

# NKS

## Facts about the institution

Name of institution	NKS Distance Education
URL of institution	<a href="http://www.nks.no">www.nks.no</a>
Country	Norway
Number of employees	16 full-time, 60 part-time
Levels in the educational systems	Tertiary and secondary
Interviewed persons	Dagny Blom, Director and rector Atle Schaatun, Development leader of distance education Anders Nome, Leader of pedagogy in distance education

## *Introduction*

NKS Distance Education (NKS) is a non-profit private educational institution, accredited by the Norwegian Government. NKS offers courses at secondary and tertiary level to adults. The courses are aimed at the continuing and further education market, and to some extent also at students seeking an ordinary (basic) education and. NKS is a single mode distance education provider. It was founded in 1914 and is the oldest distance education institution in Norway.

## *Contextual factors concerning online education in Norway*

Norway has a total population of 4.6 million with a common language. The target group for BI DE is mainly the Norwegian adult population.

Penetration of technology for online learning is high. For instance over 50 percent of people in the main age target group have broadband Internet access at home, 75 percent of homes have PCs, 60 percent Internet access and nearly 60 percent of the population use PC on a daily basis.

It is assumed that, because of the relatively high level of computer literacy in the population, and not least, governmental support for distance education in general over many decades and for online learning the last 15 years both through legislation and financial support to students and institutions, market acceptance for online learning is high relative to most other European countries.

## *History*

Since the foundation in 1914, NKS was, obviously, based on correspondence teaching for several decades. However, NKS has been in the forefront of using new technologies. For example, a few years after television broadcasting started in Norway, NKS started to produce education programs in cooperation with the Norwegian National Broadcasting (NRK). In the eighties, NKS participated in a consortium with several other stakeholders in the field, such as NKI and the national telecommunication company. Here the aim was to run test projects with different technologies, such as satellite communication. The consortium was terminated around 1990.

Around 1987/1988 a project applying a predecessor of the Internet was launched. The system developed, called Portacom, was not applied broadly in the institution and can be viewed as a test project. Although considerable numbers of students used Portacom, teaching still relied largely on a first generation (correspondence) or second generation (radio and TV based distance education) model.

Ordinary use of the Internet started around 1997/1998 when some of the courses were made available on the web. The first LMS, which NKS still uses, was introduced in 2000. This system is called "Luvit", and NKS was one of the owners of the system (one of the other owners were The University of Lund in Sweden). With this, third generation distance education was established at NKS.

Since then, the number of students in web based courses has increased steadily, and today numbers 3-4000 per year (6-8000 course enrolments). NKS still offers correspondence teaching. The number of correspondence students has decreased during the last years, and now numbers around 2000 students per year (around 4000 course enrolments).

During the 80-ies and 90-ies, the total number of students decreased substantially at NKS. For example, in 1976 the institution had around 100 000 course enrolments. The high numbers were largely a result of cooperation with education organisations that organised face-to-face meetings in blended learning models. In addition, the government funded a large part of the course fees. The decline stopped after year 2000 and during the last few years number of students have been constant or increased slightly. The increases have been totally due to growth in number of online students.

The long tradition in first generation distance education meant that e-learning (third generation distance education) could be implemented more easily than if the institution had been without this tradition. The same staff that ran correspondence teaching started to run web based courses. Because online and correspondence teaching share several basic features (in particular, they are both designed to stimulate and facilitate dialogue between student and tutor) it was not necessary to develop an entirely new online teaching pedagogy. Adapting existing (first generation) distance education pedagogy to an online environment was the only new issue for NKS.

This had several positive effects. First, the transition was fairly easy for the staff and online teaching with high quality could be delivered very soon after Internet was taken into use. Second, existing competence in (first generation) distance education pedagogy made it easier for NKS to make the decision to switch to online teaching. In the early years of online education, several "prophets" meant that an entirely new pedagogy had to be developed for online teaching. If one believed this, one can easily imagine that an organisation could have been reluctant against moving to online teaching. Because NKS knew these "prophets" were not right (because of the existing strong distance education pedagogy), NKS was not influenced by their prophecies. In addition, a sober attitude to online teaching meant that was neither hostile nor over enthusiastic towards the new technology, but had expectation that were more rooted in realities.

Therefore, being able to build on strong competence in first generation distance teaching has been a key to success in e-learning based distance education.

## ***Technical issues***

Competence in information and communication technology varies among different groups of staff. Each group has the competence needed to operate and utilise the systems they have at their disposal. For example, teachers and course developers have necessary competence in pedagogical systems, but they can not be considered leading experts of such systems. However, when it comes to connecting pedagogy with these systems, the competence must be considered high.

NKS has an IT department with four persons which take care of system development and maintenance. Thus, in this department, general technical competence is high. NKS has developed its own student administrative system. Other systems are bought from commercial developers. The IT department works to make these systems operate together.

How well are these various systems integrated? The answer to this depends on who you ask. For students, the systems are integrated well enough for them to experience smooth and seamless links between services offered by different systems. However, for the staff operating these services, the situation is different. Less than perfect integration for example means that functions located in one of the systems are not available through a common interface but must be operated through each system separately. This means that administrative routines are more resource consuming than they could have been if the systems were better integrated, and it means that NKS still have a way to go before we have perfect integration. Nevertheless, the interviewees believe that even this imperfect system has contributed to the success of NKS, because it, despite of the shortcomings, can handle large numbers of students and therefore contributes to cost effectiveness.

From a student perspective courses are based almost exclusively on widely used technologies that can easily be used by students. Only very rarely are students required to buy additional software.

## ***Courses***

In the courses, secondary and tertiary levels are covered in an approximately 50-50 ratio. Important subjects are management and administration, economy, media studies, journalism and various subjects in continuing education for teachers. However, an overriding principle is that subjects are chosen according to demands in the market. Through years of experience with distance education, NKS staff has learned that most subjects can be adapted to an online environment. In other words, most subjects are onlineable. Only major exceptions are subjects that require practical training. Thus, the degree of onlineability of a subject is generally not an issue when NKS considers whether courses should be developed within this subject. Rather, the most important issue is whether there is a market for a course.

NKS has flexible start-up and progression to some extent. Students may start whenever they like, and study on a course for as long as they want, but exams are arranged only twice a year.

The most important form of communication is asynchronous communication between student and tutor. There are also possibilities for synchronous communication, but students show little interest in this. When synchronous (or near synchronous) communication has been tried out, for example through discussion forum and chat forum, students are often reluctant to participating. However, in some courses, such forum seems to get attention and participation from students.

## ***Management, strategy and attitudes***

Because NKS is a single mode distance education, development of online education is what NKS focuses on and therefore what leadership builds strategies around. Strategies and plans are followed up loyally by all groups of staff. Thus, this differs from for example dual mode universities and university colleges, where there may be a schism between strategic goals of the institution to develop distance education and personal goals of individual academics to follow their own research careers.

NKS does not have its own academic staff and must cooperate with other institutions or persons to get such staff. For higher education courses, a higher education institution has to be formally responsible. Thus, at this level, cooperation with an institution is necessary. On the secondary level, NKS can be formally responsible. Thus, here cooperation can be done with individuals. Cooperation is a key to success, because it allows NKS to be flexible in the courses it chooses to develop and thus makes it possible to follow demand in the market.

The fact that teachers are signed in on projects also assures that they have positive attitudes towards teaching (unlike, again, what one might expect in ordinary universities and colleges). Teachers get a clear description of what their job is. Thus, they know what they have to do and therefore probably have manageable workloads too. In agreement with this, NKS does generally not experience any over load among tutors. They are paid per assignment students are supposed to submit. This payment should also cover all other communication with students, including participation in discussion groups. If such communication takes much more time than anticipated, teachers may be paid extra.

Because almost all teaching is distance teaching, teachers can live basically anywhere. This makes it easier to recruit them, and therefore contributes to NKS' ability to be flexible in choice of courses developed.

NKS developed a system for quality monitoring of distance education fairly early. Around 1992, The Norwegian Association for Distance Education (NADE) developed a new system that NKS implemented. Focus on quality has been vital for NKS.

Traditionally distance education has been an area of great interest from the government. As the first country in the world, Norway passed a law for distance education. Also, governmental funding was substantial for several decades and led to high recruitment to courses. Now this has declined, and today governmental money makes up only around 6% of the total revenue.

## ***Economy***

Because government grants cover only a minute fraction of total costs, NKS operations has to be run with a high degree of cost effectiveness. Thus, cost effectiveness is vital for success and survival. Large numbers of students contribute to this.

Although recruitment to single courses varies, overall level of recruitment is fairly stable between years. After several years with severe decline in the 90-ies, recruitment has been stable for several years. Now, there is a small tendency of increase. However, to remain stable or increase, NKS must all the time try to feel what market changes are and adapt to them.

Because academic staff members are employed on project basis, staff costs can be controlled according to changes in the market. This is vital for cost effectiveness and survival, and is clearly a key to the success of NKS.

### ***Other factors***

Good marketing is clearly vital for student recruitment and therefore success. NKS continuously work with marketing strategy, in particular searching for the optimal media to advertise in (which has changed substantially during recent years).

### ***Conclusions***

These factors are seen as vital for the success and survival of NKS as a mega provider of online education:

- Long tradition and high competence in correspondence teaching facilitated establishment of e-learning based distance education because the two forms share several basic features.
- Integrated (although not perfectly so) technical systems which allows NKS to handle large numbers of students effectively.
- Close monitoring of the market to identify courses that should be developed and terminated.
- Flexible employment of teachers which makes it possible to develop courses within a range of subjects (and thus act on market trends revealed) and control staff costs according to market changes.
- Good marketing to recruit large numbers of students.