

# REGIONS - A STARTING-POINT FOR EUROPEAN COOPERATION? CASE: THE NORDIC COUNTRIES

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## 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### 1.1. Background

Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Norway all have national providers for student information systems for HE, Sweden having the longest history. The other three all started the process towards common systems in the early 1990s. Today the countries are at different levels, both when we consider the number of institutions using the common system and how up-to date the system is considered to be.

Since 3 years, an informal group, *NordForum*, has been established as an "IT for HE" arena for open discussion of problems and prospects connected to international cooperation on a small scale, and as an incubator for small projects with actual results for the participants.

Focus is on sharing of experience, problems and ideas, as well as on creating conditions for exchange of course and student data between countries. This involves an aim at standardization, conceptual clearing, and comparison of plans.

This group concentrates on system product owners, as representatives of the universities as users/buyers of this systems support. Developers, on the other hand, engage in a parallel forum.

### 1.2. Regional sub-structures - good or bad for cooperation at a larger scale?

The question this paper poses is: *Do contacts and initiatives within regional sub-groups tend to serve to slow down or speed up European cooperation at a larger scale?* - What are our experiences of the discussions in NordForum? Do they inspire participants to take a more active part in European cooperation, or do they preserve a narrow regional focus? - This is what we find:

### 1.3. Conclusions

1. Through the discussions, we discover new cooperative and standardization initiatives in Europe.
2. Getting to know each other, we integrate networks. This is also a form of expansion that fairly quickly leads us to new parts of Europe.
3. We train our capacity to see, and think in terms of, cooperation structures.
4. Using a third language - English - in our meetings reminds us not to take our own references for granted. The English *Lingua Franca* itself leads us to European arenas.
5. We train our ability to handle differences in a general way when mastering our own.
6. Making decision-makers - boards etc - involved means that we get approval for taking part in international processes, that lead to next steps.
7. Starting to think and build in modules gives us more freedom to choose - also from a bigger, European market.
8. We inspire one another to take active part at, for instance, EUNIS conferences.
9. One should not ignore the fact that if a subset of constituents reach agreements, this affects cooperation at a larger scale.

Conclusion: Nordic cooperation efforts *seem to contribute to deepen our commitment to cooperate in a European context.*

## 2. THE QUESTION AT ISSUE

In a European setting like a EUNIS conference, one notices the obvious language accents, sometimes also accents as to perspective, topics and aspect. One might well bring up a question like:

*Can one identify active sub-groups inside pan-European arenas like, for instance, EUNIS? And, more important: Do contacts and initiatives within regional sub-groups tend to serve to slow down or speed up European cooperation at a larger scale?*

## 3. REGIONS IN EUROPE - AN EXAMPLE

Let us try to find an answer - one of many possible - to the above question by describing an example, nearby to the authors.

### 3.1. What about 'regions' in Europe?

The concept of 'regions' is not cut in stone. However, we shall use the term *region*, here understood as "some nearby, interacting countries, significantly tied together culturally", as the subject for our observations. We can identify a few regional structures in Europe, neighbouring countries whose representatives tend to meet more frequently, share a deeper understanding and more agreements, and maybe even at times act as a group.

In our context, "IT for HE", this phenomenon is maybe not as usual? The whole of the European HE arena is open to cooperation in a number of fields, and strong traditions for regional cooperation are not obvious in our context.

### 3.2. Our case: The Nordic countries

Trying to observe some dynamic mechanisms operating on the relation between regional and European commitment, we will use as an example a specific attempt for cooperation, namely one between the Nordic countries on student administrative systems.

The Nordic countries are Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Iceland. (The Faroeislands are a self governing region of Denmark.) The authors of this paper represent Norway, Sweden and Finland.

### 3.3. Forming an arena - NordForum

Since 3 years, an informal group, *NordForum*, has been established as an "IT for HE" arena for open discussion of problems and prospects connected to international cooperation on a small scale, and as an incubator for small projects with actual results for the participants. Today NordForum consists of about 15-20 members, representatives of national HE cooperation organizations in Norway, Sweden and Finland - and recently we brought our counterparts in Denmark in the boat. These particular organizations are commissioned to provide student administrative systems support for HE institutions, and have in common that they are what is referred to as 'national provider', i.e. they cover a majority of universities in the country.

Focus is on sharing of experience, problems and ideas, as well as on creating better conditions for exchange of course and student data between countries. This involves of course an aim at standardization, conceptual clearing, and comparison of plans.

This group concentrates on system product owners, as representatives of the universities as users/buyers of this systems support. Developers, on the other hand, engage in a parallel forum.

## 4. UNDERTAKINGS FOR THE FORUM

So, what activities/projects does a recently formed, informal forum of this kind - with zero budget - take on from the beginning?

### 4.1. Conditions differ even in a close region

One must remember this: Although geographically close, the Nordic countries do not share the same conditions altogether, for instance:

**We don't speak the same language.** The Scandinavian countries - Norway, Sweden and Denmark - share a linguistic kinship, implying we mutually understand something like 50-90 % of each others' spoken language (depending on dialects etc). Recent research says that this rate of understanding is slowly diminishing. And related languages have a difficulty to handle the interpretation of terms with the same origin, that sound alike - but with different meaning! Finnish, on the other hand, is a language not at all linguistically related to the other three, meaning that understanding rate is close to zero. So, although most Finnish people have studied Swedish in school (due to historical political liaisons), it is more convenient to use English as the meeting language even in NordForum.

**Legal differences** between our countries exist, of course. No need to become absorbed with this, but there *are* differences, let alone not that extensive.

There are **differences in perspectives and traditions**, for instance  
- Only One Solution Offered and Used -vs.- Let a thousand flowers...?  
- What is regarded as integrity-sensitive data? And so on.

The Nordic countries are at **different phases in regards to system renewal cycles**. One has recently lived through a major remake of the software, one is right now verifying its choice of software package and one is midst in a feasibility study of *New generation or not?*

Anyhow, to understand and respect our differences and make use of the strength they actually offer is in itself a step towards good cooperation.

## 4.2. Some undertakings go easy...

Easier tasks first. As an opening, we have reviewed similarities and differences between our countries as to basic conditions, problems and solution strategies.

We have listened to and learned from our counterparts' descriptions - and noticed that the others seemed as interested as you are yourself! In an informal context like this descriptions and discussions can be quite frank and open-hearted, without prestige - a precious quality! Getting to know each other helps exchange of thoughts, a breeding ground for taking future steps together.

We started out with an attempt to survey international standardization efforts (e.g. MLO) where our organizations are engaged, in a couple of cases with national varieties. A small scale but promising project has commenced: - A mapping of our respective national systems, both in terms of which business processes they cover, and as function charts. This reveals several underlying little differences that have to be understood and dealt with. For benchmarking purposes this is very time-saving. At the same time we seek to agree on a common method to describe business and administrative processes.

We always aim at identifying candidate areas for coordination of approach, standards and tools, thereby promoting information exchange and thus student mobility.

## 4.3. ... but some seem more tricky

Forming a basis for cooperation on concepts and definitions is another important issue - in a more synchronized form it could yield a "Nordic HE Dictionary". This has taken its time, as there are many stake-holders and decision makers involved here.

We also realize that investigating the conditions for closer and safer information exchange will urge us to consider current legal restrictions in our countries, and prepare suggestions for change.

And, as indicated above, the path to a common Nordic student information system is long and adventurous!

## 4.4. How do we proceed?

In order to gain more firm approval for Nordic cooperation we plan to **bring together our board members and some additional key persons** in a couple of seminars on themes in focus. This is a very important step, as it provides our decision-makers with a common and broader base for understanding of system support today and possibilities for tomorrow. This is a good starting-point for further economy discussions - can we pay less by sharing more?

We aim at achieving mutual benefits, not in the first place by proposing joint technical systems, but through similar and modularized design. In the long run we will then be able to jointly use, exchange or acquire common system modules. **Being aware of each other's plans and strategies** means that costs can be cut and information exchange facilitated! A comparative analysis of plans and strategies gives the opportunity to adjust one's own planning to draw benefits from this. "Plan tuning" should be a fruitful method, when further developed.

## 5. WHAT SCALABLE COOPERATIVE MECHANISMS SEEM TO BE ACTIVE IN THE REGIONAL INCUBATOR?

These joint activities in the Nordic region might seem confining and a bit introvert. From our perspective however, Nordic cooperation efforts *contribute to deepen* our commitment to cooperate in a European context to prepare information exchange within the entire European HE market. Collaboration in other constellations, e.g. for building basic prototypes for technical solutions - where some of us also participate - can go hand in hand with more pensive cooperation, and actually strengthen each other. The goal is one and the same - to implement the Bologna Process, offer good conditions to mobile students, and provide HE institutions with powerful tools for safe, effective information exchange, based on mutual understanding.

We said above that we wanted to point out some important, dynamic mechanisms operating on the relation between regional and European commitment. In our example context - cooperation in NordForum - we have seen a number of such mechanisms, implied above, that promote extension of regional cooperation to pan-European cooperation:

1. Through these discussions, we discover new cooperative and standardization initiatives in Europe. We learn. And expand our frames of reference.
2. Getting to know each other, we integrate networks. This is also a form of expansion that fairly quickly leads us to new parts of Europe.
3. We train our capacity to see, and think in terms of, cooperation structures.
4. Using a third language - English - in our meetings reminds us not to take our own references for granted. The English *Lingua Franca* itself leads us to European arenas.
5. We train our ability to handle differences in a general way when mastering our own.
6. Making decision-makers - boards etc - involved means that we get approval for taking part in international processes, that lead to next steps.
7. Starting to think and build in modules gives us more freedom to choose - also from a bigger, European market.
8. We inspire one another to take active part at, for instance, EUNIS conferences.
9. One should not ignore the fact that if a subset of European constituents reach agreements, this will affect cooperation at a larger scale.

Conclusion: Nordic cooperation efforts *seem to contribute to deepen our commitment to cooperate in a European context*. This is a good thing. Let us continue walking on two legs!