

Lessons from Oslo

Examining social mobility after the establishment of Norway's first university

Abstract for European Historical Economics Society Conference

January 2022

Authors:

- Nick Ford, Department of Economic History, Lund University
(nicholas_martin.ford@ekh.lu.se)
- Kristin Ranestad, Department of Economic History, Lund University
(kristin.ranestad@ekh.lu.se)
- Paul Sharp, Dept of Economics, University of Southern Denmark; CAGE; CEPR
(pauls@sam.sdu.dk)

Keywords: Human capital, education, social mobility, economic history, Norway

Region and period: Denmark and Norway, ca. 1800–1820

The first Scandinavian universities were established in the fifteenth century. But Norway, in contrast to Denmark and Sweden, received its first university only in the nineteenth century. Until then, aspiring Norwegian scholars had to travel abroad — principally to Copenhagen. This paper considers what effects were observable in terms of the supply of university-educated labour in Norway following the foundation of (what is now) the University of Oslo in 1811. With the costs of accessing tertiary education instantaneously lowered, which groups in Norwegian society (after 1811) now went to university who previously did not?

Unlocking access to education is a central part of the story of achieving the economic gains from human capital. Scandinavia entered the industrial age with already high levels of literacy — a trend that started with Lutheran church teachings, and was subsequently reinforced by public primary schooling. It is in secondary and tertiary education that differences in Scandinavians' human capital acquisition are more apparent. Thus, understanding who went to high school and university — and the factors that contributed to changes in the cohort profile

over time — is relevant to the exploring the role of human capital, and particularly ‘upper-tail’ human capital, in Scandinavia’s development.

Norway provides a unique case study for examination. First, the late establishment of a national university (relative to Denmark and Sweden) provides an advantage in terms of the data available. Second, Norway did not itself choose the timing of the new university. Norway was ruled in union with Denmark until the early nineteenth century. The Danish — and by extension, Norwegian — king was required to approve a new university; Danish officials resisted the idea for decades out of fears that it would fuel Norwegian separatism. Third, the establishment of the University of Oslo coincided with (though was not a direct consequence of) Norway’s separation from Denmark in 1814. Thus, one would expect a greater share of Norwegian graduates from the University of Oslo to work in Norway rather than, for example, remain in Denmark after completing their studies at the University of Copenhagen.

The data sources underpinning this analysis are student grade lists (revealing who went to high school and qualified for entry to university) and Danish and Norwegian census data from 1801. The approach is a difference-in-difference analysis, using Danish graduates as a baseline (unlikely to be affected by the University of Oslo opening) against which the Norwegian students can be compared. By linking Danish and Norwegian graduates (only in Copenhagen pre-1811, with the opportunity to study in Oslo post-1811) with their household entries in the 1801 census (that is, when the graduates were children), we can explore changes in the socioeconomic status of Norwegian students that were triggered by the exogenous shock of Norway’s first university opening.