

To the Ministry of Education Regarding the North American Strategy 2012 - 2015

I was seeking an explanation for policies regarding student financing and more specifically the "tilleggsstipendliste" for American Universities when the American Embassy told me that the policies regarding studies in the United States and Canada were being discussed. I therefore hope that your ministry will accept an opinion from an individual rather than an organization such as ANSA.

I am a counsellor ("rådgiver") for students at the Oslo International School in Bekkestua. I actively assist students in pursuing their higher education goals. I have students from many nationalities, but approximately 50% of them are Norwegian citizens. Our students eventually attend universities in Norway, the UK, the USA, Canada, and occasionally other European or Asian countries. Our IB program is challenging and the students I assist are predominantly very motivated and ambitious about their future education. I take a great interest in them, and wish to help and support them as best I can, which is one reason why I am writing this letter.

As an American, who has lived in Norway since 1984, I also follow policies regarding American colleges and universities because they affect many institutions which I know and hold in high regard. I therefore wish to address two issues:

- The lack of student financing for the freshman year of college or university.
- The content of the list of institutions who students receive the tilleggsstipend

Lack of Funding for the Freshman Year of College

The present policy is that students who pursue a university education outside of Norway cannot obtain financing for the freshman year of university at American institutions. In contrast, they do obtain financing all years at almost all Canadian, British, Dutch, Norwegian etc. Universities (even folkehøgskole). My belief is that this policy should be changed to include the first year for all US four year institutions. While I know that there are variances in the quality of many institutions in the USA, this can equally be said of institutions in the UK, Canada, and many other places where students receive financing from their first day at university. I will be honest and express that I think there is a clear issue of fairness that needs to be addressed. All of the other Scandinavian countries have obviously realized this, but not Norway.

I use real example of how this policy negatively impacts students and becomes inherently unfair. I have a Norwegian student who last year got the highest possible result in the International Baccalaureate Program (IB)- I believe that less than one percent of the thousands of students who do the IB in the world receive such a result; it is a unique and outstanding achievement. He will attend a small college in the USA called Williams College, which is ranked number 1 by Forbes (a highly respected ranking agency). He will not receive any lånekasse financing for his first year. In contrast, I have two students who did not receive their IB diploma. Though they tried hard, they received mediocre results and I, as their advisor, felt relieved that their respective universities would still allow them to start. One will attend a UK University outside of London, the other will attend Dalhousie University in Canada. Both of these students will receive full financing for their first year. All three of the students will attend four year institutions. I see this as unfair to the student who without any doubt will be at the best university of the three.

There are some strategies that students use to get around the lack of first year financing. One strategy is to attend one of the institutions which are now accepting Norwegians as sophomores so that they can immediately get the student financing. I witnessed this with three young men who attended one such institution after graduating from Berg Vgs in Oslo. All three had dreamed of studying in the US, so they found a way to start and still obtain the financing. All three gained sophomore status at a relatively medium-quality institution. They attended an institution that was in my opinion below what they would have normally been qualified for simply because they could get funding as sophomores. None of the three stayed there- they all transferred and began at other universities because of the lack of challenge. All three thereby pro-longed their education and ended up still getting more than four years of Lånekasse financing. And they suffered from the turbulence of moving from one place to the other and having to academically and socially "start over". In my mind, encouraging students to focus on finding a place offering them to enter as sophomores rather than to focus fully on the quality of the university, gives many a "bjørnetjeneste". It hasn't saved Lånekasse, and it most certainly was detrimental in prolonging the education of these individuals. Had they reached for a "better school" that "fit" their academic needs (and there are very many these students could have been admitted to that are better but where they would have been starting as "freshmen"), they would have been finished in four years, and would have had a more satisfactory path. But that possibility was closed to them because they couldn't get freshman year financing.

Another strategy that I have witnessed to get around the lack of freshman year financing was when one of my Norwegian students attended UiO at Blindern, and thus deferred her acceptance at Connecticut College for one year. She did a semester or a year at UiO so that she could then enter Connecticut College in the sophomore year. She told me that her time at Blindern was a pure repetition of some of the classes that she had done in IB, but it served to give her freshman year credits so that she could then begin at Connecticut college with support from Lånekasse. Academically, she told me that she suffered from boredom, and socially, she entered as a sophomore and therefore missed out on the early forming of friendships that are bonded when everyone is new at the same time. This was her loss and her sacrifice for the financing game.

I realise that the present policy of funding only three rather than four years of an American education is primarily done because of two reasons. One is that many Norwegians believe that the 13th year of videregående skole supposedly covers what is covered in the freshman year of university or college. Norwegians who have done one or more high school years in the USA, know that this argument is pure nonsense. In my 26 years here in Norway, I have met very many people (usually in Norsk helsevesenet) who have been living in the USA for one or more years with their children attending American high schools. I have yet to hear anything except that they were amazed at how much harder the work and the academic rigor were for their children compared to their Norwegian schools.

The second reason for not giving funding for the first year of college in the United States is the American liberal arts philosophy of having students do work that is unrelated to their intended field of study (ie some math, some science, some social science, etc.). I find this a questionable argument for two reasons. First is that most Norwegians have to take eksphil, which could be argued as being equally "unrelated" to the eventual study goal. Secondly, my experience is that an extremely high percentage of students attending Norwegian Universities either have to attend extra years because

they change their choice of study, or because they spend time re-doing subjects so that they can pass. Students who attend American universities are highly likely to be advised and guided toward finishing their degree in four years (because it IS expensive). In contrast, a high percentage of Norwegian university students take more than four years to finish their degrees - requiring more than four years of lånekasse funding and also delaying them from entering the work force to become active tax payers who contribute to paying into the system which has so generously allowed them to study. I would be very curious to hear a comparison of how many years of lånekasse funding are required for the average student entering a Norwegian university versus those Norwegians entering an American University, and a comparison of how soon the recipients enter the work force so they can begin contributing to the "statskasse" through their taxes rather than being a beneficiary of the system.

The Tilleggsstipend List

Students who attend institutions on the Tilleggsstipend liste not only get freshman year support from Lånekasse, but students will also get additional funding for all the years they attend those universities. University representatives who visit my office in Bekkestua are always trying to get their institutions on the Tilleggsstipend liste, understandably because students will focus their search for a university to a place that will give them a good education and will cost less. I believe that the list should either be extended to be more representative of quality institutions, or it should simply be abolished due to the inherent unfairness of having such a list. From my rather extensive knowledge of the list, I believe that many more equally or better institutions than those on the present list should be included. Examples of those would include Williams College (ranked #1 on the Forbes list of America's best colleges), Amherst College (listed as #3, after Williams and Princeton), Swarthmore (listed #7), Wellesley College, Vassar College, Pomona College, Haverford College, Whitman College, Carleton College, The College of William and Mary, Centre College, and Harvey Mudd College..... All of these are ranked above many of the institutions on the list, so why aren't they on it? Students and especially their parents come to me shaking their heads in disbelief when they realise that they could go to the University of Florida and get four years of support in contrast to going to Amherst where they would only get three. And they see vgs students getting support for folkehøyskole while their student cannot get funding for the first year at Amherst, or Williams, or William and Mary?

I would hope that the list will get expanded rather than abolished but I also understand this will be a difficult process as it of course relies on judgement of which universities "deserve" to be on the list.

I realise that I am not an institution, such as ANSA or Fulbright, and I must clearly state that what I have written here is based on my personal opinion rather than the opinion of my institution. But I deal with students and their parents every day of the school year. I yearn for them to get the best and broadest education possible, and for them to have all the doors open to any opportunity they are qualified to reach. I hope that a re-evaluation of the policies in place today will make an education in the USA equally available to them as it is to students applying to the UK, Canada, or many other countries.

Respectfully,

Linda Jensen

