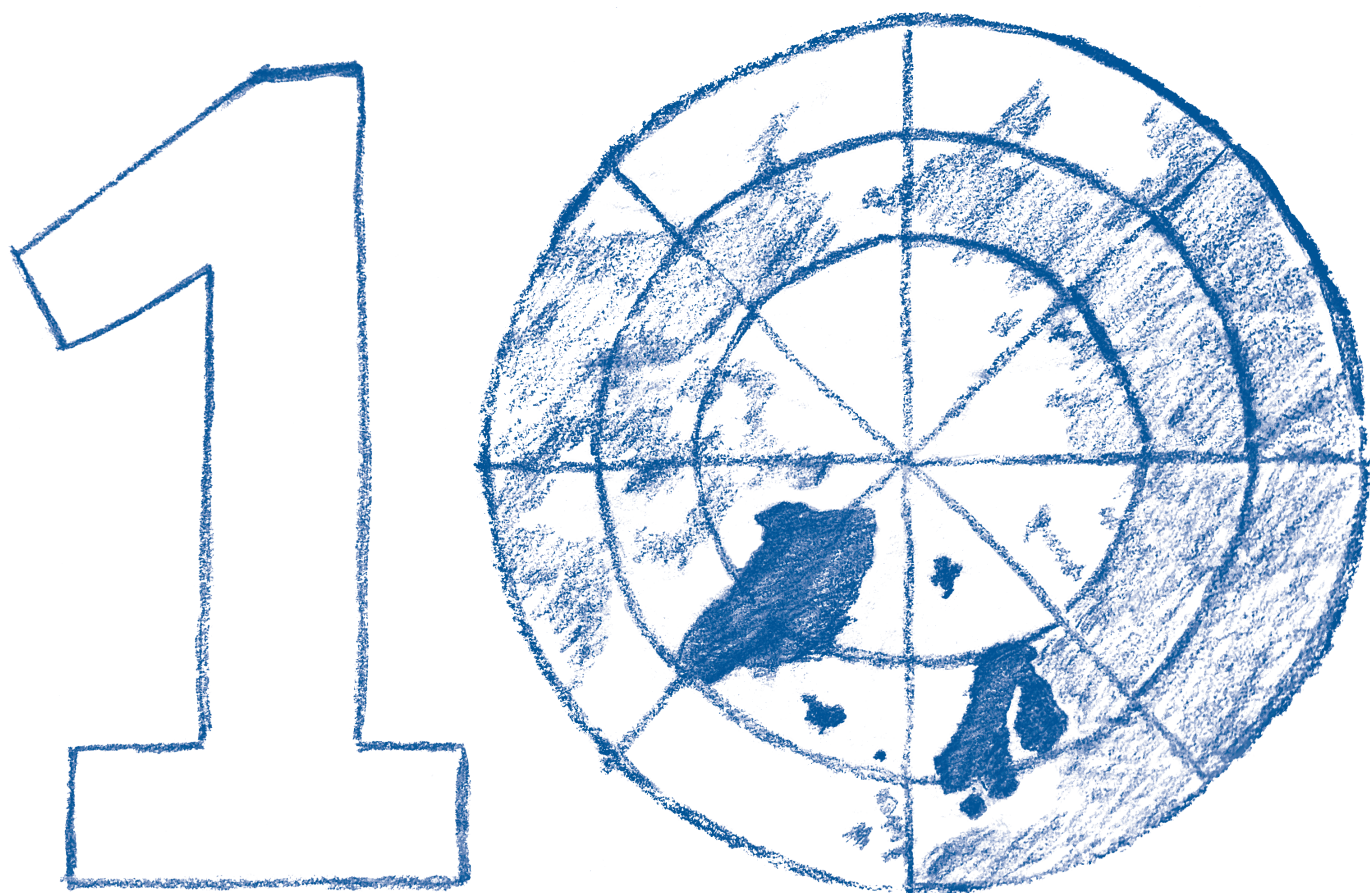


NordForsk

2005–2015



NordForsk | 10 years



norden

NordForsk

NordForsk Anniversary Insert

Contents

- 01 Gunnel Gustafsson
Preface
- 02 “Astonished that I took on such a challenge” / Gustav Björkstrand
- 03 Building up NordForsk / Liisa Hakamies-Blomqvist
- 04 Gunnel Gustafsson
NordForsk 2010–2015: Disappointment turns into strategic optimism
- 06 Nordic research councils looking ahead
- 07 Strategic priorities 2015–2018 / The NordForsk Board
- 08 Funding of Nordic research cooperation/ The development of NordForsk
- 10 Gard Titlestad
NordForsk’s prehistory, 2001–2005: Nordic swan or ugly duckling?
- 13 Gard Titlestad
NordForsk and the Top-level Research Initiative, 2005–2010: The swan starts to fly
- 17 Focusing on a few core funding instruments – Agneta Bladh
- 18 A will to research?
- 20 First evaluation of the NCoE scheme
- 21 The Top-level Research Initiative has advanced Nordic research
- 22 Celebrating ten years of Nordic “dugnad”
- 24 NordForsk secretariat 2015/ Sources for more information about NordForsk



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NordForsk

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The Swan ecolabel was
established in 1989 by the
consumer sector of the
Nordic Council of Ministers.

Gunnel Gustafsson, NordForsk Director

Preface

Ten years have already passed since NordForsk was established by the Nordic Council of Ministers. That is a milestone! In this insert to the NordForsk Magazine 2015, we are looking back at the early days, at the decisions made at political and stakeholder levels, as well as at important events and developments that have helped to make NordForsk what it is today.

In its ten years of existence, the Nordic research collaboration facilitated by NordForsk has become visible and relevant and has made NordForsk a key player in Nordic collaboration. Nordic research cooperation is looked upon with great interest by the outside world, and enhances the reputation of the Nordics as a globally leading knowledge region.

NordForsk is special in some ways. The organisation is a political instrument for the Nordic Council of Ministers with the aim of achieving Nordic added value through research cooperation. NordForsk's role is to function as a platform facilitating cross-border research cooperation where the national funding agencies and the university sector contribute with funding to joint Nordic research and research infrastructure programmes. NordForsk's unique feature is that it facilitates Nordic cooperation using a common pot. All of NordForsk's initiatives are based on national priorities, and must be of high scientific quality.

An anniversary is not only an occasion to look back, but also a time to look ahead at the next 10 years and onwards. What may be the developments ahead, and in which arenas will Nordic research cooperation have its most important function?

We live in a fast developing world that entails both challenges and opportunities. Unstable societies, migration, issues related to health and welfare, climate change and responsible development of the Arctic are all high on international and political agendas. Such grand societal challenges are addressed in several of NordForsk's research programmes. The new knowledge emerging from these is extremely important for meeting the



Photo: NordForsk/Terje Helestad

challenges and benefiting from the opportunities that lie ahead.

The establishment of NordForsk was challenging, as articles in this insert describe. However, the development has been positive and NordForsk is now contributing new, relevant knowledge in the era of globalisation. Openness and constructive dialogue between researchers, policy makers, and other stakeholders are prerequisites for growth and development in the future.

NordForsk recently celebrated its 10th anniversary with a conference in Oslo. The future of Nordic research cooperation was discussed, and ideas and suggestions were put forth by speakers and by the audience. NordForsk will take these into account on the road ahead.

*Gunnel Gustafsson, Professor
Director NordForsk*

“Astonished that I took on such a challenge”



Hilding Gustav Mattias Björkstrand is a Finnish theologian, bishop and politician. In the 2003 report, “NORIA: White Paper on Nordic Research and Innovation”, he laid out the vision for a Nordic research and innovation area to be established by 2010. Photo: NordForsk/Terje Heiestad

“Looking back, I am astonished that I took on such a challenging task. It was a very intense period,” said Professor Gustav Björkstrand in his remarks at the NordForsk tenth anniversary conference in Oslo on 8 October 2015.

NordForsk was launched in 2005 in keeping with the recommendation of Gustav Björkstrand, professor and then rector at Åbo Akademi University. At the request of the Nordic Council of Ministers, he drew up and presented a white book in 2003 on how the Nordic region could achieve its goal of becoming an internationally leading research and innovation region by 2010.

Professor Björkstrand also admitted that he was quite surprised by the speed with which the Nordic Council of Ministers followed up his report and decided to establish both NordForsk and the Nordic Research and Innovation Area (NORIA). Ten years later, Björkstrand noted, the Nordic region is still not a global leader. Nonetheless, he sees NordForsk’s development as impressive. “Standing together and using resources in an effective way is important for the Nordic countries to compete internationally. United we stand, divided we fall,” he concluded.

Building up N

Liisa Hakamies-Blomqvist was the first director of NordForsk from 2005–2009.

What was the biggest challenge facing NordForsk during your term as director?

“Becoming NordForsk’s first director was essentially being on the construction crew. I set several clearly defined goals for myself.”

“**Firstly**, I wanted to achieve a paradigm shift in the way we viewed Nordic cooperation, particularly in the research sphere. I chose to describe it as a transition from an introverted perspective, in which we worked together on comfortable small-scale Nordic activities, to an extroverted perspective, in which the Nordic people joined forces to become a strong, unified presence and make a difference globally. This was so successful that a year after I had first formulated the idea I heard Finland’s then prime minister present it as his own.”

“**Secondly**, I wanted to make NordForsk a visible, credible actor in a short period of time, thereby generating a higher profile and goodwill for Nordic research cooperation. This was successful, not least because the members of the board at the time each played such a key role in their respective countries. Per Unckel, who was the Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers at the time, was also a tremendous support. During the first years we focused extensively on communication at various levels.”

“**Thirdly**, it was important to create a functional organisation with clearly defined roles and effective processes that was at the same time a productive, welcoming working environment for our Nordic employees.”

NordForsk

Which results did you generate during the first five years?

“We launched the new, co-funded NCoE schemes, we mapped interest in Nordic cooperation on research infrastructure, we conducted research policy-related studies that became part of the foundation for further cooperation, and, not least, we made a central contribution to the establishment of the Top-level Research Initiative.”

What characterises NordForsk today?

“I have always felt strongly about enabling students and younger researchers to participate in Nordic collaborative efforts at an early stage and in all areas. That is where we can encourage future potential for



Liisa Hakamies-Blomqvist from Finland was the first Director of NordForsk following her period as Senior Research Scientist at the Swedish National Road and Transport Research Institute in Linköping. She is currently Head of Publishing at the Society of Swedish Literature in Finland.
Photo: NordForsk/Terje Heiestad

cooperation to grow! I hope that it will still be possible in the coming years within the framework of the current support schemes.”



The NordForsk secretariat 2006:

Back, left:
Kate Runeberg,
Harry Zilliacus,
Susanne Klepzig,
Torkild Winther,
Turid Hæreid.

Front, left: Marika
Muhonen Nilsen,
Ellen Knutsen
Rydberg, Liisa
Hakamies-Blomqvist,
Liv Karin Sameien,
Elisabet Lillian
Gustad.

Gunnel Gustafsson: NordForsk 2010–2015

Disappointment turns into strategic optimism

When NordForsk celebrated its fifth anniversary in 2010, Professor Gustav Björkstrand professed his disappointment. “I wish that the decision-makers in the Nordic countries had greater faith in Nordic cooperation, and that they made wider use of NordForsk,” Björkstrand said. However, he also described himself as a “disappointed optimist”.

Professor Björkstrand’s disappointment was aired when he was interviewed by NordForsk Magazine, and was later confirmed when the external evaluation of NordForsk’s first five years, published in 2011, confirmed that it was far from easy for the organisation to find its role in the complex Nordic research landscape. However, the report emphasised that there was tremendous potential in Nordic research cooperation and that developments had been positive.

Another report, commissioned by the Nordic Council of Ministers for Education and Research to assess Nordic research cooperation and the countries’ commitment to research (in Swedish: *Vilja till forskning?*), also published in 2011, stated that NordForsk had developed several strengths in a short period of time. The report pointed out that the volume and quality of research cooperation had increased. This had been achieved in part through the allocation of substantial sums by the research funding agencies in the five Nordic countries – in addition to funding provided by the Nordic Council of Ministers – and in part as a result of the competition for relatively large funding amounts, which has led to higher-quality new knowledge.

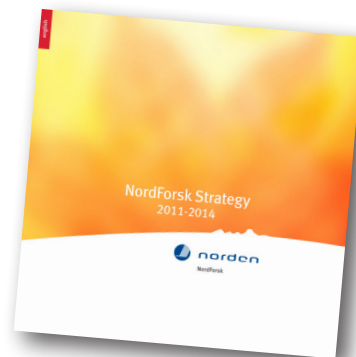
At the same time, it was noted that many weaknesses remained, related to unresolved institutional complexity, insufficient funding, and the inability to collaborate across sectors, particularly

between research and innovation. The report also concluded that NordForsk had not evolved into the central hub for Nordic research cooperation that was envisioned when it was established.

The Nordic region as a global brand

The proposals for further developing the Nordic region included increased cooperation on research infrastructure and enhanced efforts to promote the region’s international visibility, profile and attractiveness – the Nordic region as a global brand. It is pointed out that if this is to be achieved, there must be a clear policy shift from viewing Nordic cooperation as an alternative to European cooperation to viewing it as a strategic opportunity and platform for European and other international cooperation.

At the end of 2010, the NordForsk Board decided to draw up a new strategy. This decision was taken around the same time that Professor Björkstrand expressed his disappointment in the way NordForsk was evolving. The two evaluation reports commissioned by MR-U on NordForsk’s first five years of operation and the development of Nordic cooperation were also underway at roughly the same time as the process that led to a new strategy for NordForsk.



Strategy 2011-2014

Focus was now on the launch of and participation in large-scale, interdisciplinary research programmes designed to ensure that the knowledge generated should be of the highest scientific calibre and can be used to deal with major societal challenges. Priority was also given to achieving critical mass in areas of future potential, as well as to Nordic and international cooperation on research infrastructure. Given that the objective was to attain excellence in research, the most important funding instrument had become the Nordic Centres of Excellence (NCoE) scheme, which incorporated mobility, researcher training, international cooperation and research-driven innovation.

The strategy stated clearly that all decisions regarding research initiatives and research infrastructure must achieve Nordic added value as part of their underlying premise. Research areas identified as worthy of funding must be given priority in political and research circles alike, and the national research funding agencies must contribute funding.

Interdisciplinary programmes and research infrastructure

During the 2010–2014 period, interdisciplinary programmes were launched in the following areas: climate; health and



NordForsk Director Gunnel Gustafsson, EU Commissioner for Research, Innovation and Science Máire Geoghegan-Quinn and Chair of the NordForsk Board Guðrún Nardal, in Brussels, 2012.
Photo: NordForsk/Terje Heiestad

welfare; societal security; education for tomorrow; responsible development of the Arctic; and eScience. In addition, new initiatives were developed in the following areas: green growth/bioeconomy; neutron/materials science; Nordic languages, including communication and language culture in the Nordic region; and gender research with particular focus on conditions within the research community. At the same time, cooperation on research infrastructure has been expanded, and a high-level expert group has been appointed to give the NordForsk Board input on this important issue. Greater priority has been given to building ties between Nordic and international cooperation.

Vision and reality

There are many indications that Nordic cooperation is experiencing a renaissance, particularly in research and higher education. Chancellor Thomas Wilhelmsson of the University of Helsinki believes that the time is ripe for a revitalisation of ambitions for Nordic cooperation, not least in the university and university college sector. His vision is to achieve over the next ten years a closely collaborative region with an international Nordic brand, which will attract a growing number of top academics to our part of the world.



Chancellor **Thomas Wilhelmsson** of the University of Helsinki believes that the time is ripe for a revitalisation of Nordic thinking, not least in the university and university college sector.
Photo: NordForsk/Terje Heiestad

The vision for the Nordic Council of Ministers recently adopted by the Ministers of Co-operation emphasises the value of Nordic cooperation at a time in which “globalisation, resource consumption and economic crisis are posing challenges to the Nordic welfare model”. Their vision is of a Nordic region characterised by “freedom of movement, innovation, visibility and international engagement”. Like the Swedish historian Gunnar Wetterberg, the author of the *Nordic Council and Nordic Council of Ministers Yearbook 2010*, the ministers take as their starting point that the

five Nordic countries together have a population and a GDP that makes them one of the world’s ten largest economies.

In brief, Mr Wetterberg’s historical analysis states that for the first time in centuries, there is nothing in the existing power constellations that would pose obstacles to Nordic unification. In the research-policy sphere, he believes that it is now possible to build up a number of Nordic research universities that can attract highly qualified researchers. He is certain that this will have a significant impact on trade and industry in the relatively short term and lead to lasting economic growth in the Nordic region in the somewhat longer term. His vision has been received with widespread interest and has been a topic of intense debate. However, it is still not considered very realistic.

Cooperation with Europe

In 2012, an effort was made to link NORIA (Nordic Research and Innovation Area) with European ambitions to implement the ERA (European Research Area) when Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers, Halldór Ásgrímsson, and then Chair of the NordForsk Board, Guðrún Nardal, signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the European Commission. The areas addressed by the MoU included career opportunities for researchers and researcher mobility, gender equality, cooperation on research and research infrastructures, and Open Access to data and publications with a focus on Nordic eScience. The European Commission signed similar agreements with representatives of Science Europe (an association of European Research Funding Organisations (RFO) and Research Performing Organisations (RPO), the European University Association (EUA), the League of European Research Universities (LERU) and the European Association of Research and Technology Organisations (EARTO).

According to a report describing the results of the cooperation in the course of a year and half, NordForsk was able to profile its activities, gain access to discussions and take advantage of the opportunity to learn from European organisations whose Nordic representatives, in particular the EUA and Science Europe, are among NordForsk’s key partners.

Based on increased ambitions with regard to Nordic added value in the new strategy 2015-2018, the Board decided that NordForsk should leave the stakeholder platform in 2015.

A wide-enough window of opportunity

At present, there is a wide-enough window of opportunity for Nordic cooperation to allow our visions to approach our

reality. The modernisation project that the Ministers for Co-operation have given the current Secretary General, Dagfinn Høybråten, is an indication that a new course is to be charted out. In the words of Thomas Wilhelmsson in an interview given to the Finnish newspaper *Hufvudstadsbladet* in January 2014, we can envisage “the emergence of structural innovations, transboundary mergers, alliances and infrastructure consortia”.

According to Wilhelmsson, this can be achieved if there is the willingness to do so. All we have to do is “dare to invest enough.”

The visions that have been set out signal that a new direction for Nordic cooperation is coming. Fewer sector-based dividing lines, increased volume and higher quality in research will enable the Nordic region to become a globally leading research, education and innovation region.

Looking ahead

NordForsk Magazine has asked the heads of Nordic research councils:

– Which area or topic is most important in Nordic research collaboration today and will be in the years to come?



Denmark

General Director Hans Müller Pedersen, Danish Agency for Science, Technology and Innovation

In my opinion, research infrastructure projects that are too large for any one country on its own are perfect for cooperation under a Nordic umbrella. Both the European Spallation Source (ESS) and the Nordic e-Infrastructure Collaboration (NeIC) are good examples of already established collaborative projects. We should also cooperate in research areas where we have shared interests, such as the Arctic. Lastly, I think it is important for us to reach a common understanding of issues such as research integrity and open access.



Finland

Heikki Mannila, President of the Academy of Finland

The selection of themes for Nordic collaboration should be based on the added value that such collaboration can provide. We can see many examples of areas where the added value is immediately visible, e.g., in health and welfare, register-based research, and societal security. In these – and many other – areas Nordic collaboration is very natural, and the ability to form large consortia and utilise existing infrastructure benefits all participants.



Iceland

Hallgrímur Jónasson, General Director of Rannís

Important topics for the future are to stimulate young people to become engaged in research and innovation and to create conditions that give them the opportunity within the Nordic countries to reach excellence within their fields. Further, it is important that we match growing knowledge about our physical world with knowledge about our social phenomena. Demographic problems, security and green economy are examples of specific topics of importance here.



Norway

Director General Arvid Hallén, the Research Council of Norway

Nordic research cooperation carries great potential. If we are to succeed, those of us who administer public research funds in the Nordic region must work together more closely. NordForsk plays an important role, but could be used to an even greater degree to promote collaboration among the Nordic national research funding bodies. In terms of thematic areas, we should stick to areas within the national research-policy priorities. Initiatives should be focused, and carry enough weight to make a difference.



Sweden

Sven Stafström, Director General of the Swedish Research Council

Areas for Nordic research collaboration should be chosen based on one of the following criteria: 1) areas in which several (if not all) of the Nordic countries are very strong, 2) areas that connect to research infrastructure that benefit from Nordic collaboration, and 3) areas that relate to either industrial or societal challenges that are common for the Nordic countries. In the years to come I think that the second criterion will be the most important one; sharing research infrastructure will lead to collaborations and building of common Nordic user groups. This will be very important, especially for young researchers.

Strategic priorities 2015–2018

NordForsk's strategic priorities for the period 2015–2018 aim to strengthen Nordic universities and other research organisations through joint Nordic actions funded by NordForsk in cooperation with national research councils and other funding agencies.

NordForsk's new strategy states that when investments in joint Nordic research programmes are made, the availability of relevant research infrastructures should be considered and so should the impact of the programme.

Investments in research and research infrastructure are key priorities for NordForsk and should be perceived as mutually interdependent and closely linked to the impact on society, and on policy and science communities. The strategic priorities below are all important and interlinked.

- The vision is of a Nordic region that is globally leading in research and innovation, with NordForsk continuously contributing to this.
- The goal of NordForsk is to enhance the quality, impact and cost-efficiency of Nordic research and research infrastructure collaboration.

Nordic cross-border research cooperation

- Strengthening integrated cross-sectoral research with the aim of tackling societal challenges and ensuring sustainable development.



The NordForsk Board including observers and NordForsk Director. Left to right: Guðrún Nordal, Director of the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies, Dagfinn Høybråten, Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers, Gitte Agerhus, Head of Office at the Danish Agency for Science, Technology and Innovation, Anders Geertsen, Head of the Department of Knowledge and Welfare (KV) at the Nordic Council of Ministers, Marja Makarow, Chair of the NordForsk Board and Vice President for Research at the Academy of Finland, Kristin Danielsen, International Director, the Research Council of Norway, Eva Björck, Vice Chair of the NordForsk Board and Secretary General, Committee for Educational Sciences, the Swedish Research Council, Tine Pars, Rector of the University of Greenland, NordForsk Director Gunnel Gustafsson, Annika Sølvará, Director of the Faroese Research Council, and Ole Petter Ottersen, Rector of the University of Oslo.
Photo: NordForsk/Terje Heiestad

- Creating critical mass in potentially excellent research areas.

Nordic research infrastructure cooperation

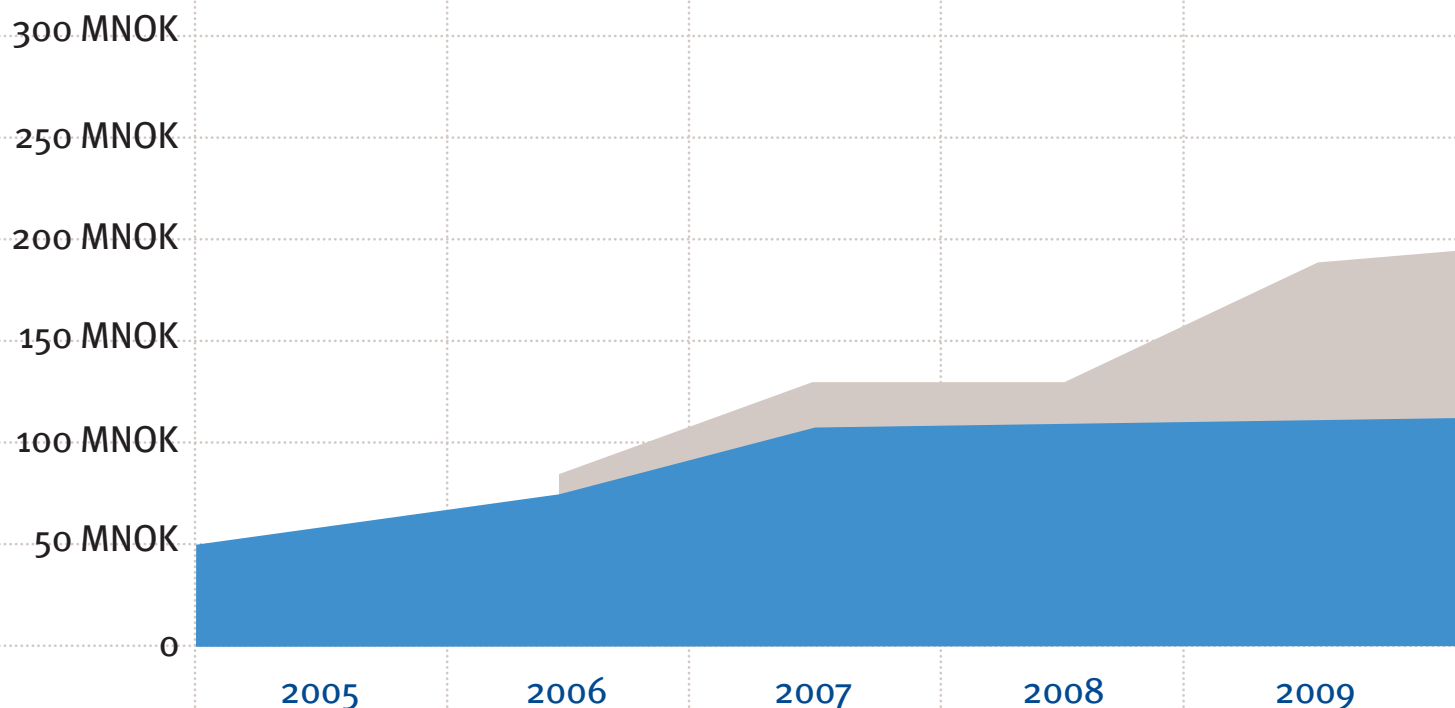
- Increasing cross-border access to and joint use of existing research infrastructures in the Nordic region and globally.
- Supporting the establishment of new Nordic research infrastructures.

Impact of Nordic research and research infrastructure cooperation

- Providing Nordic policy-makers and users with new evidence-informed/ tested knowledge.
- Improving knowledge about new results of Nordic research and research infrastructure cooperation on the science and society arenas by increased visibility.

Funding of NordForsk initiatives, 2005–2015

NordForsk's common pot budget consists of two parts. One part is the funding from the Nordic Council of Ministers. The other part is national co-funding for all initiatives.

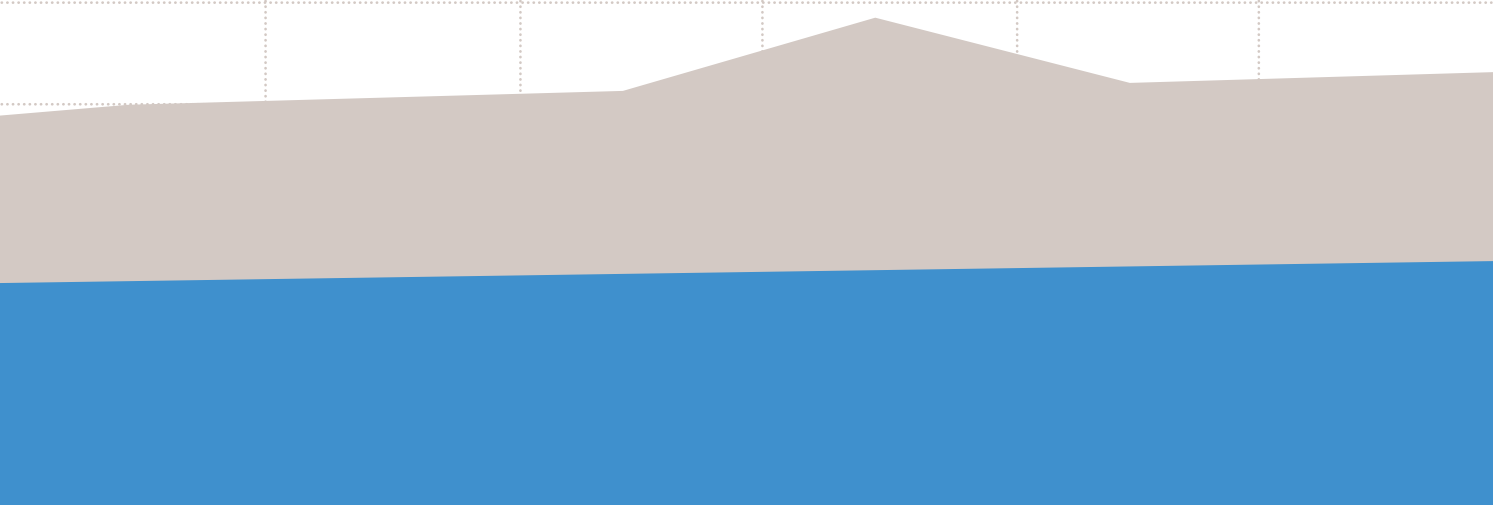


Selected key developments of NordForsk 2005 - 2015

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
2003 - Gustav Björkstrand's report "NORIA: White Paper on Nordic Research and Innovation" 2004 - The Nordic Council of Ministers decides to establish NordForsk and the Nordic Research and Innovation Area	- NordForsk is established - NordForsk's first Chair of the Board, Professor Lene Lange - NordForsk's first Director, Dr. Liisa Hakamies-Blomquist	- NordForsk's strategy 2005-2009 - NCoE Programme on Welfare Research - NCoE Programme on Food, Nutrition and Health	- The Nordic Prime Ministers' Punkaharju Declaration in June agrees on a Globalisation initiative. - NordForsk establishes the NORIA-NET Programme - New Chair of the NordForsk Board Dr. Kari Kveseth	- The Riksgränsen Declaration defines the basis for an extended Nordic cooperation - The Top-level Research Initiative (TRI) is established with a budget of 400 MDKK	- Completed plans for the TRI presented to the Ministers of Research and Education at the Nordic Council Session in Stockholm - The TRI presented at UN Climate Change Conference, Copenhagen - The programme on Living Labs - The programme Sustainable Freight and Logistics in a Nordic Context - The programme on Primary Industries - New Chair of the NordForsk Board Professor Guðrún Nardal

■ National co-funding

■ Funding from the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM)



2010

2011

2012

2013

2014

2015

2010

2011

2012

2013

2014

2015

- NordForsk's second Director, Professor Gunnel Gustafsson
- New strategy for NordForsk 2010-2014

- External evaluation of NordForsk's first five years
- The Nordic Council of Ministers for Education and Research (MR-U) issues its report "Vilja till forskning?"
- The Nordic e-Infrastructure Collaboration NeIC is hosted by NordForsk

- NordForsk joins the ERA Stakeholder Platform
- The programme Nordic eScience Globalisation Initiative
- The programme Education for Tomorrow
- The TRI book: "Hot Topic - Cold Comfort. Climate Change and Attitude Change" by Gudmund Hernes
- The programme on Health and Welfare

- The Nordic Societal Security Programme
- NordForsk's Open Access Policy
- NordForsk's Gender Policy
- NordForsk facilitates a joint call for the European Joint Programming Initiative Climate

- Joint Nordic Initiative for Responsible Development of the Arctic
- Register cooperation included in the Health and Welfare programme
- New Chair of the NordForsk Board Professor Marja Makarow

- New strategy for NordForsk 2015-2018
- Research and innovation programme on Green Growth in cooperation with Nordic Energy Research and Nordic Innovation
- Joint Nordic Neutron Science Programme
- The programme Gender in the Nordic Research and Innovation Area
- The Nordic Bioeconomy Programme
- The TRI book "Solving the Climate Crisis – A Nordic Contribution"
- TRI presented at UN Climate Change Conference, Paris

Gard Titlestad, Head of Department of Knowledge and Welfare,
Nordic Council of Ministers' secretariat:

NordForsk's prehistory, 2001–2005

Nordic swan or ugly duckling?

Ten years have passed since the launch of NordForsk, and the original visions of transforming Nordic cooperation on research and innovation into a high-flying Nordic swan have not been entirely realised. However, NordForsk has not become the ugly duckling it was first perceived as in certain circles either – and the trend is moving in the direction of the swan.

Gard Titlestad knows more than most others about the events leading up to the start of NordForsk and its history up until 2011, when he stepped down from the position of Head of Department of Knowledge and Welfare at the Nordic Council of Ministers' secretariat. If the details of NordForsk's history are ever to be officially recorded, Mr Titlestad will be an indispensable source. Already now, ten years after NordForsk was launched, he has begun to tell of the visions, perspectives and some of the challenges that are part of NordForsk's evolution.

A gradual development

"As I see it, the first question a historian should ask is whether NordForsk is the culmination of development over several years – in what I would call a continuum – or whether the organisation

grew from political innovation during the period from 2004 to 2005," Mr Titlestad explains. "Also of interest are the people who took part in the process. My view is that NordForsk emerged as part of a continuum which gained momentum around 2001–2002, when Nordic ministers in research and education decided to evaluate Nordic collaboration in the research sphere. This marked the beginning of a process involving ministers of education, parliamentarians, senior officials and the executive level of research councils in the Nordic countries. The Nordic prime ministers were in fact not part of the process for many years, but subsequently weighed in heavily when the Danish Prime Minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, introduced his initiative for globalisation in 2006, and when deciding to launch the Top-level Research Initiative in the Punkaharju Declaration in June 2007."

From 1950 until the beginning of the new millennium, Nordic cooperation in research and innovation largely revolved around establishing specialised institutions. Stated somewhat categorically: if Nordic politicians and key civil servants could show they had left an institution as their legacy it proved that they had accomplished something.

But as the new millennium started, the time was ripe for more sweeping change. Alongside the establishment of various institutions, there had been development of a fairly extensive – but little coordinated – Nordic collaboration in the area of research. The Nordic ministers of education and research realised that something had to be done, and took the decision in 2002 to commission two important reports.

The ministers' initiative was inspired by then EU Research Commissioner

and Belgian professor of physics and politician, Philippe Busquin, who in January 2000 presented a report recommending the creation of a European Research Area (ERA) to integrate the science resources of EU member states. Two months later, European heads of state agreed during their summit in Lisbon to establish the ERA. This triggered a similar line of thinking in the Nordic countries, and certain individuals with an eye to the future began to see the potential in combining instruments that were already in place.

Gustav Björkstrand elaborates on a vision

The Nordic Council of Ministers for Education and Research (MR-U) commissioned a white paper on Nordic cooperation on research, researcher training and the business sector. The aim was to formulate specific recommendations for future activities that would make the Nordic region a leading region in research and innovation.

The task of writing the report was given to the Finnish professor, theologian and politician Gustav Björkstrand. His mandate was to address a wide range of issues related to Nordic research cooperation,

This article presents the development of Nordic research and innovation cooperation prior to the launch of NordForsk in 2005. Developments from 2005 up to today are described in two other articles.

including organisation, funding, incentives and instruments. Professor Björkstrand consulted numerous experts as well as the reference group appointed by the Nordic Council of Ministers. He also engaged in close dialogue with the relevant ministries and research funding agencies in the five Nordic countries and the autonomous areas (the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland). This resulted in the document “NORIA: White Paper on Nordic Research and Innovation”.

In the report, Professor Björkstrand envisions a Nordic research and innovation area to be established before 2010. The report played an important role in the founding of NordForsk two years later.

Parallel to Professor Björkstrand’s efforts, Professor Dan Brändström was drawing up a report about the funding responsibility for a number of research-performing institutions which, at the beginning of the 2000s, were by and large financed by the Nordic Council of Ministers for Education and Research. Professor Brändström concluded his study in 2003, and recommended that the financial support from the Nordic Council of Ministers should be gradually reduced and reinvested in more flexible funding instruments that would promote Nordic excellence in research. He proposed nationalising the institutions in question and then scaling down support from the Nordic Council of Ministers.

The nationalised institutions would have the right to seek funding from the research funding agencies in their respective countries as well as in the rest of the Nordic region, in competition with other applicants. Professor Björkstrand’s report concludes that this would be consistent with the principles underlying the NORIA white paper.

The global context

It was at this time, as the vision of developing a future Nordic research and innovation area into a swan was taking shape, that Gard Titlestad entered the scene.

“The global setting surrounding these new ideas at the outset was marked by the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the US. Along with the bursting of the ‘dotcom bubble’, this put an end to the optimism that had reigned throughout our part of the world for many years. But this new reality also triggered a

need to build something new. The EU had launched both its Lisbon Strategy and the ERA in 2000, and in 2003 these were supplemented by the ambition of increasing overall R&D investment to three per cent of the gross domestic product – in order to make Europe the world’s leading knowledge region by 2010. Per Unckel, Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers in 2003, took the initiative to debate how to develop the Nordic region as a winner in the global innovation economy. The purpose was to safeguard the Nordic role in the global context,” Mr Titlestad explains.

This debate was started in autumn 2005 and was carried out in several different Nordic councils of ministers until it ultimately ended up as a debate between Nordic prime ministers and opposition leaders in the Nordic Council in November 2006. That is when Anders Fogh Rasmussen, then Prime Minister of Denmark, took the initiative to draw up what would later be called the Nordic Globalisation Initiative, under which the Top-level Research Initiative would become one of the primary initiatives. One of Mr Titlestad’s tasks in the Council of Ministers secretariat was to prepare the Nordic Globalisation Initiative which, in many ways, was a follow-up of the report on the Nordic region as a winner in the global innovation economy and of the reflections of the MR-U on a Nordic “Lisbon Strategy”.

Despite its name, the Nordic Council of Ministers consists of not one but several individual councils of ministers. Based among other things on a joint declaration between the ministers of trade and industry, education and research (September 2004), Per Unckel felt that the ministers of trade and industry and education should be merged under a single umbrella when simplifying the structure of the various councils of ministers. But given the often unpredictable course of politics and in the discussion between the Ministers for Co-operation, this plan was thwarted due to the need to make room for the future Nordic regional cooperation. This led to the formation of the ponderous and complex Nordic Council of Ministers for Business, Energy & Regional Policy (MR-NER).

However, combining the MR-NER and the MR-U under the auspices of the same secretariat would have given this council too domineering a position within the Nordic cooperation, so instead, education was merged with labour into a single council of ministers. The logical result was that coordination between the major, closely related policy areas of research and innovation became weaker than Mr Unckel and many others had hoped. This was also the underlying framework when NordForsk was established in 2005, and this decision clearly made it more difficult for NordForsk and the Nordic research



Per Unckel (1948-2011) was a politician from the Swedish Moderate Party. He was Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers (2003–2006) and then County Governor of Stockholm, Sweden, until his death in 2007. Photo: NordForsk/Terje Heiestad



Lene Lange from Denmark was Research Director at the global healthcare company Novo Nordisk when she accepted the offer to become the first Chair of the NordForsk Board. Photo: NordForsk/Terje Heiestad

and innovation area to develop into a swan, according to Mr Titlestad.

Start-up problems

When time came to appoint the first Chair of the NordForsk Board, forces from the political level emphasised the importance of attracting candidates with a strong foundation in industry-oriented research. Therefore many were pleased when Lene Lange of the Danish Council for Strategic Research and Research Director at the global healthcare company Novo Nordisk accepted the position. Finnish philologist and psychologist Liisa Hakamies-Blomqvist was subsequently appointed the first Director of NordForsk. She, too, was a strong candidate, whose applied science background included the position of Senior Research Scientist at the Swedish National Road and Transport Research Institute in Linköping.

To return to the swan metaphor, a swan attempting to take to the skies from the water is not an elegant sight. There is a lot of flapping and splashing before the heavy body finally becomes airborne. NordForsk can also be said to have had a protracted lift-off process.

“A mistake was made prior to start-up, which in my opinion was because Per Unckel, a great visionary, was too impatient,” Gard Titlestad explains. “Mr Unckel wanted to get NordForsk’s operative structures into place quickly, and a relatively heavyweight project leader was hired to prepare for the launch. He quickly built up a culture that in reality differed greatly from the vision and strategy of the NordForsk Board and chair for the organisation, leading to his subsequent withdrawal from the project. This was a lesson Per Unckel took to heart. After this, the board adopted a strategy more suitable for

the organisation to expand upon,” Mr Titlestad explains.

The first NordForsk Board was characterised by a lack of clearly defined objectives and widely divergent views as to what NordForsk should be. This was in part because the appointed representatives from universities were there as individual representatives, not as representatives of Nordic university collaboration. This also made it difficult for NordForsk to relate to and unleash the potential inherent in the universities’ research and innovation capacity. The second chair of the NordForsk Board, Kari Kveseth, from the Research Council of Norway, spoke of this in 2010 when she stepped down from her post to become Norway’s Counsellor for Science at the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Beijing. Ms Kveseth had taken over as Chair of the NordForsk Board after Lene Lange in 2007, and was succeeded by Guðrún Nordal from Iceland in 2009.

“Those of us from research councils believed that if NordForsk was to take on a role it would have to be as a coordinator in relation to national activities. Some, especially those who came from the universities, felt that this was not ambitious enough. But I believe it has been important to follow that line of thinking,” Ms Kveseth stated in NordForsk Magazine in 2010.

What should NordForsk be?

In Mr Titlestad’s opinion, this question and other tensions continued to weigh on NordForsk for several years following its launch, making for a difficult start. Not surprisingly, the most crucial discussion was about what NordForsk should really be – and whether realising the vision of a Nordic research and innovation area in reality lacked the actual coordination

needed to support such an ambitious vision, both at the political level and between the key stakeholders in research and innovation.

Another question was whether NordForsk should be a body for facilitating and coordinating activity or a Nordic research council. If NordForsk’s ambition was to become a research council it would be widely considered an “ugly duckling” – an attempt at top-down coordination rather than a bottom-up facilitation of the countries’ national resources. The national research councils have overall been sceptical towards seeing NordForsk develop into a Nordic research council, even though some of the early documentation pointed somewhat in that direction.

“I would say that NordForsk settled on a reasonable solution and is on the right track. Research cooperation and NordForsk were the first to achieve significant national funding and prioritisation of Nordic initiatives. This applies both to initiatives for excellence in research, eScience and educational research and more, and, with the help of the councils of ministers, the Top-level Research Initiative. NordForsk is clearly a coordinating body that works to promote high-quality Nordic research and place the Nordic countries on the European and global agenda,” Mr Titlestad states.

The Nordic Research and Innovation Area

NORIA is a term for the Nordic Research and Innovation Area, introduced by the Nordic Council of Ministers in 2004. Inspired by the EU’s concept of “the European Research Area” (ERA), NORIA was introduced as a Nordic counterpart. The vision of NORIA is

to give Nordic research and innovation a world-leading position through enhanced Nordic regional cooperation. Both ERA and NORIA seek to develop research and innovation policy that transcends national boundaries.

Gard Titlestad, Head of Department of Knowledge and Welfare, Nordic Council of Ministers' secretariat:

NordForsk and the Top-level Research Initiative, 2005–2010

The swan starts to fly

NordForsk has been developing constantly in the ten years since its start in 2005. The most important contribution so far has been the Top-level Research Initiative, which is the largest Nordic research effort to date.

NordForsk's first two years of operation can be characterised as a gradual transition from the era of the Nordic Academy for Advanced Studies (NorFA). The new institution continued to allocate a relatively small amount of funding to a large number of participants in networks, courses and projects. At the same time, there were aspirations to enhance both the volume and the quality of Nordic research cooperation.

The Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers for the 2003–2007 period, Per Unckel, was among those who sought to achieve the objectives formulated by Professor Björkstrand through targeted, long-term activities. Mr Unckel played a critical role in facilitating the transition from NorFA to NordForsk.

A marked change in Nordic cooperation

Gard Titlestad describes the process of establishing NordForsk as a continuum. But in 2006 and 2007 the steady, gradual progress took a giant leap forward when the Nordic prime ministers championed the cause and took an important decision.

As mentioned earlier, the change began with the Danish Prime Minister



*Norwegian **Gard Titlestad** was the busy Head of Department of Knowledge and Welfare at the Nordic Council of Ministers from 2005 to 2012. Prior to that, he was Counsellor for Research and for IT at the Norwegian EU delegation in Brussels. In 2011 he returned home to Norway after 13 years abroad, and was appointed Secretary General of the International Council for Open and Distance Education. Photo/illustration: Terje Heiestad*

Anders Fogh Rasmussen's concluding speech in a major debate on the Nordic region's role in globalisation at the Nordic Council session in Copenhagen in November 2006. He made it clear that he would personally take the initiative to give the Nordic countries an influential voice in a globalised world. At the time, the Danish Government had already established a globalisation council

which was viewed in a positive light, and Denmark was preparing to host the UN Copenhagen Climate Change Conference in 2009, expected to be the most significant summit since Kyoto in 1997. Prime Minister Fogh Rasmussen had already begun planning Denmark's contribution.

In autumn 2006, Prime Minister Fogh Rasmussen, together with relevant

ministries in Denmark, drew up a comprehensive document detailing his country's new globalisation strategy. The coming Top-level Research Initiative was already outlined along with several other proposals for cooperation on research and innovation. Half a year later, on 19 June 2007, the Nordic prime ministers met in Punkaharju, Finland, and agreed on an even more ambitious goal, announced in a press release from their summer meeting. This would come to be known as the Punkaharju Declaration, and it set a new tone in Nordic cooperation, presenting a vision of the future in which the Nordic region's responses to the challenges of globalisation would be implemented.

In April 2008, the prime ministers met again at the Riksgränsen ski resort in Kiruna, 200 km north of the Arctic Circle in Swedish Lapland, in the first Nordic Globaliseringsforum. The result was the Riksgränsen Declaration, which states that:

"... The Nordic region is in a position to pioneer efforts to combat climate change. A sustainable Nordic model for meeting climate challenges will demonstrate the potential for combining reduced emissions with economic growth."

The prime ministers also stated that a research and innovation programme in the field of climate, energy and the environment was to be set up as a joint Nordic venture and labelled the Top-level Research Initiative (TRI).

"Knowledge and education remain vital for the Nordic countries in a global context. Research and innovation are areas where we have much to gain by promoting a more visible Nordic position. By further developing the Nordic research and innovation area, we will provide a stronger basis for maintaining and developing research in our respective Nordic countries. Not least we will strengthen the Nordic countries as a region for excellent research and create better opportunities for cross-border research."

"Suddenly the old rules no longer applied," explains Mr Titlestad, "because now the prime ministers had taken a bold initiative. It all happened because they wanted to define a more assertive role for the Nordic region and Nordic cooperation. Within a short time, Nordic cooperation at the political and senior-official levels

accelerated dramatically. During this phase, in fact the most marked change in post-WWII Nordic cooperation, many began to seek out cooperative bodies and ways to take things even further. That's when it became clear that the only actors able to realise these very ambitious goals would be NordForsk and Nordic Energy Research as well as the Nordic Innovation Centre [NICE, which has since changed its name to Nordic Innovation]."

Cultivating a new spirit of cooperation

The foundation for the Nordic Globalisation Initiative and the Top-level Research Initiative was laid during 2006 and in the debate about how to develop the Nordic countries as a global winner region. A working group between the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers was appointed in October, headed by Gard Titlestad and his colleague Kristian Birk of the Secretariat for the Nordic Council of Ministers for Business, Energy & Regional Policy. The group organised a seminar in March 2007, with participation from key persons in the Nordic region, which generated a number of recommendations for activities and projects.

Mr Titlestad and his colleagues in the Nordic Council of Ministers understood it would be no easy matter to implement these new ideas. Their strategy was to push for developing a new spirit of cooperation. Among other things they commissioned five reports to examine the problems and opportunities of developing the Nordic countries as a winner in the global innovation economy. Perhaps the most influential of these reports was prepared by Danish expert Erik Arnold of Technopolis Group and titled "Building Nordic strength through more open R&D funding – the next step in NORIA".

The Technopolis report pointed to NordForsk and the Nordic Innovation Centre, among others, as:

"... the current institutional pillars of the Nordic system for discussing and implementing research and innovation policies at the Nordic level." But the report found it problematic that the two institutions were organised under different "ministry fiefdoms" and that "their links to the grass roots at national level are limited, and their links to each other seem largely confined to sharing

office space. There is no common governance or coordination channel."

Mr Arnold's main conclusion was thus that:

"Nordic structures need to become better able to develop holistic research and innovation policies and to respond to bottom-up pressures for cooperation and opening of programmes."

"Øystein Djupedal, the Norwegian Minister of Education and Research, was also Chair of the Nordic Council of Ministers for Education and Research in 2006 and was heavily involved in this. He even went as far as signing the preface of each report, which was very unusual," notes Mr Titlestad. "But it was a vitally important way for the Norwegian Presidency to signal its deep commitment."

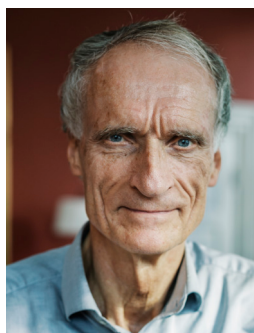
"At that time a critical change occurred," continues Titlestad. In 2007 Iceland's former Prime Minister Halldór Ásgrímsson succeeded Per Unckel as Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers. He used his big-league status as former prime minister and took part from Day One in the cooperation at prime minister-level. He would not hesitate to ring up a Nordic prime minister, breaking with the tradition that the Secretary General primarily dealt with the cooperation ministers. The Secretary General took his place at the table at the prime ministers' meetings, forging the strong link between the Nordic Council of Ministers and the highest political level. "Unfortunately, during this development the communication with the Nordic Council and the parliamentarians broke down, due to what appeared to be action-oriented tunnel vision. The prime ministers set deadlines and wanted to see concrete results, and there was frantic activity at the senior-official level," recalls Mr Titlestad. The lack of ongoing dialogue and Nordic coordination at the ministerial and senior-official level between education and industry created a fragile foundation for the framework that would later be launched as the TRI.

Rank and file always wanted cooperation

Even though NordForsk had been established through a broad-based, well-thought-out process, and the Top-level Research Initiative had been born



Øystein Djupedal, the Norwegian Minister of Education and Research, was also Chair of the Nordic Council of Ministers for Education and Research in 2006 and was heavily involved in promoting Nordic cooperation. He broke with tradition by personally signing five reports by the Technopolis Group.
Photo: Jarl Fr. Erichsen/NTB Scanpix



Liberal Danish politician **Bertel Haarder** was a staunch supporter of Nordic cooperation for excellence in research in his roles as Minister of Education and then Minister of Health.
Photo: NordForsk/Kim Wendt



Iceland's former Prime Minister **Halldór Ásgrímsson** (1947–2015) brought new gravitas to Nordic cooperation when he took over as Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers in 2007.
Photo: NordForsk/Terje Heiestad



Kari Kveseth of the Research Council of Norway succeeded Lene Lange to become the second Chair of the NordForsk Board.
Photo: NordForsk/Terje Heiestad

from a visionary initiative by the Nordic prime ministers, not all conflicts were resolved. Many still feared that NordForsk would be an “ugly duckling” that would steal away resources and attention from other institutions. In addition there were formal and legal hurdles, such as a Swedish legislative provision that made it difficult to inject funds into joint Nordic activities. Paradoxically it was Swedish senior officials during the Swedish Presidency in 2008 that managed to cobble together agreement about the TRI, through internal Swedish efforts at the civil-servant level (coordination group) that enabled Sweden to speak with one voice in all the Councils of Ministers. This secured consensus between the Nordic Council of Ministers for Education and Research (MR-U) and the Nordic Council of Ministers for Business, Energy & Regional Policy (MR-NER).

On the heels of the Punkaharju Declaration came the global financial crisis that affected all the Nordic countries, but hit Iceland particularly hard. Shortly after the Punkaharju meeting, it became clear that the prime ministers’ decision to form “a financial group to discuss joint Nordic funding alternatives for globalisation processes” was unable to muster new resources.

This left only the Nordic funds and the resources that the Councils of Ministers had committed to through the TRI decision.

Not surprisingly, the rapid Nordic build-up and the visions and ambitious decisions taken by the prime ministers, combined with deadlines and a lack of new resources, led to concerns, disagreement, confusion and resistance, and in spite of it all – to enthusiasm. Many viewpoints, voices and versions of what was happening were being presented – and the national support for new Nordic momentum was wavering.

Mr Titlestad’s department at the Nordic Council of Ministers took various steps to get around the difficulties. One such step was to ask Erik Arnold to carry out a new evaluation. He produced the report “Experience from the first Nordic Top-level Research Initiative (Toppforskningsinitiativ)”, published in 2009, in which he wrote:

“The current structures and processes of Nordic cooperation tend to lock the system into small scale and only permits slow and incremental development. If the ambition of the Prime Ministers to increase the scale and power of the cooperation is serious, it needs to disturb this incremental logic – preferably

without at the same time destroying an apparatus that in many ways serves the Nordic countries well.”

According to Mr Titlestad, another initiative was to produce an analysis which showed that that the Nordic region was viewed as the best-cooperating area in the EU in the research sphere. “We were able to demonstrate that Nordic researchers performed very well in the new ERA projects, which were the first tentative attempt to coordinate the opening of national research programmes. The fact is that Nordic researchers “on the ground” have never been opposed to collaboration across national borders. The resistance occurred at the structural level, either in the legislation, amongst politicians or at the senior-official level. If the rank and file had been allowed to decide things, without the other levels stepping on the brakes, the Nordic region would have been an international leader in research and innovation long ago.

The Swedish brakes were finally dismantled, leading eventually to the Nordic research cooperation we see today with a common pot, i.e. research funding within each programme is allocated to the best projects, regardless of how much each country has contributed to the pot, until the budget has been used

up. It is unique to the Nordic countries that research funding for international cooperation is allocated with such a high degree of trust and flexibility.

Winners and losers at the same time

A central point in the Punkaharju Declaration was that the finance ministers were asked to look at how they could fund “healthy” initiatives. The prime ministers never named a figure, but it was evident their ambitions were high – so high that NordForsk’s first project leader began working on a TRI budget that turned out to be nearly ten times larger than the final approved budget. The Committees of Senior Officials under the Nordic Council of Ministers judged the original amount to be unrealistic and adjusted the budget downwards to avoid a spectacular financial belly-flop. This turned out to be a wise move, as it soon became apparent that the Nordic finance ministers were not at all willing to open their coffers so generously.

The finance ministers’ restraint was, of course, influenced by the global financial crisis of 2007, which eventually triggered serious recession in most industrialised countries. The crisis did not fully strike the Nordic region until 2008, but already in 2007 the situation was dire enough to begin affecting state revenues.

“If the original budget had been realised,” continues Mr Titlestad, “the TRI would have become a Nordic swan that flew high and far on powerful wings. The scale of NORIA, too, would have surprised everyone at home and abroad. But instead the final result was an initiative with a gross budget of roughly DKK 400 million. We can say that NordForsk, Nordic Energy Research and Nordic Innovation came out as both winners and losers. Allocations to the TRI were nowhere near what was originally envisioned, but still the TRI became a significant initiative.”

When it became apparent that the Nordic finance ministers were unwilling to fund the initiative generously, it resulted instead in a large number of actors needing to reach consensus: the cooperation ministers, the respective ministries, central bureaucrats in the respective ministries, the national research and innovation councils, and so on.

Finally, the establishment of the Top-level Research Initiative became one of the highlights of 2008. NordForsk headed

the secretariat function for a preparatory working group in which Nordic Innovation Centre and Nordic Energy Research participated, and which under the leadership of Professor Peter Lund put together an initial plan early in the year. For the first time, staff from all three of the institutions in Oslo worked intensively together as a team.

And once the planning process had come far enough along for Kari Kveseth from the NordForsk Board to present the completed plans to the Nordic ministers of research and education at the Nordic Council Session in Rosenbad in 2009, there were only smiling faces to be seen.

Detractors and supporters

According to Mr Titlestad’s analysis, resistance to both the Nordic Globalisation Initiative and the Top-level Research Initiative can be ascribed at least in part to a feeling among many actors of being caught off-guard. This was after all a top down-initiative perceived by many as fundamentally un-Nordic. “The Nordic attitude in general is that new, large-scale initiatives should begin with grass-roots discussions that give rise to sound suggestions that eventually work their way up in the system through consultative review and thorough procedures, with the governments and prime ministers stepping in and taking decisions as the final phase of the process. But in this case, that essentially healthy, idealistic and democratic attitude stood in direct conflict to the prime ministers’ efforts, so the traditional model’s many proponents served in practice as brakes.”

Nordic cooperation, of course, had its share of many strong supporters as well. While it is impossible to name them all here, in retrospect Mr Titlestad points in particular to the Norwegian Conservative politician Kristin Clemet and the Socialist Left politician Øystein Djupedal – the Norwegian Ministers of Education and Research 2001–2005 and 2005–2007, respectively – as guiding lights. In Denmark, Liberal politician Bertel Haarder was a staunch proponent as Minister of Education from 2005 to 2010 and as Minister for Nordic Cooperation from 2007 to 2010 and then as Interior and Health Minister.

Mr Titlestad also commends the first Chair of the NordForsk Board, Lene Lange, for her abilities to combine

toughness with an inclusive, democratic approach. Icелander Guðrún Nordal was Chair of the NordForsk Board from 2009 to 2014 and did an exceptional job of handling the organisation’s complex conflicts during that period. Current Director of NordForsk Gunnel Gustafsson has been outstanding at further developing the organisation since she took on her role in 2010. Finally, we must not forget Per Unckel, who died so prematurely. These five, says Mr Titlestad, deserve much of the credit for NordForsk’s present path to becoming a Nordic swan.

TRI shows what the Nordic region can achieve together

Looking back, it could be considered a small miracle that the TRI was ever realised. Much of this is due to the sectoral ministers involved, who had great faith in the project, and to the fact that the prime ministers presented it as a joint initiative.

Rolf Annerberg, Chair of the TRI Management Board since its inception in 2009, recalls that the initiative did not receive the significance hoped for at the UN Copenhagen Climate Change Conference.

“When we started out in early 2009, we were hoping that the initiative would make it easier to reach an agreement at the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in December of that same year. But the conference was not a success, for various reasons. We didn’t manage to achieve our political goals in the short term, but perhaps they weren’t that realistic.”

Rolf Annerberg still thinks that the TRI has been a success. The initiative has generated a lot of new knowledge about ongoing climate change and how we can deal with the major challenges facing us, according to Annerberg – and Titlestad agrees.

“Some people may still think the story of the TRI is akin to the proverbial mountain that gives birth to a mouse,” concludes Gard Titlestad, “but the fact is that the TRI is a success story. We can view it as a pilot project that shows us the Nordic countries can achieve great things when we pool our resources.”

Focusing on a few core funding instruments

In the autumn of 2010, NordForsk carried out an assessment of the portfolio of instruments in light of the new strategy that was adopted earlier that year. The expert group behind the assessment recommended that NordForsk should focus on a few core funding instruments, which would lay the foundation for further progress.

The evaluation reviewed NordForsk in its role as facilitator of Nordic research and research policy actions. The evaluation mandate was to assess whether the current NordForsk instruments supported the new strategy.

The overall aims expressed in the NordForsk strategy were to create forums for broad debate and dialogue on Nordic research and research policy, and to design processes that would aid the national research-financing bodies and the Nordic Council of Ministers in developing common research strategies and priorities.

Chose a broad perspective

The expert group decided to employ a broad perspective, incorporating the planning processes and structures behind the development of joint Nordic



Agneta Bladh was chair of the committee that wrote NordForsk's portfolio assessment. The other members were Claus Beck-Tange, Hans M. Borchgrevink, Ingileif Jónsdóttir and Paavo-Petri Ahonen. Photo: Vetenskap & Allmänhet/Gustaf Waesterberg

research activities as part of the analysis of instruments.

The expert group recommended that NordForsk should focus on a few core funding instruments – Nordic Centres of Excellence, thematic programmes and joint establishment and use of infrastructure – in which other instruments could be embedded.

All funding instruments were to promote research excellence and reflect national priorities. Larger-scale initiatives were to be shaped in close collaboration with primary national stakeholders within fields where Nordic research collaboration is expected to result in added value through achievement of critical mass, shared use of infrastructure, and as a stepping stone to increased influence in European and international research policy and programmes.

The European perspective

In light of the strategy's focus on European cooperation and recent European policy development, the expert group recommended that NordForsk's funding instruments should more explicitly address the European perspective. In the group's view there was no contradiction between the strategy's objective of achieving influence in Europe and the objective of achieving added value through Nordic research collaboration. It is essential to utilise joint Nordic strength to influence European research strategies.

The expert group further recommended that policy analysis and coordination activities should be prioritised, including commissioned policy briefs, reports and analyses. Analyses also play an important role as joint background for Nordic coordination processes in efforts to direct the focus of future European programmes and calls.

A will to research?

A report on the Nordic commitment to research, published in 2011, provided important input for the development of NordForsk. The report stated that NordForsk had developed several strengths in a short time. It also offered a number of recommendations for taking the organisation even further.

The report (in Swedish: *Vilja till forskning?*) was commissioned by the Nordic Council of Ministers for Education and Research (MR-U) in order to assess Nordic research cooperation and the countries' commitment to research.

The report pointed out that the volume and quality of research cooperation had increased. At the same time, it was noted that many weaknesses remained, related to unresolved institutional complexity, insufficient funding and the inability to collaborate across sectors, particularly between research and innovation.

According to the report, Nordic research cooperation on the whole has developed a number of strengths in recent years. Of particular value is the ability to create, via the established structures and in a short period of time, common pot-funded research collaboration based

on national priorities. These initiatives incorporate a considerable amount of national co-funding and are open to researchers from all of the Nordic countries. The strong networks and deep trust among the key actors that this spawns creates significant potential for future cooperation.

However, the report also pointed out that the institutions involved are complex and highly diverse, and there is much to be gained from implementing greater coordination. The fragmentation of what is essentially a very small amount of funding (in a national perspective) poses a significant obstacle to the gradual expansion of Nordic cooperation towards its full potential.

New challenges

In recent years, new challenges have emerged that must also be given consideration when determining the need for new initiatives and how to reshape Nordic research cooperation.

As a result of the rising pace of globalisation, research, innovation and knowledge policy have become more important as policy areas for maintaining and enhancing competitiveness. More attention is being paid to efforts to make countries and regions attractive to investors and qualified professionals. In many countries, such as in the EU, the focus of research and innovation policy is being directed more towards global challenges. Many of the challenges relating to energy and climate are comprehensive and require activities that will lead to rapid changes in the European and global energy system.

Obviously challenges of this type cannot be solved by individual countries on their own. A strategic mobilisation of international cooperation is essential.

As European research cooperation has evolved, the EU framework programme has taken on an increasingly more crucial role as a research funder. The most important step taken in Nordic intergovernmental cooperation in recent years was the prime ministers' decision to launch a new Nordic Globalisation Initiative to promote a more knowledgeable, visible and prosperous Nordic region. In many ways the initiative has led to much more stringent requirements for focus, relevance and efficiency, and not least for cooperation between sectors and institutions.

Strengths and weaknesses

The report identified a number of strengths and weaknesses with regard to research cooperation under the Nordic Council of Ministers. Overall, much Nordic research cooperation functions well and is on the right course, but there is a need for adjustments and new initiatives in order to make further strides and enhance efficiency. It is essential to concentrate activities and apply a more targeted focus in order to derive the greatest impact and benefit from the funding available for Nordic research cooperation.

The report also concluded that NordForsk had not evolved into the central hub for Nordic research cooperation that was envisioned when it was established.



The report was written by a High Level Group consisting of Rolf Annerberg, (left) Kristin Clemet (right) and Marja Makarow. It was presented to the Norwegian Minister of Research and Higher Education, Tora Aasland (middle) in 2011. Photo: NordForsk/Terje Heiestad

External High Level Group

The report was authored by an external High Level Group on commission from the Nordic Council of Ministers for Education and Research (MR-U) as a basis for discussion on the further development of Nordic research cooperation.

The High Level Group consisted of Rolf Annerberg, then Director General of the Swedish Research Council Formas; Kristin Clemet, Managing Director of the Norwegian think tank Civita; and Marja Makarow, then CEO of the European Science Foundation.

First evaluation of the NCoE scheme

The number of researchers from China and the US who come to study the Nordic welfare state is on the rise. Word has also spread that typical Nordic dietary patterns are just as healthy as the better-known Mediterranean diet. Two joint Nordic research programmes established by NordForsk in 2007 have helped to make this happen.

In 2007, NordForsk launched the first two research programmes based on the introduction of a Nordic Centres of Excellence (NCoE) scheme. The centres brought together established Nordic researchers who received additional resources in order to enhance the international profile of their research activities, and operated as either virtual or physical entities. The final evaluation in 2014 of the first programmes under the



NCoE scheme indicated that the model is effective and yields high-quality research results.

One overall conclusion is that schemes of this type are beneficial for already-established groups of researchers with a strong position in their fields. "There is no doubt the centres have been successful and have been home to top research activity," states Technopolis Senior Consultant Peter Stern, who served as project leader for the evaluation.

The evaluation was led by Peter Stern, a philosopher with a PhD in sociology. He has worked with evaluation and analysis activities within research and innovation and also has experience from government administration in Sweden. Photo: NordForsk/Terje Heiestad

Nordic Centres of Excellence (NCoE)

The decision in 2006 by the NordForsk Board to establish two new jointly funded programmes, the Nordic Centre of Excellence (NCoE) Programme on Welfare Research and the Nordic Centre of Excellence (NCoE) Programme on Food, Nutrition and Health, represented an important step in implementing the new direction of Nordic cooperation. Sizeable grants were awarded to five Nordic Centres of Excellence (NCoE).

NCoEs are a funding instrument originally used by the Nordic Research Councils for the Humanities and the Social Sciences (NOS-HS), the Nordic Co-operation Board of Natural Sciences (NOS-N) and the Joint Committee of the Nordic Medical Research Councils (NOS-M). Research groups compete for relatively sizeable allocations within the framework of a common-pot budget. The first NCoEs with funding from NordForsk had a total budget of NOK 170 million for a five-year period.

The Top-level Research Initiative has advanced Nordic research

The Top-level Research Initiative has produced important scientific results and provided a major contribution to the Nordic research effort of the areas of climate, energy and the environment. This is the main conclusion of the final evaluation by the independent consultancy firm DAMVAD.

The Top-Level Research Initiative (TRI) – the largest Nordic research effort to date – was subject to ongoing review by the independent consultancy firm DAMVAD. An interim evaluation in 2011 showed that the initiative was a well-functioning research and innovation programme that had generated a relevant portfolio of promising projects. The final evaluation was completed in autumn 2014.

Many publications, high impact factor

The final evaluation documents the many positive results that were achieved. It shows, for instance, that the number of scientific publications by participating researchers has risen. Publication levels will continue to increase for several years into the future, in part because many of the projects are not yet concluded.

Just as important is the fact that the citation frequency and the scientific journals' impact factor are high. The evaluation shows that 31 per cent of the articles have been published in the most influential journals.



The Nordic prime ministers – Geir H. Haarde, Jens Stoltenberg, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, Fredrik Reinfeldt and Matti Vanhanen – met in April 2008 at the Riksgränsen ski resort in the north of Sweden, where they drew up the declaration that laid the foundation for the Top-level Research Initiative. Photo: Johannes Jansson, norden.org

Interdisciplinary research

One of the primary objectives of the TRI was to support or encourage interdisciplinary research, and this has been achieved. The final evaluation shows that more than 70 per cent of all the scientific articles by TRI researchers are published in interdisciplinary journals.

Productive cooperation

One of the lessons learned from the TRI is that the Nordic countries have the ability to reach consensus and establish a large-scale programme in a relatively short period of time.

If Nordic research cooperation is to once again be given higher priority on the Nordic political agenda, an effort should

be made to identify areas where there is a comprehensive need for action – similar, for instance, to how the threat of climate change was seen in 2007.



Celebrating ten years of Nordic “dugnad”

“I think of NordForsk as a giant community effort – ‘dugnad’ – where all the big players come together in the spirit of collaboration and create something that is bigger than the individual institutions,” said Dagfinn Høybråten, Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers, when he opened NordForsk’s ten-year anniversary conference in Oslo on Thursday 8 October.

Close to 170 participants from the Nordic-wide research community convened in Oslo to take a look back on NordForsk’s childhood years, as well as to consider future challenges facing the organisation and Nordic research cooperation overall.

Suggested the next Top-level Research Initiative

Professor Gustav Björkstrand, former Finnish Minister for Education and generally regarded as NordForsk’s “founding father”, used his speech to suggest nothing less than a new Top-level Research Initiative.

“There is a new challenge rising with the refugees now streaming into the Nordic region. But the current stream is nothing compared to what may happen when the changing climate really hits Asia and Africa some time in the future. We need a lot of new knowledge about how we can integrate people of different nationalities, cultures, religions and value systems, so that we shall be able to live peacefully together in the future. This is a great challenge that NordForsk is well placed to take on,” said Björkstrand to great applause from the audience.

Nordic cooperation – stepping stone or intrinsically valuable on its own?

Several speakers, among others Mikkel Leihart, Chair of the Nordic Committee of Senior Officials for Education

and Research, stressed that Nordic collaboration is not a goal in itself. It should only be done when it makes a difference in terms of added value, and NordForsk has proved to deliver exactly that.. In fact, Deputy Director-General of the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, Rudolph Strohmeier, described the Nordic research and innovation area as “a highly successful mini European research area”.

Proximity, shared values and trust were mentioned as some of the many reasons to cooperate at the Nordic level.

“Size matters, sometimes,” stated Ilona Riipinen, associate professor at Stockholm University. She has taken part in three different Nordic Centres of Excellence and highlights the larger market, wider network and similar rules in Nordic countries as tools enabling researchers to navigate in an international context.

Our similarities also place us in a particularly good position for compiling large amounts of data from comparable environments, stated Camilla Stoltenberg, Director-General of the Norwegian Institute of Public Health. She sees enormous potential in the Nordic countries in the area of cohort, registry and biobank research. “We need very large numbers. Even combined, the Nordic registries are relatively small making for such studies, but there are no competitive numbers elsewhere, so we are competitive in this respect,” she

said, citing examples involving drug safety and pandemic preparedness. “We should make Nordic cooperation our first choice,” Dr Stoltenberg emphasised.

Jason D. Whittington, Scientific Director at the Nordic Centre of Excellence NorMER spoke of the great enthusiasm for the Nordic network that has developed among the participants, even though none of the centre’s researchers had experience cooperating at the Nordic level before.

“A new generation of researchers now believes that this is how science is done – the added value will come over the next decades, as they continue with their careers,” he said.

Strong Nordic universities working together

Many of the conference speakers mentioned the need to increase collaboration at the Nordic university level. State Secretary Bjørn Haugstad of the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research noted as an example the success of the “Nordic Five Tech”, in which five leading Nordic universities of science and technology cooperate to offer joint international master’s programmes and courses, among other things.

Thomas Wilhelmsson, Chancellor at the University of Helsinki, pointed out that seven Nordic universities ranked among the top 100 in the 2015 Shanghai Ranking. He believes the time has come



1) Ilona Riipinen, Associate Professor, Stockholm University. 2) Camilla Stoltenberg, Director-General of the Norwegian Institute of Public Health
3) Rudolf Strohmeier, Deputy Director General, DG Research and Innovation, European Commission. 4) Dagfinn Høybråten, Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers. Photo: NordForsk/Terje Heiestad

to think along new lines regarding how to distribute tasks in the educational field.

“The Nordic countries have more leading universities than both Germany and France. Together, the Nordic region is the best university area in the world” Wilhelmsson stated. He then jokingly suggested reinstituting the Kalmar Union – the union between the Nordic Kingdoms from 1397 to 1523:

“If we had a Kalmar Union today, the Nordic countries would rank third among the world’s leading university regions. In relation to our population, we are already the world’s strongest region!”

Focus on the migration situation across Europe

Following Professor Björkstrand’s talk on the refugee situation in Europe, this

subject was mentioned by several of the other conference speakers as a topic that should be given priority in future Nordic research cooperation. The ensuing rise in migration to Europe and the Nordic countries will place increasingly greater pressure on the welfare states and value frameworks of the European countries.

“The challenge of mass migration comes on faster than expected,” stated Guðrún Pétursdóttir, Director for the Institute for Sustainability Studies at the University of Iceland.

“This is only the beginning. Being unprepared for this is not a good idea. This will be one of the great challenges for us in the future.”

Vision of a Nordic collaboration without borders

In her closing words, NordForsk Director Gunnel Gustafsson described a vision of a Nordic research and innovation area without borders. “In such a situation, there would no longer be any need for an organisation such as NordForsk,” she stated, “Perhaps this is a useful long-term vision – making NordForsk redundant. But until that time, NordForsk’s role as a facilitator remains an important task we will continue to fulfil,” she concluded.



NordForsk secretariat 2015

Back row, left to right: Lotta Strandberg, Tor Martin Nilsen, Marianne Aastebøl Minge, Lise-Lotte Wallenius, Sandra Danielsson, Lisa H. Ekli, Gudmund Høst, Torill Morken, Mikael Heimonen, Lone Jessen, Hanne Silje Hauge, Pål Pettersen and Maria Nilsson.

Front row, left to right: Sóley Morthens, Linn Hoff Jensen, Jostein K. Sundet, Gunnel Gustafsson, Harald Botha, Anne Riiser and Marianne Røgeberg.

Not present: Stephanie Fjeld, Sverker Holmgren, Janina Lassila, Christian B. Lorentzen, Kati Lehtinen Melbøe, Ida Persson, Ewa Preston, Unni Rørslett, Eivind Sætre and Kaisa Vaahtera

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