

Nordic Research Board (NRB)

- an organisation for Nordic research co-operation

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Long version

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1. Research and Innovation Area

Advanced, high-quality research is a decisive prerequisite for the development capacity of modern society and for international competitiveness. Research and the climate for innovation together constitute prerequisites for wealth. Research at the highest international level requires top quality environments. However, the cost of high quality research tends to get increasingly higher. To meet this challenge, new trans-national structures for co-operation are needed, not least to ensure that Europe keeps up with other advanced technology countries. The establishment of a Nordic Research and Innovation Area is ultimately intended to strengthen the Nordic region in the global competition.

1.1 A European Research Area

During the past four years, the European Union has been developing the concept of a European Research Area – ERA. The purpose of the ERA collaboration is to contribute to better co-ordination of the European research capacity. The ERA will supplement national research policies and contribute, among other things, to:

- better use of national resources;
- creating a critical mass for research projects, both in terms of funding and of research capacity, in such areas where the individual countries are too small to manage on their own;
- supplementing national competence, particularly in interdisciplinary research;
- co-operation in research areas of global interest;
- stimulating the expansion of research in trade and industry;
- stimulating research in EU priority areas.

Within the ERA, the EU can be expected to carry out important financial investments through the so-called framework programmes. These may also be supplemented by a European Research Council (ERC) and a European Research Fund (ERF). While the framework programmes are primarily directed towards industry, the ERC and ERF would focus on basic research. However, in the environment created by increased EU commitment to research, it is imperative that smaller countries – such as the Nordic countries – develop their own co-operation, in order to stand strong on the European scene, where they have been successful so far in the competition for research funding.

Against this background, regional research co-operation may grow in importance in an enlarged Europe. It is likely that regional co-operation patterns will develop, not only in the Baltic region, but also in Western Europe, Central Europe and between the countries around the Mediterranean. To make it possible for the Nordic region to compete for European research funding and to keep up with the ever increasing global competition that today's research is exposed to, the Nordic countries should act rapidly and pur-

posefully to renew and expand their collaboration – not only in the Nordic region but in the whole Baltic area. This can be illustrated by two examples:

A prerequisite for developing strong research environments is the ability to attract and keep prominent research scientists and research students. During the next few years, many researchers who are active today will retire, making it necessary to recruit many more young research-workers and students to universities, research environments, industry and society in general.

It is also necessary to provide better opportunities for young, talented research-workers, both from the Nordic countries and from other parts of the world, to create a challenging and rewarding research career for themselves in our part of Europe. Today, many of them choose to go to the United States and other countries outside Europe. Enhanced research collaboration in the Nordic region could contribute to improving the attractiveness of the Nordic countries in this respect.

EU co-operation about major infrastructure projects is strong in a number of fields, such as high-energy physics, molecular biology, space research, astronomy, etc. However, it is also important to ensure, at regional level, that Nordic researchers have access to the best possible infrastructural resources. This can be done, among other things, by the Nordic countries joining forces to attract facilities to the Nordic region.

The Nordic proposal about hosting a European Spallation Source (ESS) is one example of this. The Max Lab at Lund University – in which all the Nordic countries eventually will have a share - is one example of successful Nordic infrastructural co-operation. This can also be said for NORDUnet. Furthermore, there is great potential in the joint use of existing databases, collections and other infrastructures in more formalised co-operation structures also within the humanities and the social sciences. Co-operation of this kind will increase the attractiveness of the whole region.

1.2 “NORIA - White Paper on Nordic Research and Innovation – Co-operation for a World-Leading Position”

The challenges outlined above was the point of departure when the Nordic Council of Ministers for Education and Research (MR-U) commissioned Professor Gustav Björkstrand at Åbo Akademi University to examine the conditions for closer research collaboration in the Nordic region. He presented his proposal in a White Paper entitled “NORIA - Nordic Research and Innovation Area – Co-operation for a World-Leading Position,” in the autumn of 2003. At a meeting in October 2003, the Education and Research Ministers Council (MR-U) endorsed the visions presented in the White Paper.

The White Paper discusses different ways of developing the Nordic region into a leading region for research and innovation. It also stresses that today's success is no guarantee of future success, as scientific competition increases. Despite a high proportion of research results, in terms of share of the economy, the Nordic countries are all small in absolute numbers in a global perspective. The report points out that the Nordic countries are advanced in many areas in an international context and that this should be better exploited to create synergies and a stronger profile.

The establishment of a Nordic Research and Innovation Area (NORIA) is emphasised as a realistic and necessary measure to strengthen strategic co-operation within basic and applied research and innovation between the Nordic countries. NORIA can also be seen as the contribution from the Nordic countries to the vision of a European Research Area.

The White Paper has been circulated for consideration in the Nordic countries. It has also been discussed in the Nordic Research Policy Council (FPR). At the first MR-U meeting in 2004, on March 25, the ministers for education and research discussed the opinions submitted and the FPR's comments to these. Although the opinions do not give an entirely clear-cut picture, the ministers concluded that the attitude to the vision presented in the White Paper is generally positive.

As a step in the final drafting process, the most important parties at the national level in the Nordic countries have been consulted through personal visits from the Secretariat of the Nordic Council of Ministers.

1.3 An Innovation Strategy for Trade and Industry

The Council of Ministers for Trade and Industry has initiated work to develop a specific strategy for innovation in trade and industry. A report entitled "*Nordic Strength, National Benefit and Global Excellence – A Proposal for a Nordic Innovation Policy Collaboration Programme, 2005-2010*," was presented in May 2004. The strategy proposed in the report will be of considerable importance also to research. There is already an institution under the auspices of the Nordic Council of Ministers for Trade and Industry, the Nordic Innovation Center (NICE), which can serve as a complement to and co-operation partner with a new structure for Nordic research collaboration.

Close collaboration between research and innovation is important. For this reason, it is imperative to foster close contacts between research institutions and research-based activities in trade and industry and between a new Nordic research structure and NICE. The role of research collaboration should be considered an important element in the innovation process in trade and industry and for society's capacity for renewal. More ambitious efforts to turn scientific and technological progress into new enterprises and more jobs are an important part of the justification for enhanced Nordic collaboration.

1.4 Conclusion

A *Nordic Research and Innovation Area (NORIA)* will be created for all the reasons listed above. The crucial players in this new structure will be a *Nordic Research Board (NRB)* and the *Nordic Innovation Center (NICE)*.

2. The Nordic Research Board - NRB

To make Nordic research collaboration more efficient, a NRB (NordForsk in Scandinavian) will be established as an independent body under the Ministers for Education and Research (MR-U), with responsibility for Nordic collaboration within research and research education and for co-operation and co-ordination with NICE. The national research councils (and other research-funding bodies) and the universities are the central players in this organisation. The focus of the collaboration is research areas within which the Nordic countries have strong scientific expertise and may even hold an internationally leading position. The aim is to promote research of the highest international quality.

2.1 Focus

The NRB will provide the organisational framework for promoting collaboration between the central research-funding bodies in the Nordic countries. The NRB will control and distribute the resources for Nordic research collaboration available under the MR-U and any research funds made available by the Nordic Council of Ministers for other sectors. The aim is to define collaboration on the basis of national priorities and identified common interests. The basis for all granting of funds should be excellent scientific quality. Nordic synergies should be an objective for co-funding and co-ordination. The available Nordic funds transferred to the NRB are expected to amount to just over MDKK 76 in 2005 and to rise to MDKK 100 in 2007. If other research activities of the Council of Ministers also can be attracted to the NRB, the disposable funds may rise to approx. MDKK 200. The NRB will be ensured considerable freedom in terms of its activities and the organisation of its work.

As mentioned previously, another important task for the NRB is to establish collaboration with the Nordic innovation systems and NICE.

Nordic funds should be regarded as marginal/seed financing for joint support to the best institutions, researchers and research groups. With this approach, it is natural to consider funding a primarily national matter. Synergies between Nordic and national resources can be promoted by delegating the decision-making responsibility and the competence for granting of funds in the NRB to the national research councils.

The NRB differs from the European research bodies in one crucial respect. The latter are engaged in direct and extensive support activities, while the primary aim of the NRB is to promote common Nordic interests. Some important effects of the work of the NRB will be enhanced regional research collaboration in the Nordic region and its adjacent areas and a stronger common Nordic position in the competition for European research funds than the individual countries could manage on their own.

2.2 Organisation

The NRB will have a board with a limited number of members. The board is composed of ten members and five observers who will all be appointed by the MR-U (see Figure 1). The statutes of the organisation will be laid down by the MR-U.

Members:

- 5 representatives of the national research councils (nominated by the authorities responsible for research in the respective countries)
- 3 representatives of universities in the Nordic countries (nominated by the NUS)
- 1 representative of companies carrying out research (nominated by the MR-U)
- 1 representative of companies carrying out research (nominated by the MR-N. This member will be expected to serve as one of two vice chairpersons of the board)

Observers:

- 1 representative of each of the autonomous areas (nominated by the regional research council or corresponding entity)
- 1 representative of the Baltic research councils (nominated by the Baltic research councils)
- 1 representative of the Secretariat of the Nordic Council of Ministers

The board members should be leading representatives of their respective organisations. The board will be appointed for a period of four years that can be extended by another two years. It is important to ensure that the board members together represent broad knowledge of research and research policy. The board will play a key role in making the planned collaboration successful.

Chairperson and steering group

The MR-U will appoint one of the five representatives of the research councils as chairperson for a period of two years. The board will also elect two vice chairpersons who, together with the chairman of the board, will make up the steering group. The Director will also be included in the steering group as ex officio member.

The board may engage an advisory committee consisting of prominent researchers, parliamentarians, corporate leaders and persons in central positions as sparring-partners and to create stronger links with interested parties and environments at the national level.

Secretariat

The NRB will have an independent secretariat with the necessary competence to take initiatives in a number of different subject areas. The Secretariat will be led by a director with experience from international research collaboration. The board of the NRB will lay down the rules for the work and organisation of the Secretariat. The Nordic Research Board will replace the Nordic Research Policy Council (FPR) and the Nordic Academy for Advanced Studies (NorFA). The NRB will assume the responsibility for the work carried out today by these two organisations.

The board of the NRB will decide whether subject area committees should be appointed to draft proposals. The committees may focus on specific subjects or be cross-sectorial, or focus on interesting relationships between research and trade and industry. The

board of the NRB should also consider the role of the joint Nordic research councils (NOS) in relation to the new organisation.

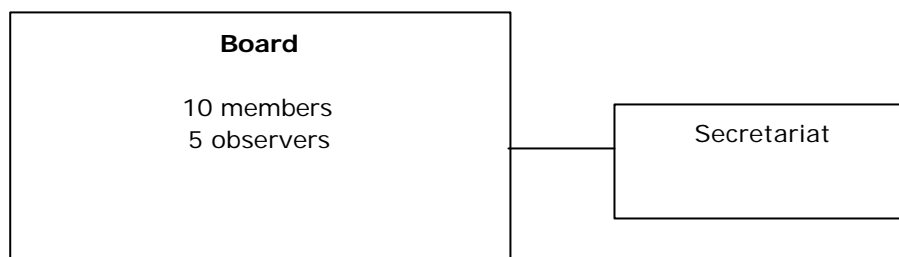


Figure 1. Organisation of the Nordic Research Board

2.3 The tasks of the Nordic Research Board

The Nordic Research Board should serve as a collaboration body between national research-funding bodies. The collaboration may encompass all levels of research, from basic to applied research. The Nordic Research Board will take initiatives on its own but also give opinions and comment on initiatives from the research community and universities. The universities play an important role, as they are responsible for a major share of today's research activities and for most postgraduate research studies.

The Nordic Research Board has a strategic task to perform. Its task is to elucidate and strengthen areas and applications where the Nordic countries have particular expertise and strength.

Against this background, the Nordic Research Board can be said to perform three functions:

1. Co-ordination

- Co-ordination of national research and theme programmes that have been identified as relevant/interesting areas in terms of Nordic activities. Initiatives may be both in the form of top-down initiatives taken by the board and bottom-down initiatives taken by the research community.
- Create opportunities for the triggering of large-scale national investments to achieve/create synergies on the basis of limited Nordic funds
- Create opportunities for and promote infrastructural investments that cannot be financed solely with national funds.

2. Funding

- Decide on support to relevant Nordic research efforts (such as the Nordic Centres of Excellence, NCoE), together with interested parties at national level
- Decide on joint activities within the field of research training, for example, Nordic Research Schools.

3. Policy

- Promote a strong and developable policy for research and innovation, in collaboration with the research community, trade and industry and the ministries for research, trade and industry and other relevant ministries
- Advise on topical research policy issues (at the Board's own initiative or at the request on the MR-U).

The Nordic Research Board will have complete autonomy on issues related to the granting of funds and make its decisions on appropriations on the basis of evaluations of scientific quality. The NRB board's decisions will be based on well-founded proposals by the Director.

The Nordic Research Board will be given extensive freedom when allocating funds to different activities, such as research schools, Centres of Excellence or other areas

brought up either by the NRB board itself or by research scientists or groups of researchers. To the extent that the NRB board chooses to advertise available funds, these should be allocated on the basis of peer reviews.

It is important to consider the work of the Nordic Research Board in the context of other initiatives for Nordic research collaboration. There is well-established Nordic co-operation in the field of energy research and plans are underway for better co-ordination in areas such as fishing, agriculture and forestry. These and other future initiatives should be closely linked to the work of the Nordic Research Board to the extent that it promotes greater consensus of views on Nordic research challenges.

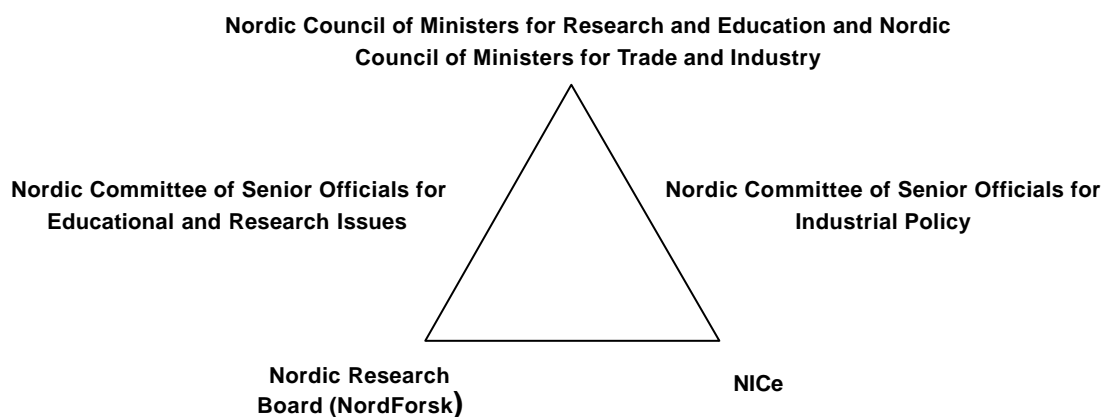
3. Collaboration between MR-U and MR-N

Close co-operation between research and innovation is imperative. This applies nationally, but also at Nordic level. At national level, several countries have developed constructive relationships between the two “pillars” of research and innovation policy. Correspondingly, it is important to establish close contacts between the Nordic Research Board and NICE.

The “triple helix” concept is often used at national level. This concept refers to the interaction in an innovation system between three categories of players – research, enterprise and politics. At Nordic level, the Nordic Research Board, NICE and the MR-U/MR-N could be considered to form a Nordic triple helix (see figure 2).

The “two-pillar” model – one for research and one for innovation, with close contacts between the two – that will now be established is fully in line with the long-term ambitions in the White Paper.

Figure 2. The Nordic triple helix



4. Contacts with the adjacent areas

There is strong interest in expanding research collaboration, not only between the Nordic countries but also with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and, at a later stage, possibly also with North-western Russia. The Nordic Council of Ministers already supports a re-

searcher exchange scheme between the Baltic countries and North-western Russia through the Nordplus Nabo and NorFA Nabo programmes.

At a joint Nordic-Baltic meeting with the ministers for education and research in March 2004, a joint declaration on deepening the co-operation between the eight Nordic and Baltic countries was signed. Preliminary discussions with the research authorities in North-western Russia (St. Petersburg) will be held in September 2004.

The creation of the Nordic Research Board provides an organisation within which the co-operation with the adjacent areas could also be realised. Initially the Nordic Research Board could hold regular meetings with representatives of the research councils in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Such meetings could pave the way for gradually closer collaboration between researchers in most of the countries around the Baltic Sea. A joint forum for such meetings should be established within the framework of the Nordic Research Board. A Baltic representative of this forum will be invited to join the NRB board with observer status.