

Midterm evaluation of the Nordic Research Schools in the Humanities and Social Sciences 2004-2008

I Background

In 2003 NorFA (now NordForsk) decided to launch a five-year pilot programme: *Nordic Research Schools in the Fields of the Humanities and Social Sciences*. After a two step application procedure, five schools were selected and started their activities in early 2004. All five selected a network model to work on and agreed to share costs, with related institutions taking responsibility for personnel costs for their own faculty members, plus basic financing of their own research students, for whom they also have full educational responsibility.

A midterm evaluation was planned to take place in 2006 but was postponed to early 2007.

The evaluation consisted of the following steps:

- a) Self-evaluation by the research school (based on an evaluation form provided by NordForsk), including a description of results so far and assessment of the achievements of the first term 2004-2006/2007.
- b) A two-day expert panel meeting, including discussions with school representatives and assessment of their achievements.
- c) A written panel report, describing the achievements of the schools in relation to their original proposals, and evaluating the success of the Nordic research school concept. The written report consists of a general part covering all five schools and a separate report for each school.

Members of the panel:

Professor Kirsten Weber, Dept. of Educational Studies, Roskilde University – Chair
Professor Peter Bosch, Institute of Cognitive Science, University of Osnabrück
Professor Blaise Cronin, School of Library and Information Science, Indiana University
Professor Dr. Christine Keitel, Dept. of Educational Science and Psychology, Freie Universität Berlin
Professor Sasha Roseneil, School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Leeds
Dr. Marie Louise Stig Sørensen, Dept. of Archaeology, University of Cambridge

Prof. Weber also chaired the panel which evaluated the original proposals. The other experts were selected based on specific expertise within the fields of one of the participating research schools and were asked prior to the panel's two day meeting in June 2007 to send a written review of their school, based on an evaluation form provided by NordForsk. Furthermore, the panel received guidelines for midterm evaluation, the original proposals from the research schools, the original call and guidelines and the self-evaluations from each school.

The panel was informed that the results of the midterm evaluation will be used to assess the results of the five research schools and as an advisory document for their development during the remaining term (2007-2008). Each school will be given their own individual report for information.

The whole report will be presented to NordForsk's Board and may have an impact on funding for the final year.

The report from the expert panel consists of a *general part (II)* and a *specific part (III)* for each of the five research schools.

II General Evaluation Report

II.1 Summary

II.1.1 Conclusions

- The pilot programme has so far been a success, as the objectives and aims of all five funded Nordic research schools (NRS) successfully met the programme criteria.
- The overall impression of the evaluation panel was that the programme has provided good value for the money, since the results achieved by the schools have been huge in relation to the rather modest funds awarded for their activities.
- By giving Nordic top funding, the NRS's have all succeeded in forming new activities and raising both quality and volume of researcher training in their respective fields.
- Researcher training is an investment in the future, the value of which cannot be overestimated. The results go beyond the project period of five years, since the interest of the graduate community is promoted and potentially long-lasting networks built.
- Courses and summer schools seem to have been the main activities of all the schools.
- The schools reported different degrees of scientific width and depth of their training. Two models could clearly be seen, where some schools opened up local courses to Nordic participation on a very broad scale and others used the initiative to tailor new, specialised courses.
- All schools claimed that supervisors are not fully integrated into the network, which is a clearly weak point of the programme and can affect the chances for students to fully utilise what the network offers.
- Opportunities for both formal and informal networking (especially for PhD students) can be seen as the main strength provided by all the research schools. This is acknowledged as extremely important.
- The Nordic setting for the programme was chosen, because this type of collaboration is more realistic to expand and build with neighbouring countries
- The international visibility and Nordic identity of the research schools seems to vary, with good examples of high Nordic and international visibility.
- The schools have achieved a lot, and the midterm evaluation helped them to structure their experience. NordForsk, as the responsible organization, should take explicit credit for that. There is a need for good researchers to also think of themselves as front-runners, organizers, role-models for PhD students, etc., including thinking of evaluations as opportunities for reflection.
- It remains to be seen if the networks actually succeed in using the NRS period as a stepping stone into something more.

II.1.2 Recommendations

- The panel supported a request from the schools to be able to use any remaining funds, even after the original project period. This could help in bridging the gap between current funding and potential new funding sources (exit funding) in case NordForsk does not consider a second funding period for the schools.
- Most courses are targeted towards first-year students. Development of the idea of building in progressive courses throughout the student period may be desirable.
- Networking with a view to improving researcher training should also be supported in a Nordic setting in the future. However, the panel recommends that NordForsk assesses whether Nordic research schools are the most relevant way of funding researcher training, given they are complicated structures in comparison to lighter ways of networking.

- If new, similar calls are opened, the panel recommends there should be a stronger focus on communicating the aim of the programme (beyond objectives).
- Future collaborations could be further developed through partnership with organisations outside academia.
- The panel warmly supported the idea of organising joint meetings with all research schools to exchange experiences and share best practices on the different models for organising activities and challenges arising from such fields as technologies for collaboration.
- The panel recommends that future evaluations could preferably be built into the programme from the very beginning as a monitoring process, rather than a single event, performed by an ad hoc panel.

II.1.3 Lessons learned

- Supervision activities have not been addressed in the reports by all research schools. More could clearly have been done here. One additional aspect of supervision is that it should be measured both as the quality of supervision given and in terms of activities for supervisors, which is becoming important and could have been stressed more in the evaluation.
- Good organisation with a good leadership of director(s), an efficient and active board, and sufficient secretarial help from academic staff are essential.
- A Nordic *Graduate School as such* is not viable, because degrees are always given by the universities.
- This sort of network collaboration always requires investment by the participating universities. Leadership may be an aspect which could be financed by the partners. Nevertheless, it is important not to underestimate the time spent on leading an NRS, regardless of who provides finance.
- To bring all relevant partners into the collaboration, a balance between a reasonable collective horizon and being all-inclusive may be desirable
- Distance-learning is seen as good complementary tool
- Although an exit plan had been requested in the original proposals, this could have been more developed and more clearly asked for in reporting.
- More stress could have been laid on the demand to develop models for future collaboration (exit strategy) during the project period.
- The panel would have liked the self-evaluation feedback to focus more on objectives or analysis.
- The evaluations by PhD students as part of the self-evaluation process proved unhelpful: too many just reproduced elements of the self-evaluation document, and did not offer their own opinions about the training received. This is a matter NordForsk should take up in the design of feedback forms.

II.2 Objectives and aims of the pilot programme

The prime objective of the pilot programme for Nordic Research Schools in the Humanities and Social Sciences according to the call in 2003 was:

"to enhance the quality of research training among collaborating institutions". The programme aimed at "testing and developing models to gain experience and possibilities for improving research training in and between the Nordic countries and creating synergetic effects through the collaboration".

Based on the self-evaluation reports and oral presentation from each of the schools and following discussion with the panel, it was clearly concluded that the objectives and aims of all five funded Nordic research schools (NRS) projects had successfully met the programme call.

II.3 Fields and themes chosen for the Nordic research schools and their success, including width and depth requirements, ambition level and possible multidisciplinary approaches:

An NRS must have a sufficient number of students and teachers at different levels in their research career. This is needed to achieve the width and depth in the research training which is crucial in securing the necessary quality; a quality comparable to that of the best Nordic and international research environments. (Call 2003)

The fields and themes for the five schools chosen have been different from the very beginning and have also developed differently during the funding period. That's why there are very few issues common to all five schools. The main common issue identified is that all schools are drawing on some kind of existing collaboration (networks, conferences, national schools). In addition, the disciplines chosen can be characterised as 'isolated' or small intellectual environments (in relation to large established disciplines) where the development of a network can be used as a means of reducing this isolation. The schools share the ambition to provide PhD students with experience of international cooperation and of exposure to a wider intellectual environment and networking. Opportunities for both formal and informal networking can be seen as the main strength provided by all the research schools and were acknowledged as extremely important by the evaluation panel.

Courses and summer schools seem to have been the main activity of all the research schools, while other activities (mobility, workshops, conferences, supervision activities etc.) have been organised in some of the schools, but had a more marginal role in the collaboration. One of the main motivations in selecting the five schools has been to build a critical mass in the supply of courses and recruitment in the Nordic region.

As for school quality, all schools aim to raise intellectual and scientific levels and quality of the discipline, including student performance, and to raise the general scientific quality in their own fields of research, but they try to accomplish it in different ways, depending on the collaboration basis.

They report different degrees of scientific width and depth of research training, as some have developed a very specific set of courses (stressed depth), while others have tried to be very comprehensive (stressed width). Two main models were recognised, which could be identified as discipline-building schools on the one hand, and more supplementing schools on the other. The quantity of courses offered also varied a lot, depending on whether the school was mainly opening national courses to Nordic participation, or if it was actually designing new Nordic courses. In the latter case, one good strategy seemed to be offering fewer, but specialised high-quality courses. One structural problem of course design was seen in the fact that most courses are targeted at first-year students. Development of the idea of building-in progressive courses throughout the student period may be desirable here.

Some schools seem to be more interdisciplinary, whilst others are more trans-disciplinary.

The schools also communicated various forms of ambition, depending on the themes and fields chosen. It is clear that their different contexts and maturity stage of their subject fields create different types of ambition. The maturity of the collaboration itself also varies depending on the relative age and maturity of the research field and the previous collaboration.

II.4 The quality and efficiency of the Nordic research schools (including student recruitment, supervision activities and results) in relation to relevant national and international initiatives

It is expected that a Nordic research school and its activities are open for participation (particularly for research students) from all Nordic countries. (Call 2003)

School results are somewhat mixed and not always easy to pinpoint. The schools all document long term investment in researcher training, broadening the horizon of PhD students, and providing a base for future research activities.

From the report material it is not clearly seen whether they have led to the recruitment of more students generally (the data provided does not show this), but they do appear to have efficiently recruited students to their course activities, and in some cases also recruited teachers into PhD programmes. Students have been recruited both outside the geographic area of the partner institutions and in some cases outside the research field; and even recruited beyond the original requirements and ambitions of the call and proposal. It could be argued that the overall level of student recruitment in the field has probably been raised.

Supervision activities have not been addressed in the reports by all schools. More could clearly have been done here. Some of them claimed that supervisors have been approached, but they are not "forced" into the collaboration. All schools stressed the independence of supervisors in their work. The other side of this is that all schools claimed that supervisors are not fully integrated into the network, which is a clearly weak point of the programme and can affect the chances of students to fully utilise the possibilities the network offers. One additional aspect of supervision is that it should be measured both as the quality of supervision given and in terms of activities for supervisors, which is becoming important and could have been stressed more in the evaluation.

The outcome in number of theses is not possible to measure, since all five schools are actually virtual networks. What could be assessed would be the probable influence of the Nordic network on theses completed during the collaboration period. As it is, the most obvious result is that a lot of students were given the opportunity to be part of an important network, participate in the various activities and gain useful competence, experience etc.

Some of the schools have very good links with national research schools or other relevant national initiatives. But the question of the non-existence of national initiatives in some fields and the gap filled by the research school in such cases should be considered.

When it comes to links to relevant international initiatives, all the schools were active in encouraging students in participating and presenting papers at international meetings and seminars.

II.5 The position of the Nordic research schools in an international perspective

A Nordic research school should work in an international perspective. It is considered to be of strength if internationally recognised researchers, irrespective of nationality, are connected to the school. (Call 2003)

Once again, general reference could be made to the conferences, associations and publication practices reported by the schools. Some have also contributed to the international reputation of Nordic researcher training as being well organised or even

pioneering. All of the schools also took a broad international approach in lecturers invited.

The international visibility and Nordic identity of the schools also seems to vary, with good examples of high Nordic and international visibility.

II.6 The relevance of Nordic research schools in relation to collaborations and connections within and outside Academia

It was brought up in discussion whether the research schools could connect more to society and possibly to industry, concluding that in the future collaboration could be further developed through partnership with organisations outside academia.

II.7 Organisational models for Nordic research schools and their success, including leadership requirements

NRS is to be governed by a Nordic Board. The NRS shall have a visible leadership and a clear division of responsibilities. The director of the NRS shall be employed (a member of the faculty) at one of the participating institutions. Strong leadership and a good organisational framework are emphasised. Part of the grant is allocated to fees to a director and to direct administrative costs. (Call 2003)

All five Nordic research schools showed different organisation and leadership models due to different fields, traditions and ambitions for their proposed plans. They all tried to develop models which fitted their own area and there is no single model which would suit every NRS. Crucial to good organisation is good leadership by a director(s), an efficient and active board, and sufficient secretarial help by academic staff. One interesting leadership model was highlighted by the case of one school which changed its directorship and host institution during the funding period. The division of labour within the board was also organised in various ways. One other interesting issue was the balance between leadership and collective ownership of active partners and participating venues. Most of the schools reported some problems in getting all relevant partners into the collaboration (the reasons for this remained unclear). A balance between a reasonable collective horizon and being all-inclusive (the necessary inclusiveness depending much on the fields involved) may be required.

When it came to school activities, most seem to have focused on physical courses including student mobility. Distance learning has also been tried with various results and experiences, maybe partly due to the level of support from within the participating organisations. The general impression is that distance learning is a good complementary tool, but which cannot substitute physical courses and networking. Somebody pointed out that good virtual communication is easier with people you have met.

Some practical organisational issues raised were homepages and databases. Some of the schools found problems in developing various kind of technical support, while others did not report such problems. There was a clear need for exchange of best practices to find an appropriate level of ambition and functional solutions. Distance learning problems were also reported, maybe partly due to a lack of sufficient support from within the participating organisations.

II.8 Funding level and the eligible use of Nordic funding

NordForsk's framework funding shall primarily cover direct costs for promoting research training through creating or strengthening the collaboration and framework for the school, such as costs for collective supervisory tasks, seminars, visiting professors, course activities and mobility for both supervisors and research students. NordForsk covers to a certain degree direct administrative costs and fees for a school director. A

maximum of 10% of the funding may be used for direct administrative costs. Overheads or other similar costs should be covered by the responsible institution(s).

It is expected that the institutions attached to the research school take the responsibility for employment and salaries for their own faculty members as well as for the basic financing of their own research students, for whom they also have full educational responsibility.

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(Call 2003)

Several schools reported an organisational problem in the hours a director had to work greatly exceeding the amount of funding allocated. On the other hand, it can be argued that this sort of network collaboration always requires an investment of the participating universities and that leadership could be financed by the partners. Nevertheless, it is important not to underestimate the time spent leading an NRS, regardless of whom is to finance this.

Some of the schools reported that they had not spent all their money within the given time and they all wanted an extension of funding. Administration and management costs had been higher than reported in all schools. This means they had invested a lot of non-funded time in their activities, whilst not all funding was used. However, it was pointed out that the level of administrative costs partly depends on an efficient administrative model. Relevant, high-qualified staffing and an appropriate division of labour are crucial for functional and cost-effective collaboration.

II.9 Prospects for continuing the co-operation/activities after the end of the funding period

Originally the applicants were asked to give an account of the considerations and plans for continued activities after the expiration of the NordForsk grant.

The schools reported quite mixed expectations to continuing cooperation after the NordForsk funding period. However, they all indicated a wish and need for further Nordic funding. Some had more elaborate plans and visions on how to preserve and continue at least the most essential parts of the cooperation (own institutional funding; EU funding). Although an exit plan had been requested in the original proposals, this could have been more developed and more clearly asked for in the reporting.

One interesting question is also what happens to the marginal partners (1 supervisor + 1 student) when the NRS projects end? Some of the larger environments might be able to recruit the smaller environments to some extent, which will eventually lead to closure of the latter. The original agenda was also to integrate the various environments within the framework of the project, but it remains to be seen if the networks actually succeed in using the NRS period as a stepping stone into something more.

II.10 Concluding remarks

II.10.1. Added value and outcome

When measuring the benefits of the NRS cooperation, the value of interaction has to be measured. This is not easy. The most essential aspect occurring throughout the evaluation was *the value of networking* for PhD students; functioning in a more cosmopolitan and peer environment beyond the period and activities of the school; collaborating with researchers and professors; making connections, which would

otherwise probably not have been generated. A quantity rise within specific research field activities with more students writing and presenting more papers can also be expected along with the further development of emerging fields and broadening scientific views through the collaboration.

The overall impression of the evaluation panel was that the programme has provided *good value for the money*, since the results gained by the NRS schools have been huge in relation to the rather modest funds. By giving this Nordic top funding, the NRS's have all succeeded in forming new activities and raising the quality and volume of researcher training in their respective fields. A feature highly stressed was that researcher training is an investment in the future, the value of which cannot be overestimated. The results go beyond the project period of five years, since the interest of the graduate community is promoted and potentially long-lasting networks built. The reasons for keeping the collaboration in a Nordic setting are due to it being more realistic to expand and build with neighbouring countries.

The panel agreed that networking with a view to improving researcher training should also be supported in a Nordic setting in the future. But what was not so clear was whether this should necessarily be Nordic research schools, as there are much lighter ways of networking. With the various research school models in mind, the evaluation panel posed the challenge to NordForsk to assess whether Nordic research schools are the most relevant way of funding researcher training, as a Nordic *Graduate School as such* is not viable, because degrees are always given by the universities. Therefore, it could be more adequate to discuss strong researcher training networks, perhaps with a strong base in national research schools where they exist (as in NordForsk's existing scheme "Networks of National Research Schools").

As for the academic focus, two models could clearly be seen: some schools opened up local courses to Nordic participation on a very broad scale; others used the Nordic effort to tailor new specialised courses, which would otherwise not have been offered to students there. This raised a more general question as to whether the schools should be used to patch the gaps in basic education or focus on a more specialised design, challenging the level of researcher education in the field. It was agreed that in either case the Nordic collaboration had a positive impact on researcher training. Furthermore, the most important effect of the programme was seen in the creation of a research training community, which all five schools had managed to do. The overall impression was that the programme had succeeded in creating peer groups in fields where the intellectual environment would otherwise not have been strong enough, and opening up for further internationalisation of researcher training in these fields.

II.10.2 Exit plans

The panel was aware that the programme is a time-limited programme with no automatic continuation. Although the NRS had been asked for exit plans in their original proposals, the panel thought that even more stress could have been laid on the demand to develop models for future collaboration during the project period. Some schools had clearly tried to find ways to continue parts of the collaboration, while others were very unclear about the future. If new similar calls are opened, the panel recommends there should be a stronger focus on communicating the aim of the programme (beyond the objectives). Apparently, the policy behind the choice of these NRS's had partly been to try to overcome the isolation of emerging or otherwise marginal areas through thematic efforts, rather than to spend funding on obvious Centres of Excellence.

The panel warmly supported the idea of organising joint meetings with all research schools to exchange experiences and share best practices on different models for organising activities and the challenges met in such fields as technologies for collaboration.

Finally, the panel supports the schools' request to be able to use any remaining funds after the original project period, since they may not have been used because at least some of the schools did not reach the full volume of activities during their first year. This could also help bridge the gap between current funding and potential new funding sources (exit funding), in case NordForsk does not consider a second funding period.

II.10.3 The evaluation procedure

The panel believed it was a problem that despite the papers provided by NordForsk, it was not quite familiar with the background of the concept and the original setting in the Nordic research policy at the time of programme creation. The panel recommended that future evaluations could preferably be built into the programme from the very beginning as a monitoring process, rather than a single event, performed by an ad hoc panel.

On the subject of evaluation material, the panel would also have liked a clearer request in the self-reflection evaluation on objectives or through analysis. The papers produced for evaluation mainly described the efforts of the schools and their success in achieving their stated goals. Thus, while strengths emerged clearly and convincingly, weaknesses or threats were mainly acknowledged through low-key references to future funding, whilst the middle part (issues such as weaknesses, opportunities, challenges, future development), which strategically as well as pedagogically may have been particularly interesting, was somewhat played down. The evaluations by PhD students as part of the self-evaluation process proved unhelpful: too many just reproduced elements of the self-evaluation document, and did not offer their own opinions about the training received. This is a matter that should be taken up by NordForsk in the design of feedback forms.

The research schools have achieved a lot, and this midterm evaluation has helped them so structure their experience. NordForsk, as the responsible organization, should take explicit credit for that. There is a need for good researchers to also think of themselves as front-runners, organizers, role-models for PhD students, etc., including thinking of evaluations as opportunities for reflection.