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Incentives, Barriers, and Ways Forward

Participation in Educational Provision Across Faith and Belief Traditions





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This report examines two educational programmes aimed at religious leaders in Norway. Both are provided by the Faculty of Theology at the University of Oslo. The programmes are the course "Å være religiøs leder i det norske samfunnet" (Being a religious leader in Norway) and the master's programme Lederskap, etikk og samtalepraksis (Leadership, Ethics and Counselling/Chaplaincy). The first course is offered to religious leaders in Norway with a primary focus on leaders who have a minority background and/or belong to an ethnic and/or religious minority. It is offered on commission from the Ministry of Children and Families and has existed since 2007. The master's programme was established in 2019 and is a regular master's programme equivalent to other such programmes at the Faculty of Theology. Like the course for religious leaders it was realised following a political initiative in integration policy, when additional funding was provided by the authorities to the University of Oslo.

The research questions in the report are concentrated on the barriers that prevent religious leaders from taking part in the course for such leaders, and how one could make the master's degree a viable option for a larger group of students. Our aim has been to examine how participation may be expanded to include more religious and life stance communities. The analysis draws on document analysis and on qualitative interviews – with both individuals and groups – with leaders and representatives from a range of religious and life stance communities.

The course for religious leaders was developed by the Faculty of Theology based on input from the authorities. This was done in close cooperation with a number of religious communities. These communities have later been essential for recruitment for the course and for providing members to the reference group. We have identified a sense of ownership of the course among several religious communities, and that participation is initiated through collective work. Dialogue and participation appear as essential success factors for the course. Several former participants describe interreligious dialogue as the most important element of the course: participants learn through conversation, get to know one another across communities, and build relationships that enable further cooperation. The term "community of disagreement" aptly captures what participants learn in the course: they learn to disagree while still respecting one another. Many former participants therefore actively recruit new participants within their own communities, and the course functions as a forum that strengthens the interreligious field in Norway.

At the same time, we identify several barriers that has led some religious leaders and some communities to remain outside the course. Some barriers are practical and administrative: lack of information means that potential participants are unaware of the programmes. Geographical distance and requirements for physical attendance sometimes make participation from outside Oslo difficult. Time pressure and obligations to family or work can make participation difficult for people who are not employed full-time as religious leaders. Language is a clear practical barrier for certain groups, particularly for religious leaders brought from abroad for short periods who do not have a good command of the Norwegian language.

Other barriers concern the perceived relevance of the course for one's own faith community, including how participants perceive the course content based on its marketing profile. Several informants experience the term "foreign background," used in the course description to characterise the target group, as excluding or misleading. There is also considerable variation in how one understands the term "religious leader." In many faith communities it is still only the spiritual or ritual leaders who are considered as potential participants in the course, even though laypeople can hold important leadership functions in the community. In particular, secular life stance communities do not identify with the concept of "religious leader."

Other barriers stem from experiences of the course contents. Some have experienced the course as patronizing. This applies especially to informants with minority backgrounds who grew up in Norway and have experiences of being viewed with suspicion in other arenas of society. They call for course contents that more strongly highlights them as resources for Norwegian society. In addition, we identify a broader scepticism in parts of the field toward initiatives initiated or financed by government authorities. Some informants interpret such measures as attempts to control or influence them and the groups they represent. This can reduce the willingness to participate.

The master's programme was designed primarily through an academic process at the Faculty of Theology and in dialogue with the authorities. Religious and life stance communities were not as closely involved as they were in developing the course for religious leaders. We therefore do not find the same sense of ownership of, or knowledge about, this educational programme within religious and life stance communities. Enrolment in the master's programme appears as an individual decision rather than a result of collective work within communities. The master's programme qualifies for work in chaplaincy, but the labour market for such positions is currently limited and structured by historical arrangements where the Church of Norway still dominates.

Based on our findings we conclude with seven recommendations. We strongly recommend maintaining the voluntary and dialogical aspect of the course for religious leaders and communicating this even more clearly. We further recommend removing the formulation that the course is aimed at religious leaders with a "foreign background." We also recommend considering measures such as regionally based courses around Norway, or shorter programmes with interpreters for religious leaders who do not speak Norwegian. While some recommendations can be implemented within the current course and funding, others will require increased funding from the authorities.

We also suggest that more information should be provided to religious and life stance communities about the master's programme in Leadership, Ethics and Counseling/Chaplaincy, and that the option to take individual course units should be communicated more clearly. As noted in some interviews, it is not easy to persuade leaders who already hold a master's degree to start another master's programme.

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