

Humble outlook of Norwegian oil trailblazer

NTNU professor Jon Kleppe wins SPE's Norway Oilman of the Year award in recognition of his contribution to the country's industry

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JON Kleppe is proof that nice guys do win, as witnessed by his recent selection as Norway's "Oilman of the Year" for 2014 by the Society of Petroleum Engineers (SPE). The prize is awarded annually to someone who has made a significant contribution to Norway's petroleum sector over a period of time.

It traditionally goes to an executive from the industry, but this year the SPE chose Kleppe — an acclaimed petroleum academic at Trondheim's prestigious Norwegian University of Science & Technology (NTNU), and just the second academic to receive the prize in its 27-year history.

He was surprised to be selected, and collected his prize at an award ceremony in Stavanger.

"I don't really go for all the attention, I'm a modest person, but it was really great. Lots of my former students were there," he says.

"It was recognition of the number of students I have helped along the way, and it was nice for the university and for academia."

Fundamental role The SPE said Kleppe "has served a fundamental role in building up much of the petroleum industry in Norway to what it has become today".

Kleppe is a trailblazer in Norway, being the first Norwegian to graduate with a PhD in petroleum. He did this in 1974 at Texas A&M University.

At that time, there were no universities in Norway offering an equivalent education in petroleum.

He was the first appointed professor at NTNU in petroleum reservoir technology.

Kleppe is characteristically humble when he says he has personally supervised about 300 Masters of Science and PhD graduates at NTNU's Department of Petroleum Engineering & Applied Geophysics (IPT).

Many of his former students hold positions of authority in Norway's oil industry and around the world, including Schlumberger chief executive Pal Kibsgaard and the petroleum ministers in several countries.

Kleppe had the foresight to pioneer the use of English at NTNU IPT as the language of learning. This began in 1993, and

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has meant that up to 50% of the Masters programme is made up of international students.

The conversion from Norwegian to English was monumental at the time, he says. Student politicians opposed the move, and Kleppe was summoned numerous times by the university board to explain the rationale.

"We were the first department in Norway allowed to teach in English," he says. "We did it for several reasons. The first was that our teaching resources were being drained by a nine-month petroleum course for people from developing countries."

"This was in English and was separate to the Norwegian programme. We had to integrate the two."

"Secondly, the petroleum business is international, and many of our graduates would work internationally."

"Thirdly, there was a huge demand from developing countries that needed help to educate their people."

The current Masters students at NTNU IPT are from Norway, Tanzania, Angola, Mozambique, Pakistan, Indonesia, China, Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Iran, Turkey, Mexico and Venezuela.

With an average 6.5 applications for each Masters position offered, there is high demand to study at NTNU IPT.

The SPE acknowledged Kleppe's "strong engagement in internationalism both in education and research", to building university capacity in Africa and Asia, and to educating petroleum engineers from those continents.

The industry has tried on

numerous occasions to poach Kleppe away from academia but, with the exception of a three-year posting with Saudi Aramco early in his career, he has remained faithful to a university career.

"There is probably more freedom in academia and less salary than the industry, but that's ok, I like the academic life. I like having students, being surrounded by young people who are eager to learn, it keeps me young," says the father-of-three.

After years of leading the department and being in charge of cutting-edge research bodies such as the Center for Integrated Operations, Kleppe is starting to take a back seat.

"I will continue teaching and doing research, this semester I have 20 Masters students that I am advising simultaneously."

International leader He travels regularly on behalf of the department to countries where it has relationships or is building new ones.

The objective is to maintain NTNU IPT's position as a world leader in the education of Masters of Science and PhD students.

In addition, NTNU IPT is focused on continuing to be an international leader in petroleum research, as well as in renewable energy.

Kleppe has been one of NTNU's spokespersons this year in Norway's debate about whether it is ethically correct to receive funding from oil companies for petroleum-related research.

A national ethics committee examined the issue, and made some recommendations that are being processed by the industry, academia and research institutions.

Kleppe says NTNU IPT's work will not be affected, and agrees the entire discussion was "a rich country's debate".

"We discussed this issue with some people in Tanzania, and a professor there said to me: 'Well, is it ethical that people in Africa are starving and have no access to energy?'. That was a relevant point, and put it into perspective."

Away from work, Kleppe is a passionate jogger, and enjoys downhill skiing and golfing. He also has three grandchildren who he loves to spend time with. Like his students, they keep him young. **U**



Award winner: Jon Kleppe
Photo: NTNU