

Intervention – Ms Kristin Halvorsen – Norwegian Minister of Education “Jobs for Youth” forum – Session 3 – 21 September 2010

Introduction

- Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen.
- It is a great privilege for me to see so many of you again – I hope you all enjoyed dinner last night as much as I did.
- Today, I will speak to you about Norwegian priorities when it comes to implementing the necessary efforts in the education system to promote more and better jobs for youth. Education is the single most important thing that will help young people to get a firm foothold in the labour market.
- Until last year I served as Minister of Finance. So, I do know quite well what is important to the national economy. It is the human capital and not the oil that is important. The human capital amounts to almost 80 percent of our national wealth and is much more valuable to the economy than exploitation of oil and gas. Knowledge is a basis for economical and social development. Growth and employment is clearly dependent upon the qualifications and competence of the working force.
- My message is simple: Education prevents exclusion. To succeed with the “employment strategy”, we must first succeed with our “education strategy”. To conduct more young people through education, particularly upper secondary education, is a prerequisite if we are to achieve sustainable employment and equitable growth. We must utilize times of recession by investing in young peoples’ education. It will always pay. It will help them during the downturn, better prepare them for the recovery, and make sure that we meet the labour market’s as well as society’s future needs for skills.

An overview of the situation in the labour market and Norwegian challenges

- Compared to many other countries, Norway is not very hard hit by the economic and jobs crisis. We have a registered unemployment rate of less than 4 per cent. The school to work transition is relatively smooth for most young people. Youth unemployment is low compared to other countries.
- However, Norway has the same challenges as many other countries hit by the present recession: There has been an increase in unemployment: youth,

immigrants and disabled are the most affected. There has been an increase in young people on social assistance. We also have far too many on disability pension, and there has been a worrisome increase in young disabled persons (mostly owing to social- and psychological problems).

- The youth unemployment rate is three times the adult unemployment rate. The unemployment rate is highest in the age group 20-24 years: 11.5 per cent while 3,9 per cent in the population as a whole (Labour Force Survey by Statistics Norway, 2. quarter 2010 (AKU))

- We also have a challenge when it comes to those between 16 and 19 years who are in neither in the education system nor in employment. There is also a lack of trainee-positions (apprenticeship) within upper secondary vocational education, especially in the public sector.

- I am extremely concerned that far too many people leave school without a completed secondary education. The drop-out figures have been stable during the last 15 years. A third of the pupils do not receive their upper secondary education diploma within a period of five years. In vocational training more than 40 per cent do not receive their diploma within this same period. This is something we, as a society, cannot afford and will not accept.

- Socio-economic background has strong influence on school performance. Young first generation immigrants boys from non-western countries are among the most vulnerable. Thus, we still have a challenge when it comes to equal opportunities and social reproduction which is a major concern of this government coalition.

- Failure to complete upper secondary education is a loss not only for the individual but also for society as a whole. Having an upper secondary diploma makes school-to-work transition a lot easier. There is a strong connection between upper secondary education and status in the labour market. Dropouts from upper secondary education score high on most negative statistics: unemployment, disabilities, and even imprisonment. Young people who have not fulfilled upper secondary school, are more likely to be unemployed. Almost none of the young people on disability pension have fulfilled upper secondary education.

- Poor employment prospect in the beginning of the working career unfortunately easily leads to long benefit spells as well as exclusion and have long term costs. If we increase the number of young people who complete upper secondary education by 10 percentage points, we can save about 5 billion Norwegian kroner each year in Norway.

- When we know that the need for a labour force with only primary and lower secondary education is low, and will decrease in the future while we will be in short of people with a vocational diploma in the coming years, the political solution seems rather obvious. We must see to it that more pupils complete upper secondary education.

● What, then, are the concrete measures and political priorities to succeed in my ambitious combating dropouts- project?

- First of all I will ensure that the school sector has the capacity to follow up and work in line with important steps stressed in the education-reform of 2006 and further developed in several propositions and white papers since then.

- First and foremost we need to intervene at an early age and take action at an early stage in a child's life. We also need to stress basic skills at all levels. We must map and monitor during the whole education period – from kindergarten through upper secondary education.

- In Norway most children attend Kindergarten. We need to give children the best possible opportunities for the future. To invest in the education and care for small children so that they develop their talents and capacities regardless of social or economic background, is very important for the future of this nation. The Government will therefore develop the quality in the kindergartens in the years to come.

- Information flow between kindergartens, schools and the different levels within the education system is fundamental to offer assistance when needed. I will strengthen the cooperation between kindergartens and school and between municipalities (school owners and responsible for the primary and lower secondary school education) and the county authorities (school owners and responsible for upper secondary education).

- The Government has recently launched a three year project aimed at improving the prospect that young people complete upper secondary education. This is one of my most important political missions. I am in close dialogue with County–authorities in order to intensify the effort of preventing drop-out.

- To ensure that more young people leave school with a diploma, it is very important to make schools more practically oriented. The curriculum in upper secondary vocational training shall be more work relevant. Furthermore, it is crucial to implement greater flexibility in the way teaching takes place to make it easier to take the individual needs of pupils into account. A new pathway with

a competence certificate after two years within technical and vocational training shall be imposed to pupils in danger of dropping out.

- Pupils and apprentices shall be followed up more closely. A new contract with the social partners regarding apprenticeship is under preparation.

- I will pay special attention to the phenomenon of what we call “mental dropout” in lower secondary education, which has a drastic effect on the pupils’ school results and further education and work possibilities. I will present a white paper to Parliament on this topic next year. Possible measures include the following: The school shall not turn out to be less demanding, but measures that make teaching less academic, more practical, relevant and realistic will be further developed. Measures that give pupils more individual choices and a possibility to improve performance from lower secondary education will be considered.

- I will be watching the development of dropout figures closely. A new monitoring and reporting system shall be implemented and The Ministry will have closer contact with the counties that responsible for providing upper secondary education.

Offering youth a “second chance at a qualification”

- Offering a second chance for those who did not succeed the first time is crucial to hindering so-called scarring effects.

- Low skilled youth who is out of work should have the opportunity to participate in training programme to boost their employability for the future, and low skilled youth should strongly be incited to opt for training to get a vocational diploma.

- A well designed active labour market policy is crucial to hindering passive welfare dependency and promoting the passage to working life.

- Close cooperation between and education-, labour market- and social institutions is crucial to helping those at risk. In Norway the Government represented by the Ministries of Education and Labour, and the Norwegian Association of Regional and Local Authorities (KS) has agreed on the need to strengthen cooperation to reduce dropouts and increase the number of youth and adults who complete upper secondary education.

- When it comes to recent and important policy measures in this field, I can mention that:

1) We are now discussing specific measures to ensure better follow up of the youngest age group who is neither in education nor in employment. It is not acceptable that the local Educational Follow Up service and the local Employment and welfare service are not in contact with 1/3 of this group. Hopefully we will find inspiration from the discussion here today.

2) In the budget of 2010 The Ministry of Education gave priority to a three year pilot project in four counties to encourage the development of courses in technical and vocational training adopted for jobseekers. The aim is to make sure that more unemployed people have access to participating in upper secondary education while keeping their unemployment benefit. I will follow these projects with great interest and foresee an extension if the pilot turns out to be effective.

Some concluding remarks

- There are people who tell me that education is not the solution for the most disadvantaged group. Those who belong to this group are supposed to hate school and to be so unmotivated for further education and training that even the thought of school makes them sick. Is there really no chance for further training of the hardcore group of disadvantaged youth?

- As I see human beings, there is no limit to what people can learn. It is only a question of professional teaching and adapted training for the individuals concerned. If there is a problem, it is not that boys and girls do not fit into whatever teaching/training/ are available; it is rather that available teaching/ courses/training do not have what it takes to provide everyone with an opportunity that fits their abilities and ambitions. People working within the education- and employment services should always bear in mind the potential for achievement that resides in every human being and look at the bright side of life!

- Against all odds, things often go well indeed! Let me tell you about a young woman who received the prize of hero of learning. She is a perfect example of how education and training may alter a persons' life completely. While still in prison, she was motivated to make some changes in her life, and with well adopted training and support she was able to complete upper secondary education. Her prospects may not have been promising. She was homeless and a drug-addict for many years and had been arrested several times for criminal offences. Today she has put all this behind her. Now she has a steady job, lives in an apartment of her own, and drugs are no longer part of her life.