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The Nordic-Baltic cooperation in doctoral education: The case of NORSLIS

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Abstract

The present paper will discuss the postgraduate research education of information professionals in Nordic and Baltic countries by analyzing, first and foremost, NordIS-Net (1998-2002) and Nordic Research School in Library and Information Science, NORSLIS, (2004-2008) - networks for postgraduate research training in library and information sciences (LIS) - from the aspects of organization of training, mobility of researchers, and using and sharing of resources.

Keywords

International postgraduate research training networks, library and information sciences.

Common European principles for postgraduate research training

Research training has become a major issue in research, research policy and postgraduate education during the last twenty years – this has been the case in all the Nordic countries (Nordic ... 2003, Quality ... 2004), and world-wide as well (The Research ... 1993).

In terms of research, at the European Council meeting 2002 in Barcelona it was agreed that overall spending on R&D and innovation in the EU should be raised to 3% of GDP by 2010 (Presidency ... 2002). This requires not only increased investment, but also growth in the number of qualified researchers. Most countries, including the Nordic countries, will have to raise the number of researchers if Europe is going to meet the need of estimated 700 000 additional researchers, as outlined in the communication "Investing in research: an action plan for Europe" (Investing ... 2003, 11). For example Denmark with some 27,000 researchers will need 45,000 researchers before 2010 if the 3% target is to be met (Nordic ...2003, 9). This creates new challenges for the existing postgraduate training systems as the development of adequate research training is becoming increasingly important.

In order to achieve this on the European scale two processes have begun to merge - creating a European Research Area (ERA) and a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) as the two pillars of the knowledge based society. It has not only created a renewed importance of the role of universities in terms of their task of research and research training, it has also led to a closer scrutiny of the ways in which research is currently organised (Kehm 2004, 3). Ministers meeting 2003 in Berlin conscious of the need to promote closer links between the ERA and the EHEA and of the importance of research as an integral part of higher education across Europe, emphasized the importance of research and research training and the promotion of interdisciplinarity; they called for increased mobility at the doctoral and postdoctoral levels and encouraged the institutions to increase their cooperation in doctoral studies and the training of young researchers. Finally Ministers stated that networks at doctoral level should be given support to stimulate the development of excellence. (Realising ... 2003, 7).

It has been understood that increased supply of qualified researchers as well as high quality research training are important elements in order to realize the vision of a Europe of Knowledge. Issues or problems discussed in terms of doctoral education today are at least twofold: (1) the first having to do with structure of programs, funding and supervision in the process of getting a doctoral degree; (2) the second having to do with transition into employment and adequate employment (Kehm 2004, 8). Mobility of researchers faces its own problems, apart from the academic factors that affect mobility patterns; there are also practical and social problems in relation to family obligations, language differences, welfare arrangements, and tax systems etc., which represent important barriers to mobility in research training (Barriers ... 2003).

In order to overcome the problems and reach the established goals the environment of research training should find a balance between national and international, organization and flexibility, specific and multidisciplinary. Therefore the needed changes in the doctoral education and training can be summarized as follows:

- from national to international;
- from curiosity driven to result oriented (i.e. relevance, impact);
- from individual to team;
- from narrow and discipline guided to multidisciplinary research;
- from small laboratories to larger research institutes and programmes (i.e. critical mass);
- from fragments to programmes;
- from purely academic to also professional;

- from national guarding and use to competitiveness, job creation and sustainable development on a broader scale (Kehm 2004, 8).

The EU level developments have influenced different fields of education and research. The Position Paper of European Association for Library and Information Education and Research (EUCLID) focuses on the importance of European standards for competencies needed by LIS-professionals in the information society. EUCLID supports the processes promoting the development of curricula and comparable degree programs on a European scale (Position ... 2003).

On national level in the Estonian Research and Development Strategy, a future Estonia is seen as a knowledge-based society where the sources of economic and labour force competitiveness and improvement in the quality of life, stem from the search for new knowledge, the application of knowledge and skills, and the development of human capital. In a knowledge-based society research and development are valued highly as one of the preconditions for functioning and development of society. (Teadmiste põhi ... 2001). In the Strategic Foundations of Estonian Higher Education Policy, the need to develop doctoral studies is emphasized in order to fulfil the needs of the society by increasing the effectiveness of studies and their connectedness with research, by promoting international cooperation and academic mobility (Kõrghariduspoliitika ... 2005).

NORSLIS (Nordic Research School in Library and Information Science) – vision and activities

The Nordic countries have long-standing, strong traditions of research co-operation and joint activities in postgraduate research training. Virkus and Harbo pointed out that LIS institutions have not used all possibilities offered in the Nordic higher education space and close co-operation between the countries would offer opportunities to utilize the resources for the benefit of Europe as a whole (Virkus, Harbo 2002). Also Kajberg observed that networking and mobility efforts in European LIS education have not yet produced convincing results - active cooperation and networking efforts in European context must be initiated, and a first step could be greater reliance on European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) as a means for facilitating comparison of LIS curricula across Europe and for promoting transparency in the LIS education field (Kajberg 2003).

In the year 2000 a work group was appointed with the assignment of preparing a proposal for initiatives and measures at Nordic level with a view of introducing internationally competitive postgraduate research training programmes in the Nordic countries. The work group found that it would be of great value to have such common objectives, some of the reasons being international recognition of Nordic research training and recruitment of foreign students for Nordic research training (Nordic ... 2003).

During the years 1998-2002 Nordic Academy for Advanced Study (NorFA) supported a network for doctoral training in LIS called NordIS-Net. It attracted doctoral students from all of the five Nordic and three Baltic countries to participate in joint research courses and workshops. The research courses, organised once a year, consisted of intensive lecture series on theoretical approaches and research methods in LIS; and the workshops, organised also once a year, provided the students with an opportunity to get feed-back to their papers by a broad range of Nordic-Baltic researchers. A particularly successful activity was the travel support to research students for participating in research courses organised either by the network or outside it and for taking part in international scientific conferences.

In 2003 NorFA started a five-year initiative (2004-2008) for graduate schools within humanities and social sciences. The purpose of this initiative was to increase mobility in the region, to strengthen research training and develop models to improve research training in each country and in the region as a whole. Five graduate schools were chosen after external assessment, with Nordic and Baltic/ North-West Russian participants, each with a framework funding of NOK 1 million per year for five years, one of them being Nordic Research School in Library and Information Science (NORSLIS).

As the earlier network, also NORSLIS encompasses 15 institutions offering postgraduate research training in LIS in the 8 Nordic and Baltic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) and is open to participation for about 150 doctoral students.

The objective of NORSLIS is to increase the quality of doctoral education in library and information science in order to meet the requirements of a knowledge society. The research school intends to achieve synergistic effects, effectiveness and efficiency in doctoral education and research of LIS by collecting the scattered scientific expertise, often in small-size research educational units, throughout the Nordic and Baltic countries.

Each year NORSLIS offers 2 research courses, 1 workshop, 1 road show seminar, and selects 1 visiting professor. The novel component is the road show seminar attended by 2-3 researchers and organised at about 3 network sites offering lectures and possibilities for individual supervision and consultation. The main activities of NORSLIS, which consist of promoting the mobility and the interaction of researchers, are also supported by a web-based portal with a variety of information functions¹.

The activities cover a broad range of topics and combine theoretical and methodological aspects. Two 5 ECTS research courses are developed and offered per academic year, some of which will be provided twice during the five-year period. The idea is to enable two cohorts of students to benefit from those courses, taking into account that doctoral students normally take courses in their first two years of their studies. NORSLIS considers all credits as acceptable for local exams although the final decision is up to the local programs.

Workshops provide an opportunity for students to present a paper based on their research and to get feedback from their peers and from senior researchers. One workshop is offered each year. Workshop credits are in the range of 2-3 ECTS.

Doctoral research courses and workshops have proven to be beneficial means for sharing the Nordic mentoring expertise and creating contacts between doctoral students and senior researchers. Hence, a primary goal of the research course is to provide the doctoral students with a forum in which to present their research projects and to discuss with senior researchers and fellow students the range of appropriate methodologies available.

The novel concept of a 'road show seminar' is incorporated into the activities of the research school. It means that a team of 2-3 senior researchers of high international status visits about three Nordic-Baltic sites, each covering an adequate region, with a tailored set of lectures and tutorials on a pre-selected research area, as well as supplying improved supervision and consultation. The idea is to provide, in cost-effective manner, research knowledge and experience to the local research groups and doctoral students within the Nordic-Baltic

¹ Nordic Research School in Library and Information Science (NORSLIS). Retrieved May 4, 2005, from <http://www.norslis.net>

regions. Travel and accommodation costs are thus minimized. Also the visiting professors are expected to participate in 'road show seminars'.

Visiting professors for a period of 3-4 weeks at 1-2 relevant locations, e.g., to promote research frameworks and encourage local research groups.

Exchange of supervisor experience between the NORSLIS institutions is encouraged by the availability of a number of travel grants. To be cost-effective the exchange is intended to take place in connection with other NORSLIS events, such as research courses or workshops, in which the supervisor already is engaged.

NORSLIS supports also doctoral students and post-docs mobility between their "home institution" and a "guest institution" (primarily other institutions of the NORSLIS network). For PhD students the "home institution" is where they are registered as PhD students. Post docs must be engaged in research and employed by one of the 15 institutions participating in NORSLIS.

NORSLIS intends to support visits of doctoral students and post-docs in other Nordic-Baltic research groups for 1-2 weeks. The aim is to help them to become acquainted with the work of eminent research teams and to encourage research co-operation between the post-docs and young researchers.

In addition mobility support for PhD students may include:

- travel grants for research conferences for which the student has had a research paper accepted or a research paper accepted for a doctoral forum connected with an international or Nordic conference;
- travel grants to attend other PhD courses in the Nordic countries;
- travel grants to attend other types of research courses, for example Nordic summer schools.

The guiding principle is that these grants are for high level research conferences or activities that make considerable demands upon the PhD students.

Conclusion

Through cooperation and coordination it is possible to increase quality and effectiveness and make the research education more efficient by collecting the scattered scientific expertise, often in small-size research and educational units. By pooling the doctoral students in Nordic and Baltic countries it becomes possible to gather groups large enough for providing them with relevant research courses tailored to their needs. The advantage is also the possibility to organize informal thematic discussion (or research) groups and workshops that may include doctoral and post-doctoral students as well as senior researchers.

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