

## **Yes to international students, no to pointless money moving!**

Associate professor of Global Development Studies at the University of Agder, Arnhild Leer-Helgesen, and leader of SAIH Selma Bratberg share their opinions on the recent news regarding the proposed national budget for 2025.

It is unfortunate to see that the proposed budget indicates a further weakening of the international cooperation in the Norwegian higher education institutions.

### **Read the full article below:**

"We want more international students to attend Norwegian universities and university colleges. What we are concerned about is a multi-year trend where international cooperation in academia in general, and the focus on student mobility in particular, is being given lower priority, write the authors of the article.

The government is using millions in aid that could have provided the world's poor with an education to cover tuition fees in Norway that they themselves have introduced. Despite how absurd it is, State Secretary Bjørg Sandkjær seems unsympathetic to the criticism.

State Secretary Bjørg Sandkjær is surprised by our criticism of the use of aid funds to pay tuition fees for international students at Norwegian universities and university colleges in Panorama.

We are surprised by the response, and the apparent unwillingness to respond properly to the criticism. When the proposal to introduce tuition fees for students from outside the EEA and Switzerland was circulated for consultation in 2022, both the University of Agder and SAIH were among the 87 consultative bodies that all expressed criticism of the proposal.

The measure met with massive opposition from a unified sector that feared less diversity and fewer important perspectives at Norwegian higher education institutions.

A little over a year after the introduction of tuition fees, the number of international students has fallen by almost 80 per cent, and the student body at Norwegian universities has become significantly more homogeneous.

The government's proposed national budget for 2025, presented on Monday last week, provides for a further weakening of international cooperation at Norwegian higher education institutions, with a scholarship scheme for up to 200 students with two-year scholarships as a small band-aid on an open wound. Our criticism is not directed at the scholarship scheme

itself, we are in favour of all good measures that can bring more international students to Norway. However, we are highly critical of a financing model in which the newly introduced tuition fees are estimated to be the scheme's most expensive expense item, and that this cost is to be covered by an already severely tested aid budget.

This appears to us to be a pointless transfer of money from one government agency to another, and we believe that a minimum measure to ensure the effectiveness of the scheme is that students who come to Norway through the scholarship schemes are exempt from the requirement for tuition fees.

Fortunately, we have previously received support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for this concern and had therefore expected something other than surprise from Sandkjær in the face of our criticism.

Among the above-mentioned critical consultative bodies in 2022 was also the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Ministry expressed concern about the consequences the tuition fee could have for the operation of schemes financed through its budgets, including the aid budget.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs therefore requested an exemption from the tuition fee for this type of scheme, and also stated that a new scholarship program is not considered appropriate, because "costs related to scholarships to cover tuition fees and administration of a scholarship program will most likely entail higher costs for the Norwegian state than the current scheme".

The scheme referred to here is Norpart – which supports long-term academic cooperation and mutual student exchange between higher education institutions in Norway and partner countries in the Global South. This scheme is also proposed to be cut in the budget that is now available.

Let there be no doubt: We want more international students to attend Norwegian universities and university colleges. What we are concerned about is what we perceive as a multi-year trend where international cooperation in academia in general, and the focus on student mobility in particular, is being given lower priority.

Under this government, free higher education has gone from being a right for everyone, to becoming charity for a few students. To add salt to the wound, the government is now also proposing to take money from global education initiatives to finance Norwegian higher education institutions.

The Government must take international education and research cooperation seriously and stop wasting valuable aid money on financing a tuition fee that is contrary to the professional advice of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – and the higher education sector as a whole.