

NKS interview for the Mega Trends project.

Facts about the institution

Name of institution	NKS
URL of institution	www.nks.no
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

Historical context

1. How would you describe the history of distance education in your institution?

Distance education at NKS dates back to 1914, when the organisation was founded. Obviously, operations were based on correspondence teaching, also called first generation distance education, for decades.

Technology has been taken into use as it has become available and as early as possible. 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) 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 (TV- and radio based distance education is here referred to as second generation).

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.

2. *How has competence in e-learning developed in your institution and how has it contributed to your success?*

Competence in e-learning has been developed with a basis in strong competence in correspondence teaching. The same staff that ran correspondence teaching started to run web based courses. Correspondence and online teaching shares several basic features. In particular, they are both designed to stimulate and facilitate dialogue between student and tutor. Therefore, 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.

A person was employed to help implementing online teaching. He trained staff and helped with system implementation.

To summarise the answer to this question, a key to success was that one was able to build on strong competence in first generation distance teaching when online teaching was developed. This meant first that the organisation was not put off by early “prophets” stating that implementation online education would mean large changes to pedagogy and second that NKS staff could use well established competence in first generation distance education in the implementation.

3. *Has this development been abrupt or would you describe it more as a gradual step-by-step process?*

The development has been gradual. A predecessor of modern online teaching was introduced early (Portacom, as described above). Also, the transition from first generation (correspondence) teaching to online learning has been gradual and is still going on.

4. *How has online education been followed up by evaluation and research and how has this contributed to your success?*

Several years ago, NKS used to run large evaluation projects. Due to stricter economy, this is no longer the case. Therefore online education is not followed up by research at NKS today. Now quality is monitored through large student surveys that are carried out regularly. But the most important quality monitoring is probably happening through the daily contact between staff and students. Based on feedback here and the larger student surveys, various aspects of teaching and courses are adjusted. Often, one can see from student feedback that they are more satisfied after such adjustments.

To summarise the answer to this question, online education is not, at present, followed up by research, but by formal and informal quality monitoring.

Technical issues

5. How would you describe competence in information and communication technology in your institution?

The competence 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.

6. To which extent are e-learning courses in your institution based on widely used technologies that can be taken into use by students without requiring them to buy additional hardware or software? (in addition to what they have from before)

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.

7. How would you describe the integration between different IT-systems that are involved in e-learning in your institution? How has this contributed to your success?

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 we still have a way to go before we have perfect integration. Nevertheless, we believe that even this imperfect system has contributed to our success.

8. What are the strengths and weaknesses of your e-learning administrative systems (from enrolment through delivery to certification)?

The strength is that one has managed to connect different systems to something that actually works and that from the student perspective provides seamless services. The weakness is that the different parts are not fully integrated and does not provide seamless information and services for the staff.

Courses

9. *Which types of subjects are covered by online education in your institution and what is the relative importance of different subjects?*

Both 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 subjects are chosen according to demands in the market and then we adapt the course to pedagogical requirements.

10. *How would you describe the “onlineability” of the subjects your institution has chosen for e-learning?*

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.

11. *Do the online courses provided by your institution have flexible start-up and progression?*

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.

12. *What is the role or importance of synchronous and asynchronous communication between students and teachers and among students themselves?*

The most important form 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

13. *How would you describe involvement from the institution leadership in terms of being supportive, and how has this been important for success?*

NKS is a single mode distance education. Thus, development of online education is what NKS focuses on and therefore what leadership builds strategies around. Clearly, leadership is therefore strongly involved, but it is also self evident that this is so.

14. *How would you describe the attitudes of the different groups of staff towards online teaching? How has this affected your success?*

Staff members are generally positive and attitudes can be described as down-to-earth-like. This also includes academic staff members. They are signed in on projects (to be described below), and therefore are generally positive.

15. *Does your institution have a strategy for online education? If yes, what is (briefly) the content of the strategy and how is it followed up by employees in your organisation?*

The decision to transform NKS from a correspondence based distance education institution to a third generation based institution was a strategic one. Central aspects of NKS strategy focus on how to develop the institution as a distance education institution. It is followed up loyally by all groups of staff.

16. How does your institution deal with quality issues related to online education and has quality contributed to success?

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. One consequence is that higher education study programs at NKS have been accredited by the Norwegian National Authority for Accreditation of higher education (NOKUT).

17. How would you describe the effectiveness of your administrative routines in online education?

As mentioned above, effectiveness could have been better if integration between various systems had been better. However, a robust student administrative system ensures that students get all the information they need.

18. To which extent do teachers involved in online education have predictable and manageable workloads?

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.

19. To which extent does your institution collaborate with other educational institutions and how has this affected success?

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 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.

20. How would you describe the credibility of your institution (both formal and informal) with the government and public administration and how has this been an important criterion for success?

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.

21. *How are you able to handle the large number of online courses and students?*

The systems are designed to handle large numbers of students. In addition, 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. Being able to handle large numbers of students is a key to success, because it contributes to cost effectiveness.

Economy

22. *How would you describe the cost-effectiveness of online education in your institution?
How has cost-effectiveness affected success?*

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.

23. *To which extent is income from operation of online education stable and predictable?*

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.

24. *To which extent does your institution experience pressure to be flexible to be able to adapt to a changing market?*

This pressure is experienced and to be able to respond to it is vital for survival of the institution (as described above).

25. *To which extent does your institution apply a strategy of flexible employment and use staff to adapt to changes in markets?*

Because academic staff members are employed on project basis, NKS clearly has such a strategy. Because this is vital for cost effectiveness and thus survival, it is clearly a key to success.

Additional factors

26. *What other factors have contributed to sustainability, robustness and the achievement of critical mass in your institution?*

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).