

Evaluation: Norwegian sociological research holds high standard

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Sociology has long been a strong field of study in Norway. The conclusion of an evaluation of the research conducted at 13 Norwegian institutions is clear: Norwegian sociological research generally holds a high standard.

In its report, an international evaluation panel presents an overall assessment of the quality of the research carried out by key research groups in sociology. The panel also provides specific recommendations for the course to pursue in the future.

Measures up internationally

According to the panel, a substantial amount of Norwegian sociological research is of the highest international standard and provides important knowledge about Norwegian society. There are, however, marked differences in quality both between and within the research environments.

Empirical research on the welfare state in a broad sense appears to form the core of applied sociological research in Norway. The panel observed that a growing number of researchers employ both qualitative and quantitative methods, although the majority still prefer either one or the other. The report points out that some of the Norwegian research groups exhibit outstanding competence in the use of quantitative methods.

The panel found that there is a sizeable degree of international interest in Norwegian sociological research and that publication activity is high at many of the institutions.

However, although the overall impression is good, not all of the research activities maintain the same high standard. The panel observed distinct differences between and within the various research environments with regard to both research quality and publication activity.

Clear focus and widespread interdisciplinarity

According to the panel, problem-oriented empiricism is a stronghold of Norwegian sociology and has been for decades. By far the major portion of the research conducted at all of the evaluated research environments addresses questions located in the interface between the thematic areas of the welfare state, family, gender and organisation. These are also areas in which the Norwegian sociology community has made significant contributions internationally.

The panel found that certain traditional areas of study in sociology in Norway appear to have been taken over by anthropologists, economists and political scientists. The panel has also noted that all of the researchers working outside the three large sociology departments at the University of Oslo, University of Bergen and Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) ' which account for two-thirds of the sociologists incorporated into the evaluation ' work in interdisciplinary research environments.

Stronger theory and methodology

One of the main conclusions of the report is that theoretical and methodological research must be strengthened in Norway. The panel believes that this will be vital for the development of the discipline and recommends that Norwegian sociological research be steered in a more theory-driven direction.

This change in course will be crucial if Norwegian sociologists are to make a significant contribution to interdisciplinary research cooperation and to the discipline of sociology as a whole. According to the panel, theory and methodology development is essential for effective action-oriented research.

Provides recommendations

The panel recommends that the three large sociology departments at the universities in Bergen, Oslo and Trondheim be given the opportunity to assume greater responsibility for developing theoretical and methodological research. The departments themselves must take the initiative by organising courses, seminars and research groups. The panel also encourages the Research Council to increase the amount of funding allocated to independent basic research in sociology.

The panel further recommends that the smaller research environments concentrate their research activities in specific areas in order to increase and maintain the standard of research.

The report points out that there is too little geographical and institutional mobility. The panel proposes that more researchers at all levels be given the opportunity to conduct research stays abroad and that the institutions make greater use of the adjunct professor system. The panel also recommends the establishment of common national standards and criteria for Ph.D. programmes in sociology.

Constructive point of departure

The Research Board of the Division for Science at the Research Council has reviewed the evaluation report and finds that many of the observations and conclusions are relevant for the development of the discipline as well as for discussions regarding the structure of the Norwegian research system beyond the field of sociology.

According to the Research Board, the institutions and research groups themselves must assume the primary responsibility for further development of the discipline. Nevertheless, the Research Council can play an active role by creating meeting places, providing advice and promoting research activities, for example by issuing funding announcements for Research Institution-based Strategic Projects for the evaluated institutions.

In early 2011 the Research Council will organise a meeting with the evaluated research units and representatives of their management to discuss the report and plan further follow up.

Evaluation panel

- Professor Göran Ahrne (Chair), Stockholm University
- Professor Johanna Esseveld, Lund University
- Professor Elianne Riska, University of Helsinki
- Professor Peter Gundelach, University of Copenhagen
- Professor Thomas P. Boje, Roskilde University

Units incorporated into the evaluation

A total of 177 researchers from 13 research units in sociology were incorporated into the evaluation. The 13 research units are:

- NTNU: Department of Sociology and Political Science
- University of Bergen: Department of Sociology
- University of Oslo: Department of Sociology and Human Geography
- University of Tromsø: Department of Sociology, Political Science and Community Planning

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- University of Stavanger: Department of Media, Culture and Social Science
 - Bodø University College: Section for Sociology, Faculty of Social Science
 - Oslo University College: Faculty of Social Science
 - Statistics Norway: Research Department, Division for Social and Demographic Research
 - Norwegian Social Research (NOVA)
 - Institute for Social Research (ISF)
 - Fafo Institute for Labour and Social Research
 - National Institute for Consumer Research (SIFO)
 - Work Research Institute (WRI)

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