

Broke Students in Despair over Norwegian Bureaucracy

Aster Mulat (24) thought she was lucky to be granted a scholarship to study in Norway. After almost two months without money, she is not so sure anymore.

Aster Mulat from Ethiopia started her 3-years' study at Ås University this autumn, now she is very worried and has problems concentrating on her studies as she has still not received any of her scholarship money. Along with the other 1 100 quota students that come to Norway every year, Mulat needs a Norwegian personal number in order to access her scholarship. The application process to get a personal number might take months due to slow Norwegian bureaucracy, and the students cannot start this process until they have arrived in Norway. Quota students are advised to bring about 10 000 NOK to Norway in order to cover expenses in the beginning, but this is often an impossible amount for students from developing countries.

The President of the International Students' Union of Norway (ISU), Farshad Tami, says it is a well known problem that quota students don't receive their money for at least two and a half months after arriving Norway. Tami emphasizes that these students are not rich, and it is very problematic and hard for them to live here for several months without money. This could also give Norway a bad reputation, as these students may advise others from their home country not to come here to study.

Even though some universities have tried to mend the difficult economic situation of the quota students, the ISU President still finds great potential for improvement. Understanding the Norwegian system is difficult for many students from developing countries, some of the documents needed to obtain a personal number are hard to get in some countries, and going to the bank can be quite challenging if you don't speak the language and don't understand the system.

"Lånekassen" is responsible for transferring the scholarship to the students. Head of Information in "Lånekassen", Astrid Mjærum, says it is necessary for the quota students to have a personal number in order to receive their money because the scholarship will have to be paid back to "Lånekassen" if the students do not leave Norway after the termination of their studies. She says that as soon as the students have a personal number, their applications are first priority to "Lånekassen".

The Leader of the National Union of Students in Norway (NSU), Ingvild Reymert, requests political will and action to make the situation for quota students easier. She thinks good solutions would be to make the application process easier and faster and also make it possible to apply for a personal number before arriving Norway. Reymert says the Ministry of Education and Research has to work on this, and that it is a big problem when students have to borrow money from fellow students in order to survive their first months in Norway.

The Ministry of Education and Research was not available for comments on Friday.

Summary of an article written by Per Øyvind Fange and Ingrid Hvidsten in VG Nett on Friday 27 September 2008. Translation by Solveig Aamodt.