

UiO: Nordic call for research proposals: programme notes

The UiO:Nordic initiative is, along with UiO:Life Sciences and UiO: Energy, one of three major strategic initiatives at University of Oslo. This document outlines questions of interest, aims and objectives of UiO:Nordic and serve as program notes for the call for applications for establishing research groups due 15.8. 2016. ¹

Objectives and aims of UiO:Nordic in short

- By connecting strong research communities from different disciplines, the UiO:Nordic initiative will provide new knowledge about Norway and the Nordic countries in an international context as well as supply critical perspectives on the sustainability and development potential of the Nordic models and institutions.
- The initiative will cast a critical eye on concepts and notions of "the Nordic model" in order to analyse historical preconditions and the dynamics of change, and to investigate different areas of Nordic society, comparing and contrasting it with other countries and regions. This will be accomplished by involving cutting-edge expertise in different academic communities, insights and international research networks to develop new interdisciplinary research topics.
- A number of excellent research groups have and will be established, to realize UiO's strategy of interdisciplinary collaboration, to be more successful in gaining external funding, to develop new arenas for user contact and dialogue, and to strengthen interfaculty and international education.
- The initiative will give UiO the necessary preconditions to establish itself as the most pre-eminent research institution internationally in terms of the Nordic model, the Nordic countries and Nordic institutions and cultures. UiO Nordic also includes teaching, as well as national and international cooperation and dissemination.

Introduction

Under this call, the board will not give priority to any particular research questions or research areas under the UiO:Nordic strategic initiative, but it is a precondition for getting funded that the applications reflect on "Nordic" as a concept or phenomenon and deal with and problematize questions that involve the contemporary Nordic dimension in one way or the other. It is an aim to make use of and further develop interdisciplinary, historical and comparative perspectives. Furthermore, the research collaboration should aim at generating international funding and engage with social actors and users, as well as develop cooperation across educational programs.

¹ Shorter and revised version of ["proposal for a third strategic initiative at UiO"](#)

1. New knowledge of Nordic models: preconditions, paradoxes, and challenges

The initiative will develop excellent research groups in an interdisciplinary setting, grounded in alternative interpretations and explanations of "the Nordic Model". This concept is not clear-cut and in certain fields there is explicit mention of several Nordic models. Recently the prefix "new" has also been used in combination with Nordic (like in "New Nordic Cuisine"), indicating that there may be generations of Nordic models. Exploring deep-seated structures across social and cultural areas can elicit new knowledge about the sustainability, strengths, dilemmas and challenges of such models. The initiative will also adopt a critical approach to the Nordic 'mythologies', challenging notions of national and Nordic cultural and institutional characteristics. An important objective is to place knowledge about the Nordic countries in a broader context and wider perspective, and for this reason the initiative has an international orientation.

For many people "the Nordic Model" represents a formula for success where economic growth, social welfare, a highly skilled labour force and personal satisfaction have been successfully combined. "The Nordic Model" is often brought up in discussions about how to create and preserve a healthy, secure and sustainable society. Solutions that are understood as "Nordic" are often regarded as examples to copy or learn from.

Much of this interest stems from 1) political and cultural decision-makers, 2) international organizations and networks, 3) the business sector and workers' organizations, 4) think tanks, opinion leaders and social commentators. International delegations visit Nordic countries to learn about various phenomena such as gender equality policies, kindergartens, universal health schemes, language policies, the prison system and recreational activities. This interest is also reflected in international research communities and study programmes focusing on Nordic themes.

Although "the Nordic Model" is presented as a formula for success, the actual societies on which the model is built are characterized by tensions and paradoxes. Since these aspects are only partly reflected in the way "the Nordic phenomenon" is conceptually established, existing descriptions lack a significant analytical and normative potential for change. The aim of the initiative is to elucidate and critically examine Nordic models and their preconditions for better or worse. Not only will this provide new and deeper insight from an academic perspective but it will also be of great social significance. One of the aims of the initiative is to contribute to an international dialogue about strategic and political choices, social and cultural development potential, and good solutions for the future.

A number of features that characterize "the Nordic phenomenon" which generate interest internationally also embody paradoxes and tensions:

- In several areas the suggestion that the Nordic countries constitute a model is seriously questioned, both as a consequence of their different and strong embeddedness in international affairs and because the countries differ from each other for historical reasons. It may be argued that the Nordic countries in combination constitute a common model if compared with others but not if compared with each other.

- In immigration policy, for example, it is apparent that Sweden and Denmark have pursued different strategies. Nonetheless, it may be possible to argue that even in this area the Nordic countries have something in common.
- There is a shared Protestant tradition embodying a state church and a uniform culture. At the same time there are considerable differences among the Nordic countries regarding how the transition from a mono-religious to a multi-religious society has been addressed.
- The Nordic countries are often described as strongly collective societies, while at the same time they are often characterized by a strong focus on individual autonomy.
- The Nordic people score highest on happiness indexes, but the use of antidepressants is high and depression is an important cause of extended medical leave.
- The Nordic countries present themselves as “peace nations” and act as peace brokers. Nevertheless, arms exports are high and there is a substantial degree of participation in international military interventions and conflicts.
- The Nordic countries are often described as a kind of ‘civilized capitalism’, with a business sector characterized by a flat power structure and an emphasis on broad social responsibility. Nevertheless, as Nordic companies “go global” they find it difficult to maintain Nordic values of equality.
- It is generally believed that the Nordic countries are predominantly technology-friendly and eager to adopt new technological solutions. However, this speedy introduction of new technology sometimes challenges the established model for union-employer partnership.
- There is often talk of distinctive Nordic styles and traditions in design, food, art, popular culture and cultural policy. However, the “new cultural policy” with an aim to “brand” Nordic cultural expressions internationally may sometimes clash with the established view of the uniqueness of Nordic cultural expressions
- Nordic education systems and working-life strongly emphasize self-formation, autonomy and democratic citizenship. At the same time these ideals are challenged by an even stronger emphasis on quality control, electronic monitoring, ranking and performance culture.
- The Nordic countries rank highly as female-friendly societies with policies that make it possible to combine family life with work-life. However, there is also a tendency towards a high-pressure work-life, the neo-romanticizing of the role of the mother and the emergence of a more gender-polarized aesthetic among children and adolescents.

2. Develop and use interdisciplinary, historical and comparative perspectives

The strategic initiative brings different research traditions together. This entails collaboration between researchers with expertise in different theoretical and methodological approaches, and in different research design and publication genres. Although encounters between different research traditions are scientifically challenging, they are of decisive importance for safeguarding and enhancing research quality. Through its interdisciplinary approach UiO:Nordic will provide advice and inspiration

for researchers and research groups taking an interest in topics related to Norden and the Nordic phenomenon.

An important question is whether political interest in “the Nordic phenomenon” and eagerness to market the Nordic countries as a global brand create an ideal where positive features are grouped somewhat randomly, while interesting dilemmas and paradoxes are overlooked. For example, there is little research into science, art and culture from the welfare state perspective, and this can provide unique new insight – comparatively, internally and externally.

UiO:Nordic examines constructions and notions about ‘the Nordic phenomenon’, as well as paradoxes and tensions that are often overlooked. With interdisciplinary issues as the point of departure, four dimensions in particular will be explored:

The contrastive and comparative: The distinctiveness of the Nordic countries emerges in comparative studies, and in contrast with other countries and regions. The proposed initiative will have an international orientation and calls for close collaboration with other Nordic and international research environments. Contrasts between the Nordic countries, between the Nordic countries and other countries/regions, and between institutions, practices and cultural expression within the Nordic countries themselves will be key focus areas. There is scholarship on variations of capitalism as well as comparative media systems, democracy, welfare states etc. In this kind of research the Nordic countries are often presented as a particular model or tradition. The goal of the initiative is to advance this kind of comparative research, establish new links between existing research areas and question some of the established truths in narrowly defined research areas. It will be fruitful to shed light on how Nordic societies, legal systems, politics and culture are influenced by Europeanization, globalization, or even “ the return of the nation-state”. Emphasis will be placed on investigating the portrayal of the Nordic countries in an international context, and how this is expressed in different arenas, such as politics and diplomacy, as well as in literature, art and popular culture.

Models, styles, and traditions: "The Nordic Model" concept is not unified and in some fields there is explicit mention of several “Nordic models”. The model concept also needs further investigation. Some academic traditions employ the model concept, while others use concepts such as schools of thought, traditions or styles. The initiative will explore how ‘the Nordic phenomenon’ was constituted, debated, utilized and criticized within various societal, cultural and aesthetic areas.

History and preconditions: A critical study of “the Nordic phenomenon” demands a historical perspective. The Nordic countries were formed as nation states at different times and with different preconditions. There are important local variations when it comes to ethnicity, language, culture and politics. Nonetheless, the main traditions when it comes to language (with the exception of Finland), institutional and cultural architectures and ideologies as well as religion are strikingly similar. The initiative will contribute to the exploration of common historical features, differences and preconditions for contemporary Nordic societies.

Sustainability and future opportunities: Political, economic and cultural globalization, migration, Europeanization and standardization provide both influences and challenges.

Discussions about the prioritization of welfare benefits, competitive tendering and privatization affect all sectors. Important discussions are taking place about whether the welfare state is currently being overburdened, undermined, improved or strengthened. Studies of development and future opportunities in the Nordic countries not only deal with identifying the problems and challenges, but also examining deficiencies, solutions, adaptations and lessons learned across countries, regions and sectors.

3. Establish research collaboration aiming at gaining additional funding for research and cooperate with external social actors and users

The initiative is meant to strengthen knowledge of the societal challenges that are outlined in Horizon 2020 and other large-scale research programs. The Social Sciences and Humanities (SHH) disciplines are invited to demonstrate their relevance within research programmes that define current societal challenges. An important goal of the initiative is to increase participation in international research networks and research programs. . In order to be successful in such programs there is a need to develop ground-breaking topics, and establish practices for improving the quality of applications.

New collaboration arenas are needed in order to promote cultural and social innovation. To achieve this goal, we aim to develop cooperation with a selection of institutions that are central in Nordic cooperation and innovation. Interdisciplinary Workshops will be organized in order to develop collaborative constellations and provide useful knowledge and models for those who seek to learn from the Nordic model(s). Traditional venues for research dissemination, such as book series, sub-themes in international conferences and publication in journals and the media will be important, but may also be supplemented by channels that create more involvement and dialogue.

The aim is to shed light on social and cultural challenges from a more overarching and coordinated standpoint than that which is possible within individual projects and commissioned research. We will develop collaboration with selected social institutions and users, such as Nordic organizations, foundations and institutions, public sector institutions and enterprises, ministries, corporations, cultural institutions, the analysis section of ministries and agencies.

4. Identify and develop areas of educational cooperation across projects and programmes

The initiative has the goal of strengthening educational collaboration. For the current purpose it is also important to make use of the research collaboration that exists between the various Nordic institutions in developing good research courses for Nordic Ph.D. candidates within the topics of the initiative. Nordic collaboration on research education can be improved by developing Nordic research schools.

Separate master's degree pathways may be developed or master's degree variants may be devised within existing specializations, in which elective courses may be taken within a Nordic thematic area. Master's students may be linked directly to projects through proposals for topics for the thesis and seminars and other activities that include students.