

ENGINEERING AMBITIONS. Philip Alexander Nordås (left), Espen Johannesen and Jonas Lie Olsen are all in the first batch of students on the subsea technology course which began three years ago.



# A JOB TO GET ACCEPTED

Newly-graduated Norwegian engineers are keen to find work in the oil industry. But landing a job can be a tough business.

Astri Sivertsen  
(text and photos)

Norway's petroleum sector was fighting to secure new specialists up to last autumn in order to replace all the people reaching retirement and to crew the new rigs winning contracts on the NCS.

A number of the new companies getting involved in the Norwegian offshore business also needed personnel with expertise – until the financial crisis broke and oil prices plummeted.

Parts of the industry swung from recruitment to redundancies – and many are asking whether this might once again persuade young people to shun the business as they did a decade ago.

Around 2000, the petroleum sector had acquired a reputation as a “sunset” industry to which no sensible person

would entrust their future career.

At about the same time, declining interest among young people in studying science subjects was identified as a national problem by Kristin Clemet, then Norway's education and research minister.

The mood became even more sombre when the OECD's Pisa survey in 2003 showed that the level of maths and science skills among 15-year-old Norwegians was falling.

According to Thina Hagen, manager for expertise at the Norwegian Oil Industry Association (OLF), the OECD countries in general have a huge need for technology and science specialists.

In 2009, when the industry's “sunset” reputation was at its highest, the OLF

was asked by its member companies to develop a campaign to recruit students to petroleum-related courses.

This has been followed by an increase in the popularity of science at colleges of further education and more applications for such studies at university level.

Petroleum-related subjects were the most over-subscribed courses at the University of Stavanger in 2006, Ms Hagen reports.

She also emphasises that the drop in applications for science and technology around 2000 did not hit vocational disciplines such as drilling and well technology. The slump was seen at the higher education level.

Despite the recent resurgence in sci-

**MOBILE** "The whole world's a possible workplace," says Helena Tveraabak, who moved from Oslo to Straume because of the course on offer there.



ence studies, however, the petroleum industry continues to face a challenge in securing enough engineers – and particularly experienced personnel.

But Ms Hagen says that this sector is the one with the smallest recruitment problem in Norway. It still remains attractive to all categories of job applicants.

On the other hand, demand for specialists has fallen from the levels seen in 2007-08 and new appointments have been dropping since last autumn.

"The industry is biding its time," Ms Hagen explains. "It's also taken on a very large number of new people over the past few years."

But she warns the sector against becoming too cautious, as it tends to be when the trend turns negative. "We don't want a repeat of 2000, when recruitment came to a abrupt halt."

The consequence of this knee-jerk reaction was that the industry lost out on several age groups of young people – who are now in their early to mid 30s.

#### Back to school.

Some of those lost recruits might be among the students at Straume outside Bergen, where a number of experienced drillers and oil industry personnel have gone back to school.

They want to improve their qualifica-

tions, while some have also spent time in other industries and possess different trade skills.

"It's great being a formwork carpenter when you're young and fit," says Thomas Aleksander Stigen, who has spent six years in that trade. "And it's great being an engineer when you're 50."

He is one of 130 people studying to become a specialist on subsea technology, operations and maintenance through a mix of theory and work experience. His goal is an attractive job in the future.

This BSc engineering course was established at the initiative of local industry, which includes numerous companies working on the maintenance of subsea equipment.

Only 15 minutes by car from the Coast Centre Base at Ågotnes, the premises where the three-year course is being held have been leased by Bergen University College from the AGR oil service firm.

A total of 500 students a year are accepted on the college's engineering courses, making this department the biggest of its kind in Norway, reports study coordinator Laila Linde Lossius.

"We have long waiting lists of potential engineers. I get people virtually sobbing on the phone as they beg to get

on our courses."

Her biggest problem is that the subsea technology course has admitted 41 students this year, but the education ministry will only fund 25 of these places.

"We've taken on more than we have financing for, which means we've had to plug the gap with sponsorship from a local bank," Ms Lossius admits.

#### Learn maths

Sitting in a classroom where second-year students learn maths, Helene Tveraabak comes straight from general studies at Hartvig Nissen's school in Oslo – best known for teaching dance and drama.

She decided to become an engineer at an early age because of all the job opportunities she believes that such an education opens up.

"Norway's a world leader in subsea technology, after all, so this course is very forward-looking," she says enthusiastically. "I could well imagine becoming a project engineer abroad. The whole world's a possible workplace, after all."

Five third-year students in the room next door are collaborating on a paper about hydraulics. They will be the first to take the final exam in this subject next spring.

"Subsea's the future," says Philip Alexander Nordås, who already holds qualifications in drilling and well technology and has varied work experience – including nursery school teaching.

"You get more opportunities, more choice as an engineer," he says. "And this course gives you the chance to help create the future for the offshore industry."

Of the four other students, one has studied hotel management and worked in the restaurant business, another is a radiographer with experience from Bergen's Haukeland Hospital, the third has worked at sea and in a shop, and the fourth comes directly from a college of further education.

Many of the students on the Straume campus have had to repeat science studies at further education level or

take a preliminary course in maths and physics before they could get in.

I ask the five whether they are concerned about the impact of the financial crisis and how they view their job prospects after graduation.

A couple say they may take the new MSc course in subsea technology launched by Bergen University College and the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in Trondheim.

The majority are fairly confident of finding work, but Nordås admits that a newly qualified engineer he knows has submitted 50 applications without success.

"After the last downturn, nobody turned to the oil industry for a job," he says. "Now it's reluctant to take on new graduates, and that's very short-sight-



**PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE.** "He's my mentor," says Thomas Aleksander Stigen (right) about subsea technician Vidar Moe at Expro. Practical experience with this company is an important part of the engineering course.

## Bucking the trend

Statoil has taken a different tack from other companies in the oil industry, and is recruiting as many people as before despite uncertain times and unpredictable oil prices.

The group has received 80 000 job applications since Statoil and Hydro Oil & Energy merged two years ago, reports Tone Rognstad, head of recruitment and promotion at the human resources department in Stavanger.

Over the past six months alone, 8 500 new graduates have applied to Statoil for work. Of these, more than 200 are recruited annually.

The group restructured its trainee scheme this autumn and renamed it a graduate programme. This training period runs for two-four years and guarantees participants a job on completion.

#### Knowledge

One of the differences is that the new programme gives as much weight to specialist knowledge as it does to management, Ms Rognstad explains.

"The previous trainee scheme was regarded as a springboard into management, but our technical disciplines have now taken over much of the responsibility for the training content.

"Acquiring a solid professional platform is the

top priority when you're newly qualified. And that's particularly important for engineers."

She has seen a tendency for some people to shun the oil industry when the labour market is less heated. Statoil wants to avoid that by recruiting as much and as actively as before.

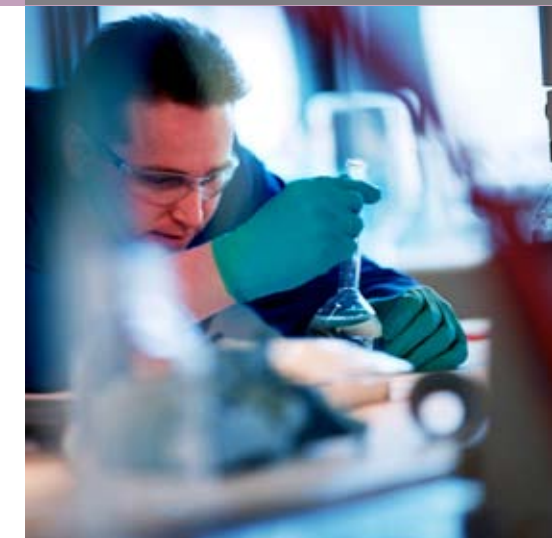
#### Planning

"We have such lengthy projects and must plan our expertise requirements over such a long time frame that we can't go in and out of the student market every time the oil price rises or falls.

"In our view, we must stick where we are or risk finding ourselves once again in a position in which young people refuse to study engineering."

To demonstrate just how seriously it takes this issue, Statoil recently launched a scheme intended to strengthen interest in science among schoolchildren.

The group has joined forces with the City of Oslo education authority (UDE) to recruit engineers as science teachers in the capital's secondary schools and further education colleges.



Statoil has received 80 000 job applications over the past two years. (Photo: Guri Dahl/Statoil)

Dubbed Teach First Norway, this initiative is based on programmes which Ms Rognstad says have functioned well in the UK and the USA.

It reflects the view that the teacher role is crucial in efforts to improve maths and science skills among children, and that learning must begin early in life.

"Running schools is a matter for the public sector in Norway, so we won't be doing that," says Ms Rognstad. "But we can use our attractiveness to encourage science graduates to strengthen recruitment to their own subject." ❄