

The double vulnerability of being a student from outside EEA in Norway: Gaps in the Norwegian welfare system during the pandemic

In this reflection note, I aim to describe how it is to be an international student in Norway during the current pandemic. In concrete, I want to describe the gaps and shortcoming of the Norwegian welfare system regarding students in general and point out how students from outside the European Economic Area are especially vulnerable because they lack any benefits just because they do not own a passport from Europe. I will then give some ideas of what changes could make the situation improve for this group of students.

I came to Norway in August of 2018 to do a Master's in International Community Health at the University of Oslo. Before, I studied a professional degree in Clinical Psychology for six years. I also worked for three years in a mental health hospital in Chile as a psychologist/psychotherapist. Here in am working with *Senter for rus-og avhengighetsforskning* in a project that aims to prevent opioids overdose deaths in Norway.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, my life in Norway was somehow similar to other Norwegians who are studying a master's degree. In my one and a half year in Oslo, I managed to attend my classes and work on my degree, work part-time in a bar, have a positive social life, and participate in Norwegian language classes. I moved from student housing because I was able to afford a private place to live. I still had to live in a student budget, of course, and live with only the essential. But I was comfortable and managing to be independent, I felt like any other Norwegian studying a master.

And then, the pandemic changed it all. Since I am studying what it is mostly public health, I knew it was bad when the numbers about Italy started to go wrong, and they were not able to stop the spread of the virus without a complete lockdown. One of my first thoughts was that the place that I was working would have to close soon because we would be a hotspot of transmission. I was on my way to work when on March 12th the Government closed down the serving places. Despite the unfortunate and inevitable news, I did not panic. I thought we would have to close for two or three weeks to take down the transmission rate and then we would open with strict distancing and hygiene rules. If I knew that I would have to stop working, that my income would be reduced to 0 kr for months, and the precarious situation it would put me, I would have left Norway while I could.

Students, in general, faced problems in Norway. Most students work part-time in jobs that are poorly regulated in the serving industry (nightclubs, restaurants, bars, cafés, among others) because they offer flexible working times. These jobs were hit the hardest with the

closing measures; while stores were allowed to keep operating the serving industry had to close.

It was a surprise for many to discover that if you are a full-time student and get laid off or fired, you do not have the right to receive unemployment benefits (*dagpenger*), regardless of how much have you paid in taxes, or if this is the only way to support yourself (NAV, 2020). The reasoning behind this is that to get unemployment benefits, you must be "a real job seeker", that is, be willing to take any job, in any industry, anywhere in Norway (NAV, 2020). Students, because of obvious reasons, cannot comply with these requirements.

Norwegians and people holding a Norwegian or European (EEA) citizenship have the right to receive *Lånekassen*, the state loan (Lånekassen, 2020). With Oslo being very expensive, the amount of the loan is not enough to cover the most basic needs like housing, food and transportation.

But the situation is entirely different depending on where are you from or which passport you do hold. There are two different classes of international students, and the process and rules differ significantly.

If you have an EEA passport, you are allowed to come to Norway to study without any significant requirements; you just need to register with the police (Utlendingsdirektoratet, u.d.). Also, as said above, you have the right to receive *Lånekassen* as long as you work a minimum of ten hours per week (Lånekassen, 2020).

Students without an EEA passport, however, face a lot of requirements that make it very difficult and unattractive to come to Norway. You have to apply for a residence permit that costs 5,000 kr for one year; it must be likely that you can return to your country when you finish your studies, and you need to have a place to live. The hardest requirement is that you must have at least 121,000 kr on cash for every year of your education on a Norwegian bank account to show that you can support yourself (Utlendingsdirektoratet, u.d.). Realistically, not many young students have this amount of money available. Most people I had talked to have managed to get a bank loan at their home countries, get money from their relatives, and other strategies to fulfil this criterion. It is possible, when you renew your permit for another year, to count your income to meet this requirement. Also, you are not allowed to work more than 20 hours per week (Utlendingsdirektoratet, u.d.), and you do not have the right to receive *Lånekassen* either (Lånekassen, 2020).

My point is that all students face a difficult situation during these times. The jobs that students can take are precarious, low pay, with demanding working hours and not the best conditions to balance studies and work. These jobs were the first to be terminated, and students were left in considerable uncertainty.

Moreover, international students have no support network here and living in another country is very challenging by itself. Many of us that have been in Norway for one or two years became utterly dependent on our income to pay our daily and essential expenses.

It became clear that the rules regarding students and unemployment benefits offered no support or help to most of the students that need to combine studies and work and that lost their income because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pressure started to build up among students, and the Government announced that they would make solutions to help those in this situation (Jostad, 2020). The most logical measure that most of us were expecting, and some political parties were proposing, was that an exception should be made for now, and students that lost their income should receive *dagpenger* (Hollum, 2020). The fact that the law specifies that one must be a real job seeker and be willing to take any job in Norway is impossible to fulfil during the pandemic and for students. Students argued that if we have paid our taxes as any other worker, we should be able to receive the same benefits as other workers.

The proposal from the Government was disappointing for students (Mikkelsen, 2020). Instead of making a temporary exception to the rule that students cannot receive *dagpenger*, they proposed that students would receive a new loan of 26,000 kr from *Lånekassen*. The proposal had several implications. First, it is a loan, which increases the debt burden and, in the long term, makes students poorer. Second, it doesn't take into account the previous income of students and gives everyone the same amount. Third, it was considered unfair because we contribute to society with work like any other worker and should receive the same benefits as any other member of NAV. Fourth, it does not consider the payment of 18 days of compensation as other workers. Finally, it doesn't take into account how long the crisis will last and if this money will be enough.

This quick and poorly thought solution was firmly rejected by students and forced the Government to include more measures. They added the 18 days compensation for being *permittert*, and the solutions for students were considered as settled (Arnesen, 2020).

The solution only applied to people holding an EEA passport. International students from other countries who had paid income tax and were laid off had no access to the new loan from *Lånekassen* or *dagpenger* from NAV.

My situation was difficult; if I knew I would be without any income for more four months now, I would have tried to fly home. However, there are no flights and getting to my home country costs around 12,000 kr. Many of us got into a desperate situation with no money and without being able to go back home.

I wrote to the Minister of Higher Education Henrik Asheim to expose the particular scenario that we, international students from outside EEA who lost our jobs, were facing and

asking that an exception should be made. His office replied to me that my group of students was already receiving free education in Norway; that we were required to have enough money to live; and that the Norwegian Government was helping their students abroad so we should get help from our home countries.

Their response was upsetting to me. It felt like the message was almost "you should be thankful to be here in the first place".

I understand that the needs in these times are enormous, and that is not possible to help everyone as much as one could desire. But the fact that the amount of help you can receive depends on where you were born, or which passport do you have is unfair. Of course, I understand that people that have lived in Norway for a long time may be entitled to more benefits than someone that has just arrived, or that someone that has worked here for several years may receive more substantial unemployment benefits than someone that has lived here only a few months. The scenario is that if you just came to the country, but are from EEA, you can receive regular *Lånekassen* plus the extra loan. If you are from outside EEA and have worked and paid income taxes in Norway for two years, you have the right to neither *Lånekassen* nor *dagpenger*.

Some people I know have complained that they don't want more loans and I agree with that, but if I could only get that loan and get out of this precarious situation, it would be such a relief.

Students from outside EEA are a particularly vulnerable group in the already vulnerable group of students. We come to one of the most expensive countries in the world with no support network, little money and little welfare benefits. Despite that, many manage to get a job and work part-time, insert themselves in Norwegian society and finish their degrees. However, when something like a pandemic occurs, we do not have someone to ask money for or a very close network, many of us come from far away countries, and we cannot go home even if we wanted to. We are also a small group that does not have enough people to make our voice heard.

Many of the rules of the welfare system that apply for students make sense to me in ordinary times. You cannot get *dagpenger* because you can't be a job seeker in the whole of Norway, but you have the loan and will get money from there.

What I find unacceptable is the institutional discrimination towards students from outside EEA. One group can get *Lånekassen*, can work as many hours as they want, don't need to have a certain amount of cash in the bank, don't need to apply for an expensive visa every year, etc.; while the other encounters several barriers and requirements.

If you hold a passport from EEA means nothing in practice. You can be from outside EEA and be rich or can come from inside Europe and be poor. Students need help according to their needs, not where they are from.

I am aware that Norway has international obligations towards people from EEA, and I respect that. But Norway could do more to give the same chances to students that come from other countries. These are some of the measures that I think will make the ground more even between all international students:

1. Visa: The student visa is costly, 5,000 kr per year. If you exceed your expected graduation time, you have to pay that amount but per semester. I believe that this should be lowered or make it last for two years.
2. Lånekassen: The State Loan should be made available to all international students that work at least 10 hours per week, as is the case for EEA students. Students that have a job pay income tax as any other Norwegian and should be able to get this support.
3. Working after graduation: International students contribute to Norway in many ways, and Norway has invested in their education. It is strange that if you are from outside EEA, you are expected to leave as soon as possible. Trying to stay and look for a job afterwards is extremely hard; you must have a job seeker visa, can only try for one year, and must document over 200,000 kr in cash and if you lose your job, you don't have any benefits. It should be more accessible for people that have completed their education to stay and contribute to Norwegian society regardless of where you come from.

It is evident that no legislation in the world was prepared to handle a pandemic, and every country had to do some changes. I think Norway could have changed some regulations:

1. Dagpenger: The most important would have been to make *dagpenger* available to all students. During the times that labour market will be extremely pressured and with significant uncertainties it would have been, at least fair, that students that have worked for years could receive the benefits they deserved. The same measure would have been logical for international students that have worked for more than one year.
2. Visas: Students that need to renew their permits are in big trouble. Is not only expensive but also it is expected that you can document the 120,000 kr in cash, which will be extremely difficult given that most students have neither a job, unemployment benefits, loan and have consumed their savings during the pandemic. The income requirement should be waived, and visa fee lowered or eliminated for this semester.

What I have tried to point out in this reflection is that the group of international students that do not hold an EEA passport face challenges that neither other students nor international students in general, face. The Government have adopted a very inhumane

approach and almost not looking at our issues behind the excuse that we are supposed to have enough money to live here. It is with great sadness that many of us have felt unwanted, unprotected and vulnerable during these months while we still try to study and finish our degrees, with our families and loved ones afar.

Norway must move to a more understanding and human way of looking to the students of the world that have chosen this country to come to study. The origin-based differences are not acceptable in our world today, and Norway should be an example of treating everyone the same regardless of which passport you hold.

During my two years of living, studying and working in this country, I have felt welcomed and part of the society as everyone else. I hope that Norway can make the changes to keep being an open and human society, even more in the hardest times.

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