' Association) argues that the financing system will influence HEIs' education and research strategies. The funding model may increase the number, but not necessarily the quality, of publications. The association also argues that the model promotes a focus on popular and inexpensive courses, which is not an intended consequence. According to the association, the quality of the educational programmes could be called into question if focus is directed at increasing credit production.

The leaders of HEIs perceive the financing system as providing a strong incentive for development and change, thus encouraging focus on the production of credits and publications. However, small HEIs with a limited number of students may suffer, and less knowledge may be necessary to pass exams. An emphasis on the number of publications produced means that priority may be given to mainstream research, which is easier to publish, rather than more pioneering research which is more difficult to publish. Further, HEIs may end up being penalised for not producing those results measured by the indicators of the model, and they may not receive remuneration for results that are not measured.

The faculty believe that the funding model has had an influence on teaching activities. The data show that half the faculty are investing more time in teaching. Two-thirds of the faculty fear that in the long run the funding model will have an impact on the evaluation of exams. The majority of the faculty have not reported an impact on research in terms of time invested, money received or international publications submitted. Faculty believe that the time devoted

to teaching will increase and time invested in research will decrease as a result of the Quality Reform.

According to the Rectors' Conference, the funding system may influence institutional strategies. For example, HEIs may place priority on educational and research projects for which there is an increasing demand. The Rectors' Conference also believes that financial rewards based on the number of publications and PhD candidates as well as external research funding have an impact on HEIs by enforcing a general norm in science to produce quality research.

In the view of the HEI leaders, educational strategies may be impacted if "all" HEIs offer the most popular studies and fewer offer less popular fields. In addition, HEIs may place priority on strategies aimed at increasing educational quality, as these tend to shorten the length of students' educations. To some extent the funding system is seen as promoting a concentration on fewer subjects/programmes and research projects, thus limiting the diversity of academic activities, at least at smaller institutions.

The faculty's attitudes reflect several strengths and weaknesses of the funding system. Two-thirds agree that resources should be reallocated according to the quality of research. However, teaching is perceived to suffer from a lack of resources, and the knowledge level of the students is believed to hamper teaching. More than half the faculty believe that the level of scholarship has deteriorated.

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## 1 Introduction

In 2002 a new funding model for higher education was introduced in Norway in response to concerns about the cost effectiveness of higher education, and with the aim of stimulating student progression and enhancing the development of new, attractive study programmes. Promoters of the reform viewed the previous funding system as the cause of structural imbalance between research funding and education funding. In their opinion research funding had been far too closely linked to education and the number of students, allowing for too little discretion in the separate funding of research according to its particular needs and considerations. To some extent the new funding system separates the funding of research and education within institutional block grants (UFD 2005: 74).

This report investigates intended and unintended effects of the new funding model on higher education and on the core tasks of teaching and research. The term “effects” refers to the impacts of the model as perceived by various stakeholders. The report sums up the present points of view concerning the funding model.

## 2 Results

### 2.1 Main Features of the Funding System of Higher Education

The output-oriented, formula-based funding model used to allocate funds to higher education institutions (HEIs) has three main components: an “education component” of 25 per cent of the total allocation, based on the number of credits, number of graduates and number of international exchange students; and a “research component” of 15 per cent of the total allocation, which is partly a result-based allocation introduced in 2006 based on the number of publications; and a “basic component”, which is 60 per cent of the total allocation.

With regard to the education component, there is no ceiling limiting the HEIs’ revenue generation. The model divides subjects at the universities and university colleges into six different price categories which are intended to reflect the complexity of the teaching and the use of scientific equipment (UFD 2005).

With regard to the research component, one-half of the funds are redistributed on the basis of performance and one-half is related to quality and strategic considerations, which include funding of positions for doctoral students<sup>1</sup>. In contrast to the education component, there is a ceiling limiting the HEIs’ revenue generation. The HEIs that do increase their revenues per-

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<sup>1</sup> Regarding the performance-related part of the research allocation, redistribution between universities in 2002–2005 was based on degree production specified by level (PhD, Master) and on funding from the EU and the Research Council of Norway. The number of higher academic positions (professors etc.) was also included. The latter was also included for university colleges in addition to credit production and external cooperation.

form the best in comparison to other institutions (Proposition to the Storting 1 2001–2002: 150–160). In the 2005 budget the research component is based on the production of scientific publications and the degree of funding from the EU and the Research Council of Norway (Proposition to the Storting 2005–2006).

The basic component is intended to support stability and selected priorities, such as special needs for a variety of disciplines and subjects, special needs for different regions, and operating expenses and maintenance costs for buildings. The basic component is intended to cover part of the expenses for teaching and research to make the HEIs less vulnerable to fluctuations in the number of students (UFD 2005: 72–74).

In addition to these block grants from the Ministry of Education and Research, the institutions finance their activities through external funding from the Research Council of Norway in particular and other research agencies or contractors in general.

## **2.2 Formal, Explicitly Stated Interrelationships between the Funding System and National Higher Education Policies**

The new funding system forms part of a recent reform of Norwegian higher education (the Quality Reform). The Quality Reform introduced a new degree structure (Bachelor/Master degrees), the ECTS, a new grading system (A-F), new commitment to quality assurance and evaluation, and a new incentive-based funding system.

When implementing the Quality Reform, the Ministry of Education and Research stated that “the design and use of the financing model for universities and colleges must support major educational and research policy goals and strategies. In the view of the Ministry, quality considerations in education and research are best safeguarded by means of a financing system that emphasizes results” (Report to the Storting 2000–2001: 62–63). The Mjøs Committee, which proposed the new funding system, underscored the cultural and societal rationale for higher education and argued that “the challenge lies in establishing funding arrangements that make the institutions better able to perform the tasks assigned to them by society” (NOU 2000: 14: 43). According to the Committee, funding based on results is appropriate because society has the right to expect results when large amounts of money are invested in higher education. A formula-based funding system also increases the possibilities for rational planning (NOU 2000: 14: 43–44).

## **2.3 Intended and Unintended Effects of the Funding System on Higher Education and on the Core Tasks of Teaching and Research**

According to the Ministry of Education and Research, the intention of the performance-based funding system is to increase the quality of research and higher education: “Quality considerations in education and research are best safeguarded by means of a financing system

that emphasizes the results attained and by introducing a partial distinction between teaching and research in the calculation of budgets” (Report to the Storting 2000–2001).

The stakeholder survey shows that the Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions (the Rectors’ Conference (RC)) has identified several elements of the financing system that contribute to the development of HEIs. Incentives are viewed as a means of encouraging institutions to increase the quality of their educational programmes and research and to implement more structural changes. Financial rewards based on publication in international review journals and books, along with increased internationalisation and improved support systems for faculty exchange, are seen as important means of accomplishing these goals. Financial rewards for publications of high quality are perceived as a way of increasing focus on research quality and originality. Activities such as knowledge dissemination and art will be included in the model: knowledge dissemination is scheduled for integration in 2007, while art is scheduled for integration in 2008. The impact of financial rewards based on the production of credits is currently being monitored; no negative impact has yet been revealed. However, the RC acknowledges that a funding model with financial rewards could produce unintended effects and advocates the monitoring of the consequences.

In the stakeholder survey the Researchers’ Association (RA) argues that one of the intentions of the funding model is to increase the number of publications, which will result in improved research financing. However, according to the association, an increase in the number of publications may not necessarily be accompanied by an increase in quality. It also underscores that attaching incentives to research creates a “zero sum game” where institutions compete by increasing their number of publications to “win” the funding attached to publication. Consequently, an institution may not be rewarded even if it has increased its number of publications. The association also argues that the model promotes focus on popular and inexpensive courses, which is not an intended consequence. According to the association, the quality of educational programmes could be called into question if focus is directed towards increasing credit production. In addition, placing priority on credit production could also result in a decrease in the time and energy devoted to research activities. Finally, the association emphasises that when considering whether to further develop the model by including incentives for other types of activities, such as rewards in connection with dissemination, it is important to maintain a basic component of 60 per cent of the budget in order to ensure that basic research is carried out.

According to the stakeholder survey, the HEI leaders perceive the funding system as providing a strong incentive for development and change, thus encouraging focus on the production of credits and publications. In the view of the HEI leaders, the “result-based” components contribute to greater focus on the individual institution’s “production” in terms of the number of students completing programmes and the number of publications generated by research activities. They expect HEIs to adapt their strategies to this system of rewards for credits, which they see as enhancing both student recruitment and efforts to “take better care” of the students. They believe that in the long run research quality, efficiency and rele-

vance will improve as research activities become more focused on results, and that institutions will probably place priority on research and funding possibilities that will augment their budgets. Finally, the HEI leaders see the system of rewarding research results as helping to increasingly concentrate activities on larger programmes and international contacts.

According to the HEI leaders, there are certain elements of the funding system that may have unexpected impacts and side-effects. Since the result-oriented teaching component is based on students' completion of 60-credit units, the number of students at each institution and their efficiency will be decisive. The leaders underscore the fact that a currently trend is for students to move to the big cities. Consequently, in the view of the leaders, regional HEIs may experience a serious setback, which in turn may have a negative impact on these institutions' potential for interacting effectively with and contributing positively to the development of small and medium-sized businesses through their teaching and research activities. When the number of students and "credit production" are the most important components of the financing system, this favours institutions with many students in each programme, making it difficult for institutions with a small number of students in each programme to maintain a sound financial position. The reduction of funding for educational programmes with weak student recruitment is thus considered as a problem. According to the HEI leaders, the indicators of the funding model do not reflect the distinctive character of small, specialised institutions, some of which may be penalised for a lack of measured results or which may not receive remuneration for results that are not measured by the indicators, such as other types of publications, dissemination and art. The HEI leaders argue that when the government places priority on selected elements, the institutions will follow suit. Consequently, an institution may find it more attractive to conduct mainstream research, which is more easily published in journals, than pioneering, critical and creative research. In some areas of research it is also more difficult to produce articles/monographs etc. that result in financial rewards. In the documents it is argued that result-based research funding according to the number of publications is a measure founded on the principles of a planning economy and could easily produce unintended effects. It is uncertain whether result-based research funding will be more successful in motivating the world's researchers to conduct better research than the established systems of academic promotion that have contributed to the incredible growth in science and knowledge that the world has seen up to now (UiO 2003b: 6). Finally, there has been a discussion about the possibility that professors may be influenced to give students a passing grade on their exams because the institution's budget is at stake.

The stakeholder survey reveals that faculty seem to some extent to devote more time to teaching. More than half of the faculty agree that they spend more time on teaching after the reform. There are small differences between universities and university colleges in this matter. There are also small differences among university disciplines and among college disciplines. One third of faculty believe that in the long run the funding system might possibly have an impact on the evaluation of exams (Frølich 2006).



As regards research production, 10 per cent of the faculty agree that they have spent more time on research after the reform, while 90 per cent of the faculty disagree that the reform has influenced their academic priorities in terms of increasing the time they devote to research. There are small but significant differences between universities and university colleges, among university disciplines and among college disciplines. Research funding seems little affected by the reform: six per cent of the faculty have experienced an increase in research funding and 94 per cent of the faculty disagree with the statement that the reform has resulted in increased research funding. There are no significant differences between universities and university colleges. Publishing also seems to be affected to a slight extent: 90 per cent of the faculty report that the reform has not changed their publishing behaviour. There are no significant differences between universities and university colleges in this respect (Frølich 2006).

For the majority of the faculty external relations seem unaffected by the reform. There are no significant differences between universities and university colleges or among university disciplines. There are small but significant differences among college disciplines. External dissemination seems to be impacted to a slight extent. There are small but significant differences between universities and university colleges and among college disciplines. There are no significant differences among university disciplines.

In sum, external and internal stakeholders' perceptions indicate the following: more popular educational programmes will be established; there will be a greater effort made to "take care" of students; there may be negative consequences for research activities in terms of impact on research funding and publishing.

## **2.4 Influence of the Funding System on Institutional Strategies**

The RC believes that the funding system influences the HEIs' education and research strategies. One possible consequence is that the institutions may act more like market players, seeking out educational and research projects for which there is an increasing demand, which could be positive, as the institutions will be more responsive to social needs. In addition, the funding model may result in more long-term strategies instead of short-term dispositions. Finally, financial rewards based on the number of publications and PhD candidates as well as external research funding will have a direct impact on institutions by enforcing a general norm in science to produce quality research.

The RA agrees that the financing system influences the HEIs' education and research strategies. One possible consequence is that the institutions will promote and strengthen educational programmes they believe to be in demand. This could result in "unpopular" educational programmes and small disciplines becoming more vulnerable. If disciplinary scholarships in general are affected, disciplines could disappear.

The HEI leaders also agree that the financing system influences the HEIs' education and research strategies. They believe that strategies will increasingly be adjusted to follow the "flow of money" in the funding system, and that subjects with good student recruitment may be given priority. They also believe that strategies aimed at increasing educational quality will undoubtedly be adopted as they tend to expedite student graduation. Finally, the HEI leaders view the funding system as encouraging a concentration on fewer subjects/programmes and research projects, and thus possibly limiting the diversity of academic activities, at least at smaller institutions.

The document analysis confirms the influence of the funding system on institutional strategies. At the institutional level it is argued that in order to maximise the new funding model it is necessary to be prepared to meet the increased competition from other national HEIs, which is promoted by the model. Teaching and research are seen as having direct consequences for each department's economic resources (UiO 2002b: 5). Both the Quality Reform and the new funding system underscore the importance of designing quality study programmes that facilitate student success. This means that HEIs will have to increasingly allocate funds to the faculties and departments where the students obtain exams and degrees (UiB 2001b: 2). The changes in the national funding system imply that the reallocation of funds at HEIs also should be made according to results (UiB 2001c: 7–8). Consequently, developing attractive study programmes will be of major importance. The number of students and the production of credits will become increasingly important after the reform (HSF 2001a: 5). When funding becomes more dependent on student numbers and the national and international student markets become more competitive, the implementation of organisational changes and greater focus on research is imperative (HSF 2001a: 5–6). Increased research and development activities are vital measures for augmenting an HEI's budget, while externally funded projects are given priority because they form part of the basis for resource allocation from the Ministry (AHO 2004a: 13).

In sum, all the stakeholders perceive that the national funding system has an influence on institutional strategies. The HEIs are encouraged to offer educational programmes according to market demand and to enhance research quality. Such strategies are perceived to have possibly negative consequences for less popular educational programmes. Some stakeholders also doubt the positive effects of the reform on research; there is a fear that the diversity of research activities may be adversely affected.

## **2.5 Stakeholders' Views Concerning Strengths and Weaknesses of the Funding System**

According to the Mjøs Committee, the funding system has two major strengths: it promotes financial self-regulation (market steering) and it improves the HEIs' capacity for planning and rational operations. "While safeguarding overall control considerations, a form of financial self-adjustment must be established with a basis in the individual educational institution. In the view of the Committee, this entails that control by the authorities should be restricted to

the control of frameworks by means of contracts in order to ensure attention to national targets. In a sense, the Committee's recommendations entail both a simplification and an extension of the economic responsibility of higher education – a simplification because the state's control more resembles overall control of frameworks, but at the same time an extension because they activate a larger element of local financial responsibility" (NOU 2000: 14: 43).

The case studies disclose several strengths and weaknesses of the funding system<sup>2</sup>. A result-based funding system is seen as both challenging and providing great opportunities for boosting university funds in the long run. The establishment of study modules enhances the ability to exploit the academic breadth of the university, which may prove to be a competitive advantage (UiO 2002b: 2). In the interviews, faculty argue that attractive courses mean more money, and they fear that department heads may end up requiring academics who are not conducting research to do more teaching (UiO 2004e). They argue that the temptation to increase the number of students beyond departmental capacity, which will make it difficult to continue to provide the minimum level of quality in education has to be taken into account. Certain disciplines may find it enticing to lower the academic level required to pass exams to try to procure the funding attached to credits. However, in the documents the system of quality assurance is perceived as a safeguard in this respect (UiO 2003c: 11–12).

Another issue discussed in the interviews with faculty is the effort made on behalf of students who perform poorly. Faculty assert the fact that theory is playing an ever-increasing role in educational programmes, which faculty believe is swelling the ranks of students who fail exams (HSF 2004). Many of the smaller disciplines are concerned about the effects of the funding model, fearing that when resources are attached to the production of credits their funding will be reduced. The possible negative effects on the smaller disciplines are nonetheless seen as being balanced by research and basic funding. Also, the faculties have a special responsibility to ensure that important tasks are still funded (UiO 2003c: 14–15). In the interviews with faculty there is a suggestion that resource-rich disciplines reallocate their funds to resource-poor disciplines since these have to survive even if the number of students decreases (UiO 2004e). However, reallocations between faculties and departments to aid resource-poor disciplines could lead to negative feelings in the long run (UiO 2004e). The funding model is also seen as providing incentives to departments to retain their students and establish new courses to attract new students (NLH 2004a).

In the documents research funding based on the number of publications is defended by pointing to the fact that external demands are increasingly being made for documentation of research results. Without a system of documentation it is feared that decisions regarding research funding will become political decisions. A counting system that measures the

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<sup>2</sup> In terms of stakeholders, the documents are seen as expressing the view of the HEI leaders (i.e. the official view of the institutions).

amount and quality of research publications based on academic criteria is also seen as an important means of enhancing internationalisation and improving the quality of Norwegian research. It is believed that with the use of aggregated data it will be possible to measure research by bibliometric methods to create an adequate basis for resource allocation internally at the university and between national HEIs (UiO 2003b: 6). The proposed criteria for allocation of research funding based on the number of publications is perceived as possibly helping to steer publishing on to a more quality and internationally-oriented track (HF-UiO 2003a: 1–3).

In the stakeholder survey, faculty identify several weaknesses of the funding system. Two-thirds of the faculty believe that teaching suffers from a lack of resources. Half of the faculty disagree that the department is not sufficiently concerned with “study quality”. One-third of the faculty are satisfied with the quality of teaching, one-fifth are indifferent and almost 40 per cent disagree with the statement. Two-thirds of the faculty believe that the students’ level of knowledge hampers teaching. More than half of the faculty think that the level of scholarship has decreased. More than half of the faculty think teaching should be more closely linked to research. Two-thirds agree that resources should be reallocated according to research quality. More than half of the faculty want to reallocate resources according to the number of students.

In sum, the stakeholders perceive several strengths and weaknesses of the funding system. Among the strengths are: promotion of market steering; improvement of capacity for planning; increase in the quality of research and higher education; growth of institutional budgets; allocation of resources according to research quality and the number of students.

The weaknesses perceived include: vulnerability of small disciplines; temptation to lower the academic level required to pass exams; increased protectionism as departments try to retain students; teaching suffering from a lack of resources; the students’ level of knowledge hampering teaching; and finally it is argued that there is a need to link teaching more closely to research.

### **3 Conclusions**

The main feature of the Norwegian funding system of higher education is a performance-based system. Almost half of the institutional block grants are allocated according to the number of credits and publications produced. There are formal explicit relations between the funding model and the national higher education policy, as the funding model is part of a comprehensive reform of higher education and is seen as a means of improving quality and efficiency.

Both intended and possibly unintended impacts of the funding model are currently being discussed by the different stakeholders. According to the RC and HEI leaders, the funding model provides strong incentives to ameliorate production in higher education. There are

several unintended effects, such as a reduction in the academic quality of both research and educational programmes and the structural impact on small institutions and disciplines. Faculty fear unintended effects in terms of a decrease in the knowledge required to pass exams. The effects upon faculty's distribution of their time seem limited, as half of the faculty report that they invest more time in teaching and 10 per cent say that they invest more time in research activities. The effects upon research also seem limited since international publishing and the amount of funding received for research are only impacted slightly, measured by asking faculty if they devote more time to research and publish more internationally after the Quality reform. External dissemination and funding appear to be impacted to some extent, measure in time devoted to this activity and in perceived increase in external funding. Concordantly, so far, the funding model seems to influence the production of education while yet having a limited impact on research activities in terms of research time and funding as faculty report these features themselves.

In the view of the stakeholders, the funding system influences institutional strategies. They expect the incentives it provides to encourage institutions to increase the quality of their educational programmes and research and to implement more structural changes. They believe, however, that it may produce unintended effects and that the consequences have to be monitored. Possible unintended effects include an increase in the number, not necessarily the quality, of publications, or the emphasis on publishing resulting in mainstream research being given priority, rather than more critical research. In addition, the funding model could lead to greater focus on popular and inexpensive courses. Also, the quality of the educational programmes could be called into question, as focus is directed towards increasing credit production. Finally it is asserted, HEIs could be penalised for not achieving the results measured by the indicators of the model, and at the same time not receive remuneration for results that are not measured.

In the view of the stakeholders, the new funding model has both strengths and weaknesses. Among the strengths are: promotion of market steering; improvement of planning capacity; increase in the quality of research and higher education; growth of institutional budgets; allocation of resources according to research quality and the number of students. The weaknesses perceived include: vulnerability of small disciplines; temptation of lowering the academic level required to pass exams; reduction of budgets as a consequence of student mobility; increased protectionism as the departments try to retain students; incentives to improve external dissemination have not yet been included; teaching suffers from lack of resources; the students' level of knowledge hampers teaching; teaching should be more closely linked to research.

## 4 General Design and Study Goals

### 4.1 Key Areas

The investigation focuses on four key areas: national HE funding policies, HEIs' responses to these policies, and stakeholders' opinions of the effects of the funding policies.

### 4.2 Key Questions

Five key questions are addressed:

- What are the main features of the funding system of higher education?
- Are there formal, explicitly stated interrelationships between the funding system and national higher education policies?
- What are the intended and unintended effects of the funding system on higher education in general and on the basic core tasks of teaching and research?
- Does the funding system influence institutional strategies? How do institutions respond strategically to the funding system?
- What are the various stakeholders' points of view concerning the strengths and weaknesses of the funding system?

### 4.3 Study Methods

Several data sources have been applied: document analysis, in-depth interviews and survey data. The empirical basis consists of written documentation collected during the spring 2005 from the Ministry of Education and Research, University of Oslo, University of Bergen, University of Life Sciences, Oslo School of Architecture and Design, and Sogn and Fjordane University College (See the list of documents attached to this report). In-depth interviews with leaders and faculty at the University of Oslo (spring 2004), University of Life Sciences (spring 2004), and Sogn and Fjordane University College (autumn 2005) have been conducted. The faculty survey was conducted in the spring 2005; the sample consisted of 3,400 faculty members from a representative sample of universities and university colleges. Two thousand persons answered the survey, which corresponds to 60.3 per cent of the sample (Michelsen and Aamodt 2006). Finally, a stakeholder survey (autumn 2006) of informants from the Ministry of Education and Research, Ministry of Finance, Rectors' Conference, Researchers' Association, Quality Assurance Agency, and rectors and directors of the HEIs was conducted. The Rectors' Conference<sup>3</sup>, Researchers' Association and 17 of a total of 36 HEIs took part in the stakeholder survey<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> The HEIs are: the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences, Vestfold University College, University of Bergen, Nord-Trøndelag University College, Volda University College, University of Oslo, Oslo University College, Molde University College, Ålesund University College, Oslo School of Architecture and Design, Bodø University College, Lillehammer University College, Østfold University College, Telemark University College, Norwegian School of Veterinary Science, Sami University College and Agder University College

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