

How to **mobilise** the Nordics!

**An inspiration catalogue from NordForsk
and more than 160 Nordic leaders**

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Preface

In December 2020, the NordForsk board launched the project *Mobilising the Nordics* in order to generate ideas for revamping and developing Nordic research, education and innovation systems. NordForsk initiated and facilitated the project as a common bottom-up process aimed at generating top-level dialogue and cooperation across the Nordic Region.

The purpose was to investigate how system change can contribute to making the region greener, more competitive and more socially sustainable, and what form this change would take – what concrete actions would be necessary? In that context, the project also supported the Nordic Council of Ministers' vision of making the Nordics the most sustainable and integrated region by 2030.

During spring 2021, following an accelerated collaboration process initiated and facilitated by NordForsk, more than 160 Nordic leaders participated and contributed at webinars and online workshops. Among the attendees were top-level leaders from all Nordic countries and from across all sectors and parts of the research, education and innovation systems. In this report – which takes the form of an inspiration catalogue – we share the most important and valuable content and points of inspiration formulated and collected during this process. For an overview of the process and its participants, see [our website](#).

NordForsk was assisted in the *Mobilising the Nordics* project by Mobilize Strategy Consulting (mobilize-nordic.com).

Mobilize Strategy Consulting organised workshops, facilitated discussions, compiled the results from the discussions, and was commissioned to write a report presenting the main findings. The conclusions and recommendations in this report are therefore based on the work of Mobilize Strategy Consulting.

We hope this report serves its intended purpose – as a catalogue of inspiration and a starting point for further discussions about research, education and innovation throughout the Nordic Region. We look forward to taking part in those discussions.

Oslo, 15 September 2021

Arne Flåøyen,
Director,
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1. Introduction

In recent years, it has become increasingly clear that the Nordic countries' current research, education and innovation systems, while enormously important, could be better equipped to meet the growing demands for societal transformation. Societal developmental issues and agendas are becoming increasingly complex and require new ways of working and collaborating, across both sectors and national borders. The COVID-19 crisis has also highlighted and accelerated the need for drastic change in our research, education and innovation systems. Our societies need more rapid, integrated and coordinated action across the different parts of these systems. *This calls for change and action!*

The current report is an *inspiration catalogue* that presents 14 proposals for concrete actions and common processes for accelerating and facilitating change in Nordic research, education and innovation systems. The proposals are also a response to the work and ideas put forward by the Nordic Council of Ministers in [Vision 2030](#), as well as the Council's [action plan](#), which runs from 2021 to 2024. A common denominator is the strong belief in the development of more *Nordic solutions*, as well as *the added value* that can be generated by transforming the research, education and innovation systems through Nordic cooperation (see chapter 3).

At NordForsk, our main aims have been to initiate discussions and to collect and share inspirational material. Now, it is our hope that Nordic politicians, ministries and other stakeholders across the Nordic research, education and innovation systems will be inspired by this report, pick up the baton and together start implementing these proposals – and do it fast. *By working together, we will mobilise the Nordics!*

A summary of the 14 proposals presented in the inspiration catalogue



This inspiration catalogue is organised as follows. Chapter 2 presents a brief introduction to the big societal challenges currently facing the Nordic countries – and most of the world. Chapter 3 argues for a more integrated Nordic Region, as a way of making the necessary improvements in our research, education and innovation systems. This is followed in chapter 4 by concrete conclusions and proposals for action from the *Mobilising the Nordics* process, which was completed in June 2021. Chapter 5 outlines the next steps in this process, in the form of suggestions for future system development in a Nordic context. Finally, the [official website](#) features a more elaborate presentation of the spring 2021 process, the participants and the development of this inspiration catalogue.

2. Meeting societal challenges in new ways

The COVID-19 pandemic is the most recent global challenge to emphasise the need for more coordination and cooperation across borders.

The pandemic has also highlighted a general weakness across Nordic (and European) countries, in terms of our ability to react rapidly to unforeseen and complex events that require an immediate response. Our research, education and innovation systems are simply not equipped to deal with this kind of rapid change and thorough societal transformation. While the Nordic countries are generally recognised for their shared culture of autonomy and decentralisation, the crisis has made clear that such a culture and the systems that support it are in many ways insufficient when it comes to handling complex issues at a societal scale – the responses are not sufficiently rapid, coordinated or integrated.

Several other political/societal issues that also require thorough transformation have been on the political and national agendas for longer. The *green transition* is one concrete example. Interventions have been employed at the political level by seeking to limit carbon emissions and setting climate targets – e.g. as stipulated in the Paris Agreement. However, both for the individual countries and for the many individual private/public organisations, realising the ambitious targets agreed at the international political level can prove highly challenging.

Digitalisation is another topic that most countries and governments agree is a strong and influential force that will fundamentally change our societies, and which requires complex and coordinated transformation and development of the Nordic societies and their research, education and innovation systems. The inherent complexity of these issues demands new ways of working together and a general transformation of the Nordic systems.

These societal challenges, of course, are not new. Much research has been conducted and many discussions have been had on the nature of these issues and new ways of handling societal transformations at scale. More recently, several reports and pieces of literature have been published on the matter. One concrete approach to societal transformation and organising research and innovation is *mission orientation*. This approach, devised and popularised by Professor Mariana Mazzucato, has become the guiding paradigm for *Horizon Europe* – the most recent EU framework programme for research and innovation.

The Horizon Europe programme is a good example of a large-scale funding scheme that encourages new ways of working together across sectors, disciplines and countries on research, innovation and competence development. With a total budget of €95.5 billion, this funding programme targets research and innovation on climate change, the UN Sustainable Development Goals and boosting European competitiveness and growth. [Horizon Europe's website](#) emphasises missions and the *mission-oriented approach* as a new and game-changing approach, and highlights five selected mission areas. There is no doubt that *mission orientation* represents a new way of working together that will become crucial for handling societal issues and responding to these types of calls in the future.

The issues outlined above all point toward the same basic challenge: *the importance of system-wide transformation of our research, education and innovation systems*. But how do we do this? Where do we start? What are the biggest problems in contemporary research, education and innovation systems? And what are the first concrete actions that we should take in order to effectively initiate change and development? The project *Mobilising the Nordics* and this report seek to answer these important questions.

The following chapters will present concrete actions and suggestions. Some of the general conclusions are listed below:

- There is *huge added value in developing joint Nordic solutions*. System-wide transformation of the research, education and innovation systems cannot be restricted to the national level – international cooperation is necessary (see the next chapter).
- We in the Nordics therefore need to work together more and better – participation in *joined governance across the systems* is essential for the different organisations in our research, education and innovation systems.
- On the one hand, we must ensure *top-down political prioritisation and financing* across the Nordic countries; on the other, *bottom-up mobilisation* of the many different stakeholders and organisations is also necessary.
- We need to make the research, education and innovation systems *more demand-driven*, with a simultaneous focus not only on the needs of citizens and society, but also on competitive considerations.
- The *mission-oriented approach* should therefore be fully embraced, in order to raise awareness and focus on the needs of citizens and society. Such an approach can potentially lead to completely new ways of working together in the research, education and innovation systems.
- All of the societal challenges and the necessary changes *transcend the public/private distinction*. We need to mobilise and integrate into these developments a range of different organisations from all sectors.
- Currently, the different actors in the existing research, education and innovation systems are not familiar with each other. We need to invest in structures and processes that will *provide more shared understanding, respect and trust*.
- We can start building new shared Nordic research, education and innovation systems *by taking advantage of common strongholds*.

It is, of course, very positive that the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers have developed and implemented several Nordic visions and action plans at the political level. However, it is also crucial that the many different stakeholders and organisations have a common ambition and understanding of how to transform the entire system. This means that the ambition must be anchored locally, which is a much more demanding task than simply describing the visions. It is therefore important to anchor the visions in a bottom-up perspective on the concrete actions that we all can participate in and contribute to. This is the main purpose of the *Mobilising the Nordics* project, this inspiration catalogue, and the solutions and proposals presented.

3. Making the case for an integrated Nordic Region

To take our research, education and innovation systems to the next level, we must transform them – but does this kind of transformation process require national or international solutions? The obvious answer is both, but common solutions at the international level are necessary to create fundamental, system-wide changes. This is where the real potential of system change lies. We need to enact solutions at the international level. The EU is one obvious arena, in which we are already very much involved as individual nation-states. However, it is difficult for individual countries to initiate and maintain cooperation at the EU level. *This is a highly complex situation* – the EU member states are very diverse, and many different types of relationships and collaborations are in place across the Union. A more viable solution is to focus more on Nordic cooperation – strengthening Nordic cooperation increases our ability to cooperate in Europe. Relatively speaking, this is also easier, because a lot of regional cooperation already exists, and some governance structures are in place. We also share a common culture and background.

What are the arguments for going Nordic?

Together, the Nordic countries make up the world's 11th largest economy, which reflects the potential influence to be gained by operating within the EU as a region. All of the Nordic countries have in common well-developed welfare states with large public sectors, and therefore there is already a high level of public investment in research, education and innovation systems. We also have a lot in common when it comes to culture – our forms of cooperation are highly trust-based (compared to the rest of the world), which means they have the potential for rapid development and close collaboration. The Nordic Region is therefore, in many perspectives and in many areas of society, already highly integrated. Nonetheless, we argue that there is much more potential in this integration than is currently being realised.

Why the Nordic solution?

- The Nordics (combined) make up the world's 11th largest economy
- Well-developed welfare systems
- Similar culture of trust and flexible cooperation
- Already very integrated across borders

Where is the potential?

By working together to establish Nordic solutions, we have a more integrated and robust common voice in the EU. This is especially important in the light of recent and upcoming developments regarding Horizon Europe and the potential of the *mission-oriented* perspective. There is also great potential in our ability to digitalise our societies – during the COVID-19 crisis, we witnessed first-hand the benefits of a digital society. We need to further reap the benefits of this development in the future.

The great potentials

- An integrated and robust voice in the EU
- Further utilising digital development across sectors
- Realising the potential of scaling and development by creating a domestic Nordic market
- Utilising complementary potentials across research, education and innovation systems

The Nordic countries are generally good at fostering and working with innovation in terms of *exploration*, but compared to other countries (e.g. the US), we have a lot to learn when it comes to *scaling* and developing mature companies so that they can become even larger actors. This drawback can in part be attributed to the fact that these organisations' national home markets are often too small to allow for the development of so-called unicorns. Today, many high-growth companies are relocating to the US, as the European market is too complex and differentiated. A common and integrated Nordic domestic market would better accommodate this kind of development and scaling of new companies. Finally, our current systems of research, education and innovation are compatible, and have several complementary potentials.

In addition to the above, there is significant potential added value associated with the utilisation of Nordic solutions when the goal is to fundamentally change or develop research, education and innovation systems so that they are better equipped to handle large societal transformations. The following chapter will describe a range of concrete proposals and possible action points for realising this potential.

4. Putting the puzzle pieces together

Creating a more integrated Nordic system for research, education and innovation requires both concrete initiatives and a certain level of engagement. The following section (4.1) describes the suggested developments and change initiatives. One necessary change to the system consists of working together in a mission-oriented way in order to create new Nordic missions (see 4.2). However, there is no point in creating new missions and structures without developing the competences in society to meet the changes that will arise. Therefore, we also need to accelerate our development of new competences in society (see 4.3). Finally, in order to make the new integrated Nordic system work, we must be familiar with and learn from each other across the Nordic sectors and organisations. This demands new, common approaches and forums that facilitate development and learning, both for existing senior figures and for aspiring leaders (see 4.4). See also figure 2, which illustrates the four overall themes for the following sections.

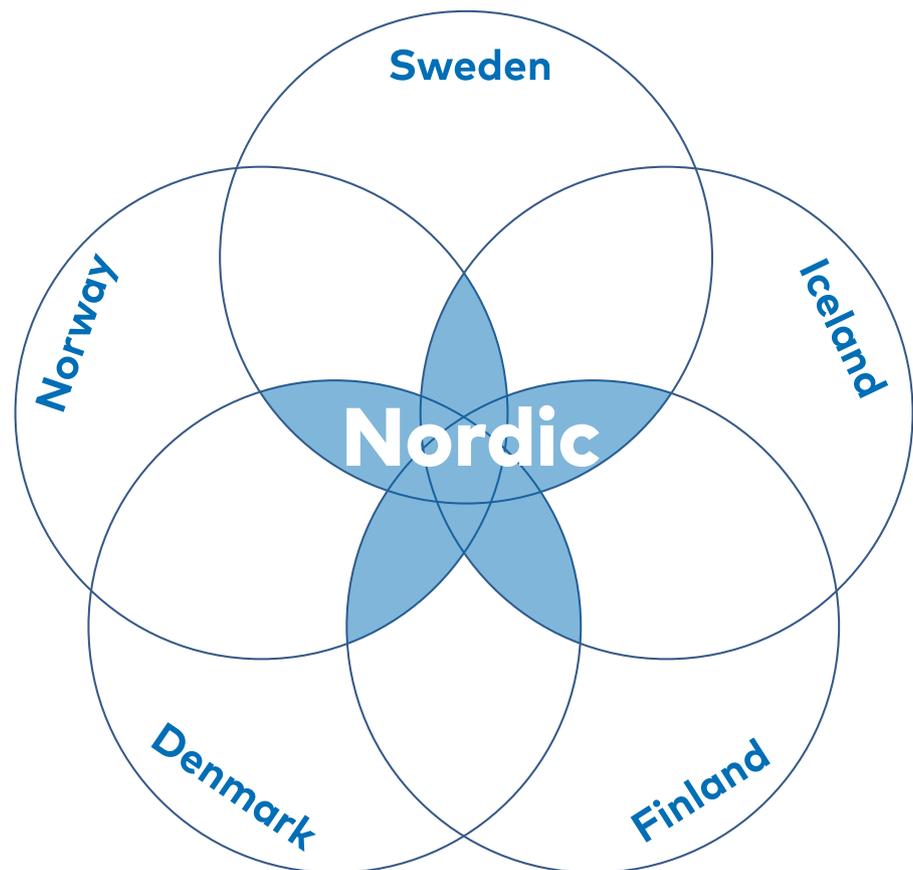


4.1. A new coherent R&I system

In order to fulfil the Nordic potentials, it is necessary to further unlock Nordic society's research and innovation capabilities. Today, the Nordic countries have valuable regional and national initiatives aimed at strengthening innovation capabilities across the Region. However, it is now necessary to identify and implement initiatives that can create added value on a Nordic scale. This entails taking steps and identifying actions that can only be realised within and across the Nordics, supported by the different countries' positions of strength.

First, we must better understand the current situation across the Nordics. We also need to analyse areas in which there is added value in working together at regional level. The suggested forms of cooperation must also be supported by the fact that businesses across the Nordics will be willing to engage and invest in them.

There is much to be gained here – not just for the people and societies of the Nordics, but for Europe and the world. But to get there, we must first take the relevant steps towards a common Nordic Region that continues to thrive and can deliver a socially sustainable, green and competitive structure for people, business and societies in the future. We suggest the following three initiatives.



Proposal #1:

A common Nordic strategic ambition

Why

We need a common Nordic strategic ambition directed at strengthening Nordic cooperation within the national research and innovation systems, thereby better equipping it to serve society. Doing so will have a significant positive impact, not just on the people and societies of the Nordics, but on Europe and the world. A common Nordic strategic ambition will ensure we are all heading in the same direction.

What

The ambition of realising a coherent research and innovation system across the Nordics must be based on the needs of companies in the Nordic countries – both large, international organisations and national/Nordic-anchored SMEs. Companies must experience the ambition and follow-up actions as being relevant and value-creating. This requires that representatives of the companies are involved in both the production of the ambition and its subsequent execution. The ambition should highlight the potentials that can be unlocked if funding for research, innovation and business development is based on a Nordic framework rather than a national one.

The ambition must consist of the following six core elements:

- We in the Nordics must establish a common strategic policy and investment plan for research and innovation in the Nordics, based on mission-oriented thinking, as part of which we define common Nordic missions.
- We in the Nordics must involve all relevant universities, research organisations, innovation agents and representatives from the private sector in the Nordics at the highest managerial level in the creation of the ambition and the efforts to realise it.
- We in the Nordics must establish common Nordic best practice in relation to the demand-based structure of each country's research, innovation and cluster systems.
- We in the Nordics must establish legal, financial and governance frameworks for partnering between universities and the private sector.
- We in the Nordics must find ways to increase private and public financing and investment in research and innovation, including from private foundations. This also includes strengthening financing networks across the Nordics.
- We in the Nordics must strengthen the common infrastructure in relation to EU's strategic goals in the areas of research and innovation.

Proposal #2:

A common Nordic analysis

Why

We need to produce a common Nordic analysis of each country's research, innovation and cluster systems. What are the current common strongholds? What are the common societal needs for new developments? This analysis should be based partly on the mission-oriented approach, and partly on a demand-based setup. Further, the analysis should be focused on how to set up and frame the new coherent Nordic research and innovation systems, with a view toward realising the strategic ambition.

What

The analysis must cover the following:

- Each country's strategic strongholds for realising Vision 2030 and the incentives for doing so at Nordic and global level.
- Each country's economic and industrial structures, strategic threats, and potentials in relation to the development of a mission-driven framework and a resilient society.
- Each country's competence base, strategic threats and potentials, including an assessment of the competencies needed to strengthen innovation in the future.
- The financial framework, primarily the ability to foster investments at an appropriate scale, and support for strengthening the national and Nordic impact ecosystem, including the right mix of public, private, and philanthropic funds plus EU financing.
- Incentive structures that encourage cooperation between research institutions and companies, including each country's legal and financial framework for IP rights and TTO (Technology Transfer Office).
- Barriers to the strategic coordination of innovation cooperation between the Nordic countries.
- Barriers to public and private cooperation, both nationally and regionally, with a focus on businesses that operate across the Nordics.

Proposal #3:

Monitoring and documentation of Nordic added value

Why

During spring 2021, it became obvious that there is a significant shortfall in the monitoring and documentation of Nordic added value. Nor, despite the large number of reports, meetings, conferences, etc. focusing on the Nordics, are there shared metrics or a common language. In addition, there is a gap between the definition of Nordic added value and how achieving it can create paths toward a common Nordic Region that continues to thrive and can deliver a socially sustainable, green and competitive structure for people, business and societies in the future.

What

A new and coherent Nordic research and innovation system, based on the strategic ambition, should focus solely on initiatives that create added value at Nordic level by taking steps and identifying actions that only can be brought to life within and across the Nordics, supported by the different countries' strongholds. Monitoring and documenting this Nordic added value is crucial.

Proposal# 4:

Common Nordic framework for missions and partnering

Why

We need a common Nordic framework for missions and partnering so that business and universities, etc., can work smoothly and efficiently together across the Nordics, and so that governments, agencies, funding mechanisms and the entire research and innovation system can support the aligned method and framework. This also entails partnerships related to the supporting legal and financial framework.

What

Initially, Nordic missions must have the following overall scope:

- Addressing "grand challenges", i.e. complex, global issues that impede sustainable development.
- Contributing to sustainable development within the SDG framework.
- Aimed at solutions at Nordic rather than national level.
- Based on Nordic strongholds within research, innovation and business.
- Transformative and creating value for societies and individuals in the Nordics.

Further, missions must create markets that:

- Are framed in a way that requires the involvement of companies, not just public actors.
- Strengthen the Nordic countries' overall competitiveness and productivity.
- Create added value for all stakeholders that contribute to delivering on the missions.

Proposal #5:

Four Nordic grand challenges and mission boards

Why

The first step is to define the “grand challenges” at the highest political level in the Nordics. The sooner these definitions are fixed, the better, as the research and innovation system, businesses, investors and others depend upon them. In order to generate Nordic added value, it is essential to first define the missions.

What

It is proposed that, in 2022, the Nordic Council of Ministers, based on Vision 2030 and the SDG framework, defines four Nordic grand challenges and subsequently establishes four mission boards, based on Nordic strongholds in industry and research, the Nordic way of life and fulfilling the mission criteria.

These grand challenges could be the following, as identified during the webinars and workshops of spring 2021:

- Societies that secure zero emissions
- Societies that secure a higher life expectancy and quality of life
- Societies that secure sustainable energy production
- Societies that secure sustainable food production

These are just suggestions, which may inform further debate as part of the decision process.

Proposal #6:

Common approach toward Horizon Europe

Why

The EU and the Horizon Europe programme play an important part in both the funding and the strategic development of the Nordic research and innovation system. There is significant added value in increased cooperation across the Nordic countries – on the one hand, it attracts more funding for research and innovation; on the other hand, it supports the expansion into the European market of companies and the research and innovation environment.

What

This entails joining forces across the Nordic countries and focusing on selected missions that are part of Horizon Europe. This kind of cooperation will also provide the research and innovation environments with opportunities to draw on a network of resources across the countries, which will support the formulation and development of impactful missions.

In general, the Nordic countries have a lot to gain from establishing common political decision-making power within the EU system. This will ensure even greater Nordic representation in the relevant governance and consultation forums. The Nordic Region can benefit from the creation of a common infrastructure in Brussels to support this Nordic approach. To facilitate such a change, it is necessary to build new common Nordic competences and capabilities, both in research and innovation environments and in private companies, aimed at reaping the benefits from Horizon Europe. Such a development can be initiated and led by the Nordic Council of Ministers.

Proposal #7:

Develop Nordic initiatives for the development of sustainable cities by the sea

Why

Cities produce about 72 % of all global GHG emissions. Most of the largest and growing cities in the Nordics are located by the sea, and in Europe it is estimated that by 2050 almost 85 % of Europeans will be living in cities. It is therefore cities and their inhabitants who must tackle climate change, by finding solutions and devising rapid methods of transformation. They share many characteristics and possibilities, comprising many complex social and technical systems. As such, they are powerful focal points for intervention, based on the mission-oriented approach proposed in this report.

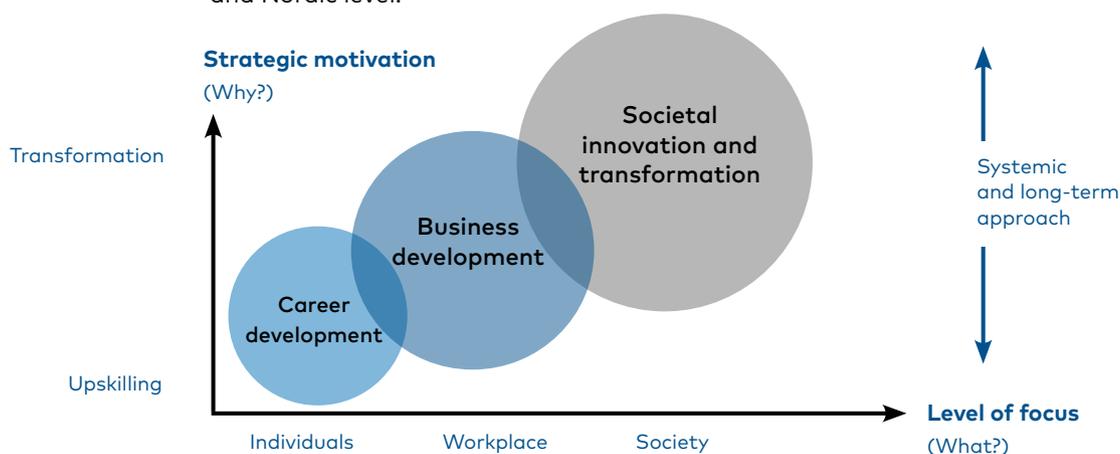
What

The issue of "sustainable cities by the sea" is highlighted as a promising Nordic mission area that calls for further examination and development. The starting point for this is the Horizon Europe programme, which connects to at least three of the five EU missions and has the potential to ensure a strong Nordic impact on the digital and green transition in Europe. The fact that the Nordic countries and cities have many things in common – culturally, societally, historically, economically, politically, etc. – indicates that there is significant potential for scaling initiatives and prototypes across the Nordic cities. This also aligns well with the mission-oriented innovation approach.

In working with such a common mission, it is equally important that the participants have access to a clear framework, mandate and set of processes and tools, in order to develop ownership and nurture engagement. The local, regional, national and Nordic levels can all be activated, potentially creating "rolling snowball" effects, i.e. building from small-scale interventions to large-scale systemic change.

4.3. Adapting competence development to the new system

Competence development is at the core of societal transformation, but we must also rethink how we provide continuing education. We need a broader, system-level perspective on continuing education, which allows for an understanding of the providers, users, platforms, regulation, etc., that together create the learning that supports societal transformation. Learning takes place in a complex ecosystem of interconnected elements and multi-relational interactions between actors and across different contexts. We need to work with the heterogeneous elements of universities, colleges, private operators, platforms, medias, social networks, public authorities, etc. Universities, as providers of research-based knowledge and competences, are a crucial element in this system of learning. As such, they could and should be central to this transformation. However, as participants in this process, they need to be more open to accepting greater responsibility for upscaling and upskilling people. Continuing education is an important strategic priority for most universities, and there is a top-level focus on this issue, but it is also important that continuing education is more than just a business model for the individual universities. Rather, continuing education should be a driver for a societal commitment and transformation at national and Nordic level.



The model above shows the importance of integrating the career development, business development and societal innovation and transformation perspectives into the development of continuing education.

In many respects, the Nordic countries are very similar – but they also have their differences, of course. We all have strong welfare societies and strong states, as well as structures and cultures that support cooperation across sectors and organisations. In a global perspective, we have the potential to collaborate on continuing education in a way that enables a sustainable transformation of our societies. We should create relevant learning opportunities for the whole ecosystem, and develop a strong Nordic approach to continuing education.

This mission's aim is therefore to increase cohesion across the Nordic countries. This entails bringing together and utilising the collective skills and resources from the national universities and educational institutions, under the umbrella "Opening up the university for upscaling and upskilling people in the Nordic Countries".

Proposal #8:

Development of a Nordic digital solution/hub for cooperation on continuing education

Why

We need to increase the accessibility of continuing education, and to enable its providers to exploit and benefit from heterogeneity. The COVID-19 crisis has presented significant challenges to the learning systems in general, and the universities specifically. This has led to the emergence of digital solutions for learning environments and relationships, as well as new experiences that may prove valuable. Private enterprises have invested enormously in building up digital learning platforms that appear to have interesting potential. Rather than spending public resources on developing competing platforms, we should invest in cooperation. Private companies, especially the large global ones, are building up their own internal learning academies and universities.

What

This initiative should support the building up of digital platforms and hubs for continuing education within specific areas that are important to the transformation of society, business development and career development, such as sustainability and digitalisation. This can be accomplished by bringing together relevant public- and private-sector actors in order to define a mission-based societal project that meets the societal need for complex, long-term competence development.

Proposal #9:

Nordic open university

Why

Universities are typically seen – and sometimes see themselves – as elite institutions for the privileged few at the top of the learning value-chain. They need to transform to better reflect the complexity of future societal changes. They need to be more accessible for society as a whole, rather than just for the few. Universities should work to enhance society and working life. Taking inspiration from Finland, it may be interesting to learn more about opening up the universities to make them accessible to people who are otherwise not in the usual target group for university degrees. This could lead to an even stronger distribution of university-based research to society, as well as an exploration of how this concept of the open university could be further developed based on a Nordic standard. The open university also fits very well with fundamental aspects of the Nordic welfare model (equality, education for all, public good, openness, etc.).

What

Anyone should be able to access university education, regardless of qualifications and age. Some advanced courses may require some 'entry' qualifications. Teaching is organised in students' teaching groups or groups designed for open university. Studies can take the form of contact teaching, blended learning or e-teaching. Open study programmes are subject to a charge, not full time, and do not in themselves lead to a qualification. The credits from open studies may contribute towards a degree if students subsequently take a degree programme at the same higher education institution.

Proposal #10:

New model for continuing education

Why

Universities are public providers of continuing education, and as such, they are regulated as public institutions. This is highly important, because universities are considered part of the common good, as communal infrastructure that is of collective concern. However, regulation sometimes prevents such institutions from adapting to societal needs. Universities are part of a complex ecosystem comprising many different actors, learning spaces and learning technologies. Continuing education should support societal transformation and innovation, e.g. on issues such as sustainability, digitalisation and healthcare. Given the complexity of these issues, we should experiment with creating new models for continuing education that are aimed at addressing them.

What

The green transition calls for new business models, competencies and careers. The green transition is an adaptive challenge with no clear solution, but understanding it entails an obvious need for cooperation across sectors and organisations. If continuing education is to be part of the green transition, it must be designed in a highly collaborative and innovative way. Cooperation should not only drive the experiment, but must be central to the content of the continuing education. This calls for a more transdisciplinary approach and the need to bring together a heterogeneous group of people in the same learning space. It also requires that a diverse range of universities from the Nordic countries and a range of stakeholders (employers, employees, universities, public authority etc.) cooperate on the societal challenge of the green transition.

Proposal #11:

Free university pilots

Why

'Free university pilots' are experiments that enable the exploration of new solutions in continuing education, which are adaptable to new and challenging needs, and which can make a difference to the transformation of society without being hindered by (unnecessary) regulation and government rules. The learning ecosystem is changing due to new actors, relationships, technologies, aspirations, financial resources, etc. An ecosystem approach needs eco-strategies that are built on cooperation and collective value creation, rather than ego-strategies that primarily support individual institutions and organisations. However, the ecosystem is complex, and we need to better understand its drivers, collective business models, etc. The objective is to find smarter, more resource-efficient, less bureaucratic solutions.

What

The Nordic accreditation authorities should launch and authorise a free university pilot, which should be explicitly based on criteria such as:

- 1) societal needs;
- 2) industry needs;
- 3) student needs; and
- 4) cross-national cooperation.

Universities should apply for free university pilot projects in the area of continuing education. Such initiatives should, of course, be transparent, to enable testing and evaluation of how cooperation between, e.g. two universities across country boundaries might work – and how it could benefit students and employers – if some of the consisting legal constraints were removed.

The project could draw inspiration from, e.g. Denmark's 'Free Municipality Pilot Project' (*'Frikommuneforsøget'*). It should contribute to innovation in continuing education at universities. Selected universities in the Nordic countries should be granted exemption from government rules and regulative requirements for the purpose of testing new approaches and solutions to the needs of specific sectors and organisations.

4.4. New system leaders that know each other

The Nordic countries are currently in a situation in which the leaders in the research, education and innovation systems know each other in national and sectoral contexts. However, these relationships can potentially be developed much earlier and in a more systematic manner, with a particular focus on transcending the boundaries of the public and private sectors – a perspective often lacking in the early careers of system leaders.

If we wish to create a real shift in the current system, it is important to focus on building stronger relationships at an earlier stage. If our hope is also that such a shift will create a more coherent Nordic system, then it is vital that the actors get to know each other across Nordic countries and sectors.

Following the workshops in spring 2021, we have identified at least three ways of approaching this issue:

- We can transform the system by designing and completing targeted leadership development. Many current programmes focus on the strategic development of our organisations. As such, a new leadership development programme should be designed in such a way that it creates relations and acquaintances around selected societal issues that call for more fundamental, systemic changes.
- This type of leadership development programme can target both existing leaders and the next generation of leaders, who will take over in the decades to come.
- The third proposal advocates the creation of a discussion forum, with broad participation from different stakeholders in the system – e.g. organisational leaders, stakeholder representatives and political leaders – the primary purpose of which is that the participants get to know each other and discuss necessary systemic developments. This can be achieved by arranging annual seminars focusing on relevant topics that require more systemic intervention.



Photo: iStock

Proposal #12:

New Nordic top-level leadership development programme

Why

The current leaders of public and private organisations in the current research, education and innovation systems must get to know each other in order to jointly contribute to the development of a Nordic system. An obvious forum for this initiative is one in which the participants are already operating with a learning-oriented mindset – i.e. the leadership development process. Such a programme is necessary to strengthen relations and establish a common arena in which the different actors can discuss how to enact systemic change and what this means for the different organisations in the system.

What

We advocate the establishment of a top leadership programme across the Nordic countries, aimed at e leaders from both the public and private sector, and with the following characteristics:

- Several institutions are invited, and with several participants per institution.
- The institutions are from different sectors and Nordic countries.
- The learning process makes use of strategic, real-world system-leadership cases from the organisations.
- Learning groups are established to work with and 'solve' systemic challenges.
- The process consists of both digital and physical activities, to minimise travel expenses and carbon footprint.
- The duration of the (pilot) programme should be no more than four months.

Proposal #13:

Common leadership education for reducing barriers

Why

It is important that leaders learn how to think more systemically early in their careers – not only within the confines of the national systems, but also in a Nordic context. In a similar vein to proposal #12, the purpose here is that leaders, early in their career, get to know each other and work together on topics of systemic change and how to transform systems of research, education and innovation in ways that allow for real societal transformation. If the leaders of tomorrow do not learn how to solve challenges of this scale, scope and complexity – and how to do so by working together – we will continue the trend of building leadership education and development programmes that promote national silos, only to discover that the silos themselves constitute a significant systemic issue. We therefore need education and development programmes that teach young leaders to not only pave the way and take responsibility for the organisational perspective, but also to participate in systemically oriented programmes.

What

Existing leadership education and development programmes should be influenced by this perspective. The people in charge of such programmes – the course providers and organisational HR departments – ought to consider these points, and thereby influence existing leadership programmes. Another idea is to create a new transverse program for young leaders. Such a programme arguably already exists, e.g. in Norway's *Solstrandprogrammet*. Perhaps it is possible to identify and mobilise similar programmes across the Nordic countries, with a view toward collaboration.

Proposal #14:

Creating a 'Nordic Davos'

Why

We need a forum that allows for discussions across nations regarding future missions – a forum that appeals to both organisational leaders and politicians.

What

The forum should act as a meeting point for leaders (public, private and political) and interested citizens. Its main purpose is to discuss the most pressing societal issues that should be tackled or solved by our research, education and innovation systems. While the format could be similar to that of Davos or '*Folkemødet*' in Denmark, the actual form it takes is not as important as its function – i.e. a forum for facilitating dialogue around the issues and building legitimacy around the common development of tomorrow's missions.

A potential first step could be for politicians and NGOs to work together to develop a forum of the appropriate scale and scope, and to discuss how to develop an inclusive process that not only allows for legitimacy in the eyes of the public, but also affords the ability to operationalise selected missions.

5. Next steps

The proposals outlined above represent a range of different approaches/ perspectives for developing our national and common Nordic systems of research, education and innovation, and for devising new ways of mobilising a Nordic network that still holds great potential. This potential is both highlighted and exemplified through the bottom-up *Mobilising the Nordics* process, which was completed in spring 2021. We successfully assembled a large group of top leaders and professionals, and mobilised them in relation to relevant topics and issues for discussion and development – issues that, due to their scale and inherent complexity, no one can solve alone.

With this inspiration catalogue, we aim to acknowledge and build on the commitment generated during the process. The report therefore serves as the next step towards integrating the Region's research, education and innovation systems. Our contention is that there is still much unrealised potential at both the structural and individual level.

- At the **individual level**, the process has made it clear that the majority of Nordic leaders sincerely wish to engage more with peers and potential collaborators at the Nordic level, but lack the appropriate platforms to facilitate this.
- At the **structural level**, Nordic collaborative processes should be more open and inclusive across both Nordic countries and sectors, in order to realise the added value and increase the success rate of larger international projects.

This is the basic dilemma that we all face when attempting systemic transformation. As individuals, we can be motivated to propose good ideas and implement changes that have a potential impact at the societal level. However, once the ideas are elevated to the system level, they can easily be perceived as top-down initiatives, as a result of which the energy and commitment surrounding the initiative tends to dissipate. Similarly, politicians can find themselves wanting to initiate larger transformations that are necessary for society to adjust and prosper, but they lack the local commitment and ownership necessary to realise large-scale societal transformations. With this inspiration catalogue – and the process that preceded it – we have paved the way for the politicians by collecting and sharing a range of proposals for the future of Nordic cooperation across several levels in the system. *Mobilising the Nordics* has generated strong local commitment to and ownership of the proposals highlighted in chapter 4. Furthermore, the catalogue should be considered an open invitation for individual actors in the research, education and innovation systems to draw upon the ideas and proposals that they find particularly meaningful and wish to further develop. They will not be alone in this, nor do they have to start from scratch – for each proposal, discussions and actions are already underway. This is an open invitation to utilise these selected opportunities, the primary purpose of which is to create a stronger, more coherent Nordic Region.

Turning again to some of the societal issues put forward in chapter 2, one key lesson from the COVID-19 crisis and our experience with the *Mobilising the Nordics* project is that the processes can (and should) be simple and digital. *Simple*, to allow for an inclusive process that is relevant across professional areas and involves a diverse group of people; digital, as we have all gone through the same necessary transition to a digital (or hybrid) workplace, and in doing so we have become experts in (or at least familiar with) completing more complex processes and meetings online. The digital format also provides much greater flexibility in terms of bringing together busy people across several time zones for relatively brief meetings or workshops. It is, of course, still crucial to have precise agendas and carefully crafted facilitation – but there is no doubt that *digital is the way forward for international cooperation!*

Thank you

– to all contributors!

Throughout the spring process, a total of 168 top leaders, professionals and students across the Nordic countries came together to discuss, qualify and further develop ideas with the potential to create Nordic added value. All of the participants in the process – in the common webinars, the mission groups and the steering group – come from different sectors in the Nordics, such as universities, research organisations, funding agencies, innovation actors, ministries and private companies. We therefore want to thank all of the leaders, professionals and students who helped make this inspiration catalogue possible and contributed to taking Nordic cooperation to the next level.



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