

Internationalisation in Norwegian health- and social care curricula – a document analysis

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ABSTRACT: In this Norwegian study, we examined the rationale for internationalisation and how national goals for internationalisation are expressed in relevant White Papers, Regulation on Common National Curriculum for Health- and Social Care studies, Norwegian regulations for six education programs and curricula for these programs in Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (HVL). The study employed qualitative, descriptive and explorative content analysis, which resulted in the main categories *Social justice and sustainability as political justifications, Mobility and internationalisation and Learning outcomes that support internationalisation*. White Papers underline the importance of internationalisation, but it is scarcely mentioned in the Norwegian regulations for health- and social care studies. HVL is in line with the White Papers, and provide for mobility windows and internationalisation at home through descriptions in their study plans.

KEYWORDS: Internationalisation, Policy implementation, Mobility windows

1 INTRODUCTION

Internationalisation is defined as a priority area for Norwegian higher education, and there are many incentives to foster the implementation of international perspectives in education (DIKU, 2024). According to White Paper no. 7 (WP7) (2020–2021), the internationalisation of study programmes involves a process that necessitates a long-term perspective. Internationalisation and facilitation for mobility must be embedded in study programmes, quality systems and leadership, but the implementation and design of learning outcomes is a complex process.

The implementation of government strategies presupposes that other national systems follow up the aims. Berman (1978) described implementation as processes on macro and micro levels, but there could be a *slippage* in passages between the guidelines and the actual implementation. Overarching national strategies such as White Papers represent the macro level, and there is an expectation that the strategies are followed up at practical levels. Decisions made by central authorities go through various stages, implying that different bodies or agencies make decisions to follow up overarching aims. According to Wedlin and Sahlin (2017), ideas circulate between institutions and become adopted by mainstream agencies. Through passages from one organisation to the next, strategies and ideas are interpreted, redefined and adapted. Wedlin and Sahlin (2017) refer to this as a process of *translation*. In such processes, ideas are interpreted to fit into new organisations.

Goodlad (1979) claimed that content of curriculums are affected by socio-political, substantive and technical-professional aspects, as well as negotiations between professional organisations outside educational institutions. The socio-political arena is about the societal context in which the curriculum is developed. The substantive aspect is how the curriculum is realised and the technical aspect concerns human and material opportunities and resources. According to Michelsen and colleagues (2017), the factors that influence descriptions of the final learning outcome include national and international standards and governance. Moreover, this process is influenced by the internal logics in professions, the preferences of an education programme, and knowledge development in the field. Considering the number of factors at play here, it is easy to understand the variations in the implementation of learning outcomes and learning activities related to internationalisation.

Generally, higher educational institutions have overarching strategies and guidelines for internationalisation, but have no clear directives for integration at programme level. This leaves room for interpreting and adapting the national guidelines to existing traditions, interests and opportunities (Flobakk-Sitter & Hybertsen, 2021). Ryan and colleagues (2022) stated that in the UK, there is a significant gap between government and institutional policies and the implementation of

internationalisation in higher education. They add that teaching staff appear to need a broader understanding of what internationalisation actually is, in order to engage in the integration of the intercultural and international dimensions of teaching (Ryan et al., 2022). Considering the number of learning outcomes in bachelor programmes, there is a risk that teachers and educational leaders will be afraid that internationalisation will come at the expense of profession-specific learning.

Flobakk-Sitter and Hybertsen (2021) found that Norwegian policy documents have defined internationalisation why it is necessary in higher education, and pointed to the need for structural and cultural changes that will enable the integration of internationalisation. A distinction must be made between globalisation, which is understood as a process in which individual measurements of distance and national borders weaken, and internationalisation, which helps to strengthen national identities and goals. Implementation of the United Nations' (United Nations Association of Norway, 2024) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and internationalisation in the curricula, as recommended by Norwegian government authorities, requires an ethical, yet critical perspective on the global and intercultural context (Gregersen-Hermans, 2021). This can be understood in terms of finding a balance between globalisation and internationalisation. By maintaining a critical and ethical outlook during the process, the quality of higher education can be improved (Gregersen-Hermans, 2021).

According to Jones (2022) and Beelen (2022), outbound mobility for students has been considered the gold standard, but travelling abroad is no guarantee of learning, and this opportunity is only available for “elite” students. Knowledge of didactics and pedagogy in the field of internationalisation is limited, but staff mobility is highlighted as a means to promote an increased understanding and integration of internationalisation (Flobakk-Sitter & Hybertsen, 2021). Teachers who learn the value of international collaboration seem to advocate it, and incorporate international, intercultural and global dimensions into education, research and service provision (Gregersen-Hermans, 2021).

In order for all students to have access to international learning, the incorporation of international aspects into study programmes (Beelen & Jones, 2015) and collaborative internationalisation without physical travel (Beelen, 2022) are possible options. This could be implemented through the use of digital pedagogical solutions, and virtual exchange (Jones, 2022). Jones (2022) emphasise that study programmes should focus on cultures. With the aim of social justice and the integration of diversity in multicultural societies, there is a need to cultivate students' ethical awareness, ensure human rights and gender equality, as well as combat racism and gender discrimination. This involves being aware of sustainability and power dynamics in knowledge policies, as well as recognising the need to meet and communicate across differences (Jones, 2022). Students might subsequently use their communication skills with patients/clients and colleagues at work, while other students might be engaged in collaboration across cultures and countries.

Knowledge sharing and network building across borders are seen as crucial to reaching the SDGs, where one of the goals is equality in education. According to Gregersen-Hermans (2021), internationalisation and sustainability are often addressed separately, but there is a need to harmonise the internationalisation of curricula with education for sustainability and critical thinking. The goals of internationalisation and sustainability in education must be clear, and pedagogical methods and teachers' awareness of integration must support these goals (Gregersen-Hermans, 2021).

Efforts are being made to integrate internationalisation in educational institutions by incorporating internationalisation into the curricula. By specifying learning outcomes that include knowledge of human dignity, social equity and cultural understanding, it will be possible to ensure that students develop ethical awareness and the skills to operate in a multicultural world (Ryan, Faulkner, Dillane & Flood, 2022).

It is essential that future health and social care professionals have the ability to cooperate across international identities, although multiple factors affect how internationalisation is implemented in study programmes. In this study, we wanted to understand whether different government guidelines are aligned, and if the aim of internationalisation is shown in health and social care curricula. The question is whether the ideas in the relevant White Papers are *translated* to improve students' international competence.

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of the present study was to examine the rationale for internationalisation, and how Norwegian goals for internationalisation are expressed in the relevant White Papers, regulation on a common national curriculum for health and social care studies and the Norwegian national regulations for education programmes and curricula for these education programmes in a specific educational institution.

1.2 Research question:

How is internationalisation in higher education portrayed in Norwegian policies and regulations for health and social care studies, and how has the Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (HVL) implemented internationalisation?

2 METHODS

Norwegian society is increasingly complex, with cultural challenges in health and social care services. The future workforce must understand how to use international knowledge in service delivery and be able to meet the population's needs. Thus, students need to acquire international knowledge during their studies. This qualitative document analysis has been performed to investigate *translation* processes regarding internationalisation.

The data include the following documents: White Paper no. 16 (WP16) (2016–2017), *Quality Culture in Higher Education*, WP7, *A world of opportunities*, Norwegian regulations for education programmes in *Social educator* (2017), *Child protection and child welfare* (2019), *Social work* (2019), *Biomedical laboratory science* (2019), *Physiotherapy* (2019), *Nursing* (2019) and the study programmes in HVL for the same education programmes (Table 1).

Table 1. Overview of the data

Study plan for bachelor programmes in HVL (2022–2023)	Norwegian regulations for education programmes (2019)	Regulation for health and social care studies	Norwegian White Papers that advocate internationalisation
Child protection and child welfare education programme	Child protection and child welfare	Norwegian regulation of common curriculum for health and social care studies (2017)	Quality Culture in Higher Education (White Paper no. 16 (2016–2017))
Biomedical laboratory science education programme	Biomedical laboratory science		A world of opportunities (White Paper no. 7 (2020–2021))
Physiotherapy education programme	Physiotherapy		
Social educator education programme	Social educator		
Nursing education programme	Nursing		
Social work education programme	Social work		

Elo and Kyngäs (2008) organised content analysis during the *Preparation, Organising and Reporting* stages. The *preparation* stage in this study involved selecting the relevant documents and keywords. The selected keywords are associated with the concept of internationalisation.

According to Elo and Kyngäs (2008), the content in documents that is part of the data must be *organised* and condensed through an analysis process before being presented as results. Each document in this study was reviewed using the keywords “mobility”, “international”, “culture”, “migration” and “sustainability”. Sentences or paragraphs from the documents containing content that matched the keywords were further analysed using Nvivo software. In the process between *organisation* and *reporting*, the data were *condensed*, inspired by Malterud's (2012) model for pragmatic, descriptive and explorative content analysis. The four steps in the analysis were as follows: 1) get an overview of the

content; 2) identify meaning units; 3) condense into subcategories and 4) synthesise the categories. Through these steps, three main categories and six subcategories (Table 2) emerged.

Table 2. Examples from the analysis

Meaning unit	Subcategories/Codes	Main categories/
<i>...contribute to social equality by ensuring that everyone has equal opportunities to pursue higher education, and that the choice of education is guided by abilities and desires rather than social background (White Paper no. 16 (2016–2017))</i>	Health policy priorities for global citizenship	Social justice and sustainability as political justifications
<i>...understand current trends in globalisation () provides a basis for mastering complex and unforeseen challenges () for those living today and for those who will come after us (HVL, study plan for Biomedical laboratory science)</i>	New solutions for sustainable societies	
<i>...able to cooperate in changing interdisciplinary national and international networks to achieve the expected learning outcomes (HVL, study plan for Social work)</i>	Mobility in study programmes	Mobility and internationalisation
<i>...all students can participate, regardless of what may potentially prevent them from physically travel (White Paper no. 7 (2020–2021))</i>	Online elective courses	
<i>...intercultural understanding is a useful generic skill for tomorrow's workforce (White Paper no. 7 (2020–2021))</i>	Sustainable international knowledge	Learning outcomes that support internationalisation
<i>...has insight into how patients' linguistic and cultural backgrounds challenge the maintenance of quality and patient safety, as well as knowledge of the use of interpreters (Norwegian regulation for bachelor's degree in nursing, 2019)</i>	Competence on human rights, ethnicity and beliefs	

3 RESULTS

Below, the three main categories, *Social justice and sustainability as political justifications*, *Mobility and internationalisation*, and *Learning outcomes that support internationalisation* are reported.

3.1 Social justice and sustainability as political justifications

This category includes the subcategories of *Health policy priorities for global citizenship* and *New solutions for sustainable societies*. Part of the impetus for focusing on internationalisation is that it is no longer possible to ignore global challenges and that such challenges must be resolved (WP7).

WP16 emphasises enhancing the quality of education through international collaboration about study programmes, mobility and knowledge, based on international research. The paper underscores the responsibility to uphold human rights and global citizenship, as well as address global challenges. WP7 highlights that, through strategic long-term work and flexibility, the need for strengthened partnerships can be met, whereas intercultural competence, language skills and regional knowledge can build a shared identity. WP16 notes that "...internationalisation can contribute to social equity by ensuring that everyone has equal opportunities to pursue higher education". Government guidelines aim for students to develop and become global citizens who take co-responsibility for sustainable development (WP16). The Norwegian regulation on common curriculum for health and social care studies state that health and social care education must prepare students for international perspectives and accommodate society's current and future needs for competence. Norwegian education-specific regulations highlight that culture and societal conditions influence health policies. An example from the Regulation for physiotherapy education (2019) states that students should have "...insight into how culture and societal conditions impact health policy priorities and the distribution of resources".

According to the study plans at HVL, social structures and ethical awareness can either hinder or promote living conditions, social inequality, health policy priorities, distribution of resources, inclusion of ethnic and cultural diversity, equality and discrimination. The study programme for biomedical

laboratory science education (2019) states that “...understanding contemporary globalisation provides a basis for the mastering of complex unforeseen challenges”. HVL offers a common course, *Academic education and academic skills*, at the start of all health and social science programmes. The course focuses on our shared global responsibility for those people living today and those who will come after us.

3.2 Mobility and internationalisation

This category includes the subcategories of *Mobility in study programmes* and *Online elective courses*. Internationalisation is integrated into HVL’s study programmes and, by 2025, the goal was for 30% of HVL graduates to have participated in an exchange programme. Norwegian study programmes have expectation of 50% student exchange in the long run (WP7) based on the notion that time spent abroad will give students international competence.

According to WP16, there are numerous incentives to strengthen mobility in education. Through international contacts, it is possible to develop joint degrees, contribute to global knowledge development, and participate in international cooperative programmes and research. WP7 supports the arguments in WP16 and highlights staff mobility as a means to create an international academic environment that stimulates student mobility. WP7 provides examples of international knowledge development where academic staff have collaborated on joint online courses. According to WP7, experience shows that “...academic staff who have themselves studied abroad are more likely to encourage and motivate students to undertake a stay abroad”. The same White Paper claims that international perspectives must concern all students. Incoming and outgoing students represent international knowledge that can be integrated into national teaching, as long as the idea of mobility is embedded in the study programmes. Technology offers opportunities for internationalisation at home and the goal of exchange for all students can be addressed by incorporating virtual exchange as part of their overall mobility: “...all students can participate, regardless of what might otherwise prevent them from physical travel” (WP7).

The social work and physiotherapy programmes at HVL offer online elective courses with international perspectives, where English-speaking students can participate. The disability nursing programme includes internationally developed subjects with internationalisation at home and international collaboration on the theme of supervision. The social work programme offers tailored subjects for incoming students and internationalisation at home. The study plan states that students should be “...able to cooperate in changing interdisciplinary national and international networks to achieve expected learning outcomes” (HVL, social work study plan, 2022–2023). In all study plans, provisions for student mobility are made to varying degrees, with mobility windows linked to theoretical subjects and practice exchange. HVL has established mobility agreements with educational institutions worldwide.

3.3 Learning outcomes that support internationalisation

This category includes the subcategories *Sustainable international knowledge* and *Competence on human rights, ethnicity and beliefs*.

International and intercultural competence, in addition to language skills, contribute to quality and is beneficial in professional life (WP16). WP7 asserts that intercultural competence, empathy and a focus on values can counteract radicalisation. According to the White Paper, intercultural understanding is “...a useful generic skill for tomorrow’s workforce”. The WP7 emphasises that personal development, academic education, intercultural competence and language skills for Norwegian students who go on mobility increase with longer stays abroad. To enhance the learning outcomes of international competence, measures are being considered to incorporate a learning outcome into the *National qualifications framework* (NKR) (WP7).

The Norwegian Regulation on common curriculum for health and social care studies (2017) emphasises knowledge of inclusion, ethnicity and non-discrimination. This is followed up by programme-specific regulations, which provide detailed descriptions of how the individual study programmes should facilitate the development of cultural competence. For instance, the Regulation for the education programme in child protection and child welfare (2019) states that students should be able to “...apply professional knowledge about cultural diversity and demonstrate multicultural understanding and cultural sensitivity in professional care”. Nursing students must be familiar with human rights and understand the importance of culture and language in understanding illness: “...have insight into how

patients' linguistic and cultural backgrounds challenge the maintenance of quality and patient safety as well as knowledge of the use of interpreters" (Norwegian regulation for the education programme in nursing, 2019). In the HVL's study plans for child protection and child welfare, social work and social educator, aspects such as internationalisation, international perspectives, the international context and global society are mentioned in the description of the learning outcomes. Learning outcomes for cultural competence are specified, indicating that students should have knowledge of ethnicity, inclusion, non-discrimination, equality, religion and migration. According to the social work curriculum at HVL (2022/2023), it is essential that students acquire international perspectives on work with clients from other countries, and that they can "...describe social welfare models in different countries". The physiotherapy study plan at HVL (2022–2023) states that students should be critically reflective and aware of the institutional and cultural frameworks that influence health policy priorities and sustainability.

4 DISCUSSION

This study highlights the rationale for internationalisation, and examines how internationalisation is portrayed in Norwegian policies, regulations for health and social care studies and selected curricula at HVL. Our main findings show that Norwegian White Papers give strong signals about internationalisation, with a goal of 50% mobility in the long run. On an educational institutional level, the goal for HVL in 2025 is 30%.

The context of this study is primarily the socio-political arena (Goodlad, 1979). Our findings show a mismatch between the aims of WP16, WP7, *Norwegian regulation on common curriculum for health- and social care studies* (2017) and the Norwegian regulations for education programmes in health and social care (2019). This is what Berman (1978) called a *slippage* between the guidelines and the next level of implementation. However, we found that internationalisation was highlighted in curricula in the investigated education programmes. Even though study plans aim to ensure the development of ethical awareness and the ability to function in a multicultural world, Ryan and colleagues (2022) noted that there is a disconnect between government and institutional policies for integrating internationalisation in higher education. We found that HVL follows the Norwegian government's internationalisation policies in its curricula, even though it is not highlighted in the Norwegian regulation on a common national curriculum for health and social care studies (2019) and the Norwegian regulations for education programmes.

According to Berman (1978), political decisions must be analysed before their content is incorporated into practical plans. Higher education has an obligation to safeguard content, from both relevant White Papers and specific regulations relating to national education. Regarding the idea of *internationalisation*, it is our interpretation that HVL has *translated* content from the national regulations, such as cultural competence and other learning outcome descriptions, to fit the White Papers' definition of internationalisation. This can be seen as *translation*, and a way to allow international aspects in study programmes.

One question is whether internationalisation has become a mainstream idea that organisations implement to fit into environments on a macro level. Wedlin and Sahlin (2017) explained collaborative processes wherein institutions circulate and align *fashionable ideas*, to be considered legitimate by other institutions. When implementing certain ideas, both the idea itself and other aspects of the organisation must be harmonised. In the process of adapting the idea of *internationalisation*, there can be various ways to interpret the content.

Physical and virtual mobility can be used to achieve lasting educational structures in which intercultural competence, language skills and knowledge of countries can build a shared understanding of internationalisation. WP7 emphasises that educational institutions must be flexible and work strategically. Ideas coming from taken-for-granted actors, such as government and institutional actors, are usually accepted. Nevertheless, ideas must be correctly interpreted in the organisations in order to be implemented (Wedlin and Sahlin, 2017). According to HVL's study plans, it is important to focus on factors that can hinder and promote social inequality. The fact that the common course *Academic Education and Academic Skills* (HVL, 2024/2025) highlights global responsibility for those living today and for future generations indicates that HVL facilitates internationalisation.

Future professionals will bear the responsibility for safeguarding human rights. They must address global challenges such as social inequality and disparities in educational opportunities (WP16) and be capable of managing complex and unforeseen challenges (HVL, Biomedical study plan, 2022). According to WP16, students need to learn about social development and cultural contexts. This aligns with Jones (2022), who argued that the internationalisation of curricula enhances knowledge of the integration of diversity, human rights and equality, through the development of ethical awareness. The facilitation of understanding through dialogue and collaboration can serve as a counterbalance to issues such as radicalisation.

According to WP16, international collaboration in study programmes, mobility and research-based knowledge contributes to the enhancement of educational quality. Gregersen-Hermans (2021) stated that the internationalisation of curricula helps to improve quality in higher education. However, while the enhancement of quality through internationalisation is mentioned in parliamentary reports, we note a lack of focus on quality indicators that higher educational institutions could use as benchmarks. Ethical and critical thinking in a global and cross-cultural context can lead to transformative learning (Gregersen-Hermans, 2021). A potential goal for students is to perceive themselves as global citizens who take shared responsibility for a sustainable world (WP16). The internet has become increasingly available and internationalisation at home is accessible (WP7), which leads to international students learning collaboratively, in spite of physical distance.

According to WP16, numerous incentives are provided to enhance mobility in education, aiming to establish international contacts and collaboration, joint degrees, global knowledge development and research. Flobakk-Sitter and Hybertsen (2021) stated that policy documents for Norwegian higher education indicate a need for structural and cultural changes. We agree with these authors in that higher education must facilitate internationalisation which, in turn, contributes to students' personal development and attractiveness in the job market.

WP7 and WP16 underline that international perspectives must concern all students and that this must be facilitated by the teaching staff. Ryan and colleagues (2022) pointed out that if teachers are included in the process of developing design, strategy, policy and learning activities, they will be more likely to address the gap between policy and practice. When mobility is integrated into study programmes, international knowledge can be used from incoming and outgoing students (WP7). Michelsen and colleagues (2017) stated that the implementation and design of learning outcomes generally occur through complex processes in which international standards, developments in the field and the internal logic of the professions and educational institutions play a role. Flobakk-Sitter and Hybertsen (2021) emphasised that the variation in study programmes connected to internationalisation can be attributed to these complex processes.

There is a need to develop the knowledge base on didactics and pedagogy in the field of internationalisation (Flobakk-Sitter & Hybertsen, 2021). Using digital pedagogical solutions and virtual exchange, Jones (2022) suggested that opportunities for international and cultural learning can be increased. In our opinion, online elective courses are effective complements to physical mobility. Our results show examples of international joint degrees in which Norwegian and international students undertook the same courses, such as in social work and physiotherapy education at HVL.

It is being considered to include a learning outcome concerning international competence in the Norwegian *Qualifications Framework* (WP7). The authors found that HVL's study plan for social work (2022–2023) emphasises international perspectives and knowledge of welfare models in other countries. A similar emphasis can be seen in the study plan for Physiotherapy (HVL, study plan for physiotherapy, 2022–2023), which aims for students to be able to collaborate in national and international networks, as well as to be critically reflective and aware of institutional and cultural frameworks.

It is known that learning outcomes strengthen the structures of an education system, but the interpretation of the learning outcomes still varies between campuses and teachers (Kvilhaugsvik, 2021). Despite stronger governance of higher education and the aim to make education accessible and relevant (Kvilhaugsvik, 2021), learning outcomes are also influenced by interactions in academic environments and the hierarchy in which the education system operates (Michelsen et al., 2017). The complexity of education, such as teachers being educated in different contexts, can lead to conflicting opinions coming into play when integrating internationalisation into education programmes. In addition, different government guidelines add another layer of complexity to processes of internationalisation. Here,

leadership support, as pointed out by Ryan and colleagues (2022), is crucial for the integration process. These authors state that teaching staff may have different perceptions of what internationalisation entails, but by participating in the entire integration process, they can gain increased cultural understanding and knowledge to prepare students to become professionals in their fields in a global world.

Empathy, intercultural competence and values that counteract radicalisation are important when collaborating with individuals from other countries (WP7). We found that the Norwegian regulation on a common national curriculum for health and social care studies (2019) emphasises that students need knowledge of inclusion, ethnicity and non-discrimination.

Nursing students need knowledge of human rights and must be able to interpret culture and language to understand signs of illness (Norwegian regulation for nursing education, 2019). Chan and colleagues (2017) suggested that intercultural communication must be developed by focusing on knowledge of each other. Intercultural learning can be more effectively achieved by addressing and learning from the interactions between students from different cultures, rather than merely sharing factual knowledge. In this study, it emerged that HVL, in its study plan for child protection and child welfare, social work and social educator, has also connected knowledge about migration due to flight, labour immigration, gender equality and religion to enhance the understanding of global society.

5 CONCLUSION

This study examined the rationale for implementing internationalisation in Norwegian higher education and how HVL aims to ensure that graduate students possess international competence and an ability to solve social challenges in a sustainable manner.

There is a slippage between the overarching guidelines and the next level of implementation. This can be explained by the need for the *translation of internationalisation* as the intended content of the concept need to be communicated through White Papers, via national regulations, and to educational institutions. Internationalisation is scarcely mentioned in the Norwegian regulation on a common national curriculum for health and social care studies, nor is it mentioned in the Norwegian regulations for professional education. What these guidelines highlight instead are learning outcomes such as cultural competence, inclusion and non-discrimination, which are compatible with internationalisation. HVL's study plans offer mobility windows, integrate a focus on sustainability from the outset of the programmes, and adopt a responsible, ethical and critical perspective on the global and intercultural context for which students are being prepared. The facilitation of internationalisation using digital tools shows that HVL is prioritising internationalisation.

There is still a need for research on the implementation of internationalisation. Such research could, for example, study teachers' views on challenges and pedagogies due to the implementation of internationalisation in study programmes.

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