

**Antra Carlsen**

Norwegian Agency for Lifelong Learning

## **Networks and networking in adult education as means of learning and addressing challenges in the Nordic region**

Sieci i sieciowanie jako środek kształcenia i wyzwanie Skandynawii

**Summary.** In the Nordic region, a unique co-operation across national borders exists in many different fields. Co-operation in the adult education sector takes place under the auspices of NVL and the Nordplus Adult programme. Nordic Network for Adult Learning (NVL) is a meeting place for Nordic adult learning organisations. NVL supports Nordic co-operation in a LLL perspective, disseminates experiences and innovations, highlights Nordic expertise and creates new co-operation models. The objectives of the NVL strive towards promoting lifelong learning by focusing on cross-sectoral cooperation in the priority areas defined by the Nordic Council of Ministers.

**Keywords:** networking, adult learning, Nordic cooperation, NVL.

**Streszczenie.** Sieci i sieciowanie w edukacji dorosłych jako środek kształcenia i wyzwanie w Skandynawii. W Skandynawii, wyjątkowa współpraca ponad granicami kraju istnieje w wielu różnych dziedzinach. Współpraca w sektorze edukacji dorosłych odbywa się pod patronatem Nordyckiej Sieci Kształcenia Dorosłych (NVL) i programu Nordplus dorosłych. (NVL) jest miejscem spotkań dla organizacji edukacji dorosłych, wspiera współpracę w perspektywie LLL, upowszechnia doświadczenia i innowację. Celem NVL jest dążenie do promowania kształcenia ustawicznego, koncentrując się na współpracy międzysektorowej w obszarach priorytetowych określonych przez Radę Ministrów.

**Słowa kluczowe:** sieci, kształcenie dorosłych, współpraca Nordic, NVL.

### **Nordic cooperation**

The official Nordic cooperation dates back to the post WWII period; and today covers a number of areas like, education, research, working life, health,

environment, etc. The Nordic political co-operation is built on common values and a willingness to achieve results that contribute to a dynamic development and increase Nordic competencies and competitiveness. A common understanding of democracy and shared social values are important underlying principles of Nordic cooperation and help to promote freedom of movement and to enhance skills, competitiveness and cohesion throughout the Region. Working together does not just put core Nordic values on the international agenda; it also helps to make the Region more visible and highlights the unique nature of the partnership, which provides benefits for citizens and users – both in the Region and beyond. The cooperation is funded by taxes from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. The autonomous territories (Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Åland) also play an important part. The official co-operation costs approx. DKK 35.00 per citizen p.a. (NCM, 2011)

### **Nordic cooperation in adult education**

We are privileged in *Norden* to have political and financial support to do more than is possible within one country. The Nordic governments put together resources and support different areas of development. There are altogether 10 different Councils of Ministers financing development work within areas like environment, fishery and forestry, energy industries, working life, social welfare and care, and also education and culture.

The current Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM) strategy plan for education and research (2011–13) states that the Nordic cooperation (Kunnskap for grønn vekst og velferd, 2011–2012<sup>3</sup>) should foster research, innovation and use of green energy and modern technologies and regarding adult education (AE):

- should eliminate barriers and enhance free mobility for students, researchers and knowledge flow in the Nordic region;
- should enhance public – private partnerships in order to develop competences of all citizens and employees and enhance the recognition of prior learning.

National experiences and initiatives are important in this context; they are the core and backbone of development. But when there is a possibility to put the different experiences together, analyse them and in the best case test them in other surroundings and circumstances – then new knowledge is created, or new angles found to the existing practice. This is a way of

creating a totally new and very valuable knowledge through cooperation. In the light of the Nordic cooperation it means also bringing about added Nordic value.

The resources allocated to adult learning – practice and policy development – are channeled through several programmes. The Nordic Committee of Senior Officials for Education and Research (EK-U) is the steering group in the field and set the priorities for the Nordic Network for Adult Learning (NVL), a network organization supporting the realization of the NCM strategy. NVL's task is to spread the knowledge about and implement the Nordic policies within the field of AE and learning. [www.nordvux.net](http://www.nordvux.net)

Besides there is another programme supporting lifelong learning in the Nordic region called *Nordplus* – a cooperation programme for projects and exchange of learners, educators and scholars. [www.nordplusonline.org](http://www.nordplusonline.org)

## **NVL**

The Nordic network for adult learning (NVL) unites all the five Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden) and the three autonomous areas (Aaland Islands, Faroes, Greenland). NVL is a programme initiated in 2005, financed by the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM) and administrated by the Norwegian Agency for Lifelong Learning (Vox). The objectives of NVL strive towards promoting lifelong learning by focusing on cross-sectoral cooperation in the priority areas defined by the NCM, like flexibility in adult learning, workplace-based learning, guidance counseling, recognition of prior learning, validation of non-formal and in-formal learning, innovations in adult education. NVL highlights Nordic expertise and disseminates experiences and innovations through Nordic meeting places, creates new co-operation models and supports networking. NVL coordinates 12 sub-networks which are thematically connected to the issues prioritized by the Nordic governments. NVL transmits competence and experiences between the five Nordic countries and the three autonomous areas. The task of the network is to deepen Nordic competence, and extend the effects to the Baltic region and the rest of Europe.

This is a relatively new form of organizing learning and Nordic adult education cooperation which has proven to be efficient, dynamic and innovative. NVL's experience shows that the decentralized and flexible network structure allows fast flow of information and knowledge among all the involved actors. The possibility to contribute with own experience, to build on

one's own experience and needs, as well as to gain new knowledge and inspiration from others has been a highly motivating factor. The interests of the network members are not necessarily alike but they agree upon and pursue a common goal, helping each other in the process of reaching this goal. This form of working has ensured both a creative work process and also high quality results, which in turn increase the interest among the adult education organizations in the whole Nordic region and support the growth of the volume of activities and number of active cooperation partners.

### **Nordic Competence Project about the role of networking**

Networking has been pointed out as one of the eight success factors in education initiatives meeting challenges in society and working life: "A project is likely to be more successful if it is based on a network initiative, planned and implemented by someone who share the same interests, or have mutual benefits. Networking between different stakeholders is usually a better guarantee for funding, more active participation, better contents and outcomes." (NVL, 2012), states the Nordic group of researchers (Manninen, Árnason, Liveng, Green) involved in NVL:s Nordic Competence Project 2009–2012.

The main goal of the project has been to identify and analyse good practice examples that would contribute to answering the following questions:

1. How can education and training help people and/or society to deal with changes and crisis in society and working life, so that the Nordic Model of a welfare society can be preserved and developed?
2. What characterizes education and training that succeed in strengthening both individuals and organisations in the perspective of managing "change and crisis"?

The results include a collection of analysed and well described learning practices on successful ways of organizing and performing education and training in manners that enhance the possibilities for people and organisations to cope with rapid change. The project report states that there is a need to promote genuine dialogue between stakeholders about the opportunities adult learning offers in finding common solutions to societal challenges. There is a need to turn individuals' life and work environments into learning environments. Many low-skilled individuals are in employment and can be reached at the workplace. In SME-s on-the-job training is a good solution but there is a need for co-operation between workplaces and adult learning providers regarding skills that cannot be learned in enterprises.

The analyses has revealed that networking generates new ideas and/or helps to put them into practice. This success factor is also connected to another one because it motivates the generation of “new roles” for organisations. For example, a new combination of liberal and vocational studies has proved to be a successful innovation, which is based on networking.

The Competence Project also shows that networking has helped to motivate the members of the involved organisations to participate in the programmes. For example, in the *Noste programme* in Finland trade unions were crucial for motivating low-skilled workers to study, and employer organisations were instrumental in convincing their members to provide support and study leaves for their employees. Networking helped to maintain commitment to the programmes, and also to provide easier access to different places, like apprenticeship placements in the Finnish Entrepreneurs’ Apprenticeship project.

Networking also enabled and secured funding, either by having funding partners (state, regional administration or companies) as members of the network, or by making funding applications by networks more attractive and successful.

## **Networks set focus on specific and prioritized policy fields and initiate development work**

NVL networks are directly linked to the thematic priorities of the NCM within adult education. NVL has 12 thematic sub-networks; they function as a link between policy and practice, initiate development projects, are a forum for dialogue and a meeting place. The networks respond to the national or regional needs through the network members and their organisations, and collectively address actual Nordic challenges. Currently the active NVL networks cover the following thematic fields prioritized within the Nordic adult education cooperation:

- Flexibility in education (3 networks);
- Workplace as a learning arena (3 networks)
- Validation of prior learning (2 networks)
- Guidance counseling ( 1 network)
- Innovation in education (3 networks)

The Nordic Expert Network on Validation is among those who have been active since the start of the NVL and achieved considerable results in several fields. The network has contributed to the validation system devel-

opment through the period 2005–2007 through the learning practice exchange, mapping of national practices and systematic comparison among the Nordic countries, and gap analyses. The survey “Validation in the Nordic countries – Policy and Practice” (Andersson, Hult, 2008) discusses the concepts and describes the differences within the validation systems in the Nordic countries as well as raises several important issues; e.g. how traditional education can develop in relation to validation and individualisation, how validation can be economically profitable, and how education institutions can organise education and make budgets so that validation and individualised education do not become problems and obstacles in the work of education providers.

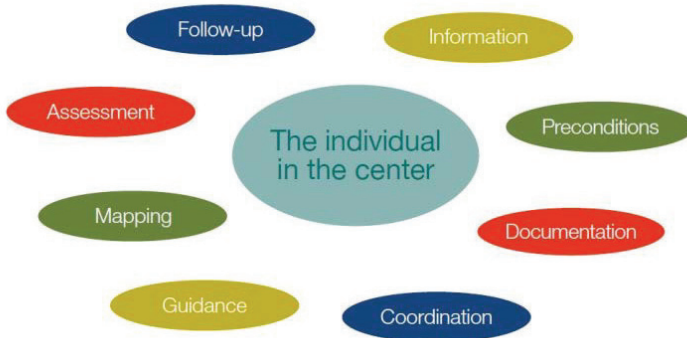
The Nordic Expert Network on Validation has also been especially active in providing evidence and input for policy making. The Network has focused on policy work during 2008–2010 and has come up with agreed 15 Nordic recommendations to the decision makers “Challenges in the work of recognition/validation of prior learning in the Nordic countries” (NVL, 2010). This memorandum is based on Nordic national reports from all the countries which were prepared during the spring of 2009. Besides identifying common challenges the memorandum points out which common challenges can be addressed at the Nordic level. Most of the challenges have by now been appropriately addressed and recommendations followed by the Nordic countries, still the Network closely monitors the developments within validation in the Nordic countries, linking their work to the EQF/NQF discussion and other networks. The network members have also provided input at the EU policy level by commenting the draft of the “European Guidelines on the Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning” due to be launched in 2014.

The third field of considerable impact, as a result of the Nordic Expert Network of Validation activities 2011–2013, is setting professional standards in validation, including competence development and ensuring quality. The network has recently been involved in a mapping project, which shows that quality assurance of validation concerns a large number of factors among them legislation, policy, financing, co-operation among institutions, co-operation between stakeholders, etc. It is also important that employees, who work professionally with validation, possess the competencies and qualifications necessary for being able to perform their work professionally using reliable and valid methodologies. Furthermore, it is imperative that work with validation is performed in an ethically justifiable manner with consequence, with methodology, and according to clear and

transparent procedures. A Nordic quality model has therefore been created to ensure the discussion about these issues and developing the practice in the institutions dealing with accreditation of prior learning (APL).

## A NORDIC MODEL

for work with quality in validation – a quality assurance model



The quality model is designed for use in relation with quality assurance, primarily in educational institutions. The model is a tool for those employees and professionals, who work with validation in practice, together with those leaders, who bear the overall and staff related responsibility for validation at the educational institution (NVR, 2013). The Nordic Expert Network on Validation network will continue working on further testing and developing the model, and through this process ensure also the professionalization of the staff. <http://www.nordvux.net/page/6/validering.htm>

### **Networks – efficient response to needs**

Through pooling of resources, access to expertise, collective knowledge and broad dissemination networks can respond to arising national or regional challenges in a fast and efficient way. Results can then be used to make a call for a political and/or structural change as well as serve as guidelines for next generation of projects and new initiatives.

When the key actors and organisations in all five Nordic countries realise a specific need and agree upon its importance, the created solutions be-



come highly relevant in all countries. Besides, the solutions can be implemented in a cost efficient way due to the collaboration. The relevance is an essential precondition if the countries want to move from a pilot to a more mainstream education offer, for example. As concerns the cost efficiency, the Nordic countries can produce a module-based further training course using the specific competence in each country within a common programme framework, and the participants in all five countries can benefit from such an education offer. By working this way networks can also create good preconditions for the Nordic region being successful on implementing the EU recommendations on following up on the Action Plan, e.g. concerning scaling-up the innovation and turning measures/pilots/initiatives into regional and national programmes.

An important focus area for the Nordic Adult Literacy Network Alfarådet is quality assurance of initial and functional literacy education for adults with a non-Nordic mother tongue. In the course of its work in this area, Alfarådet has over the years revealed an urgent need for quality development with regard to teacher competence and, thereby, also teaching.

The Nordic Adult Literacy Network has created the first Nordic description of the competencies required of a professional teacher of initial and functional literacies to adults whose mother tongue is not a Nordic language. Alfarådet provides a comprehensive definition of the specific competencies required for this complex task (NVL, 2013). The six different competence areas require a basic pedagogic/didactic competence and basic knowledge of second-language acquisition. The competence areas should be understood as being crucially important and task-specific and are described in concrete terms through the knowledge, skills and actions that characterise them.

The competence description will function as a basis for the development and implementation of education and courses in the Nordic countries and in interaction with them. The Alfarådet network will contribute actively towards transforming the description into a new education provision that will benefit teachers as well as education and training.

## **Networks attract interest of new partners and sectors e.g. social partners**

The Nordic Council of Ministers mandate to NVL is to promote dialogue and cooperation among different sectors of adult learning, like non-formal adult education, formal adult education, vocational training etc. NVL should also



enhance dialogue between the representatives of working life and adult education providers. This is a very relevant ambition taking into account the learning needs and patterns of modern society and it should contribute to boosting the competitiveness of the Nordic countries within a global context. This is not an easy ambition to realise; NVL has taken it on board and experience shows that it takes time to reach results but it is possible.

One of the NVL networks (Older Workers in the Nordic Countries (OWN) Network) has focused on elder learners and employees and their well-being at work and in life. The network organisations represent the adult education and research field and their goal is to find out to what extent the social partners in the Nordic countries are actively promoting life-long learning and opportunities for extended careers explicitly for their older members. The networking activities <http://www.nordvux.net/page/570/aldreiarbetslivet.htm> have indeed been cross-sectoral and resulted in the involvement of different stake holders, including Unions for a common goal of improving learning possibilities for the elderly (OWN Report, 2011). It is especially important due to the fact that the level of organization of labour force and trade union involvement in LLL in the Nordic countries is high. Sweden has been the most densely organised country, not only of the Nordic countries but also in Europe.

The results of the survey carried out by the Older Learner Network show that a good deal of work has been carried out already, but there is still much room for improvement. The existing policies regarding the older workers are a good pre-condition for continuing the dialogue between the adult education sector and social partners. More than half of the social partners report that they have specific policy formulation concerning the demographic development of the labor force; a third of them report having implemented a specific 'senior policy'. Overall the findings of the survey suggest that targeted measures to senior employees provide stronger, and in many cases much needed, support to LLL and career development for older workers than the all-inclusive, integrated policies. This is the case even if several of the social partners point out that good organizational, personnel and competence policy is good for everybody, regardless of their age, hence they do not see a need for targeted measures.

An important recommendation by the network is that the social partners take a more active approach, in policy and practice, to promote development opportunities for their senior members. The social partners can do a lot alone, and even more in cooperation with other relevant actors, particularly with the education and training providers at all levels. This is some-

thing that also NVL has taken on board and will continue working for the promotion of such a cooperation and dialogue.

## **Networks – motivation and increased access**

The population of the Nordic region is 25,1 million (2012). *Norden* is a scarcely populated region with the only exception of Denmark, which has 130 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>. Sweden, Norway and Finland has between 16 and 23 persons per km<sup>2</sup>, Island has 3,5, while there are only 0,14 Greenlanders per km<sup>2</sup> in the ice-free area of Greenland.

These conditions pose some serious challenges for learning provision. Even if *Norden* scores high on participation in LLL and also in the use of ICT, there is always room for improvement. Youth unemployment rates are considerably higher than those for general unemployment in the Nordic countries. A growing number of young people in the Nordic region are at great risk of long-term exclusion from working life and society. Several Nordic mapping studies and analyses have been carried out during the period 2010–2012 and the conclusion is that despite socio-economical and cultural differences, the Nordic countries would benefit from a closer cooperation and exchange of experiences when it comes to the future work of preventing unemployment among young people.

The Nordic Council of Ministers' mapping study from 2010 (NCM, 2010) aimed at identifying both existing and planned measures that can reduce youth unemployment. When preventing youth unemployment, several success factors have been identified throughout the Nordic region, among them "investments in education during recessions and cooperation between actors, which work with young people".

The experience of one of the NVL networks *Distans* provides strong evidence that cooperation among different stakeholders and education providers contributes to local development, increases motivation for learning and thus can be an efficient means against unemployment. *Distans* has been established in 2005. The objective of the network is to support the development of competences of adult educators focusing on digital competence and use of ICT methods and tools in adult learning.

During 2011 and 2012 the Network has focused on approved use of ICT and flexible learning as a tool for regional development of remote and scarcely populated areas in all the Nordic countries. The work included mapping of how ICT and flexible learning methods are used for motivating, for

opening new possibilities for learning and for raising the educational level in the remote areas, thereby applying education as an important means for regional development.

By arranging symposia in six different countries for people and organisations providing education by applying ICT, the network facilitated a dialog on the theme and promoted creating new knowledge together. The symposia have been held in areas that are really far from the major “commercial and educational routes”.

Not all the potential learners are eager to learn or are motivated enough. Finland has highlighted the experience of younger generation of educators who have good contacts with the gaming industry and are users of computer games. There are different options and possibilities for dialogue for further developing the commercial games and using them for learning purposes, and for motivation (NVL, 2012).

Denmark has used education funding strategically in several remote areas to attract well educated labour force, but it is not enough. Investments have also been made in continuous professional development and network creation using ICT for the well educated labour force in these areas. The need for a well-developed infrastructure and the gender balance in local decision making and power structures is another important aspect of local development and retaining high level of education in the area. Women are the “glue” of local society, states the doctoral student *Anna Edwardsdottir* from Iceland in the *Distans* report, and brings about several interesting findings from her research in Iceland and Scotland.

## **Synergies among networks**

We have experienced an organic process of growth and development of different networks under the auspices of NVL. The networks have become strong and competent units in the Nordic adult learning cooperation. Several of the NVL networks have gone beyond developing their own specific thematic competence area and have searched for cooperation possibilities and synergies between and among networks.

The prioritized fields of validation and guidance counseling are examples of deepened cooperation between two networks at the national and Nordic levels. From all Nordic countries Iceland is especially keen on practicing and stressing the importance that a counsellor takes part in the validation process and guides the individual on how to identify his/her com-

petence and document it. For those who have great work experience it is quite a job to put their competence into words. Professionals do the analysis on the status and confirmation of competence. The final validation and recognition is in the hands of various stakeholders, for example schools, education providers, and companies (Proceedings from Nordisk Vägledningsskonferens, 2013).. This type of practice is brought to further discussion at a Nordic arena and facilitated by two NVL networks.

Synergies between Nordic and European levels have also strengthened as the Nordic networks have gained strength and competence. The basic literacy teacher competence descriptions have raised great interest among the members of the European Basic Skills Network (EBSN) and further common initiatives are in the pipeline. NVL and the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN) have agreed upon a Nordic Concept Note to explore adult guidance from the lifelong guidance and Career Management Skills (CMS) viewpoints. The Concept Note is to contribute to the development of guidance policies and structures in the Nordic region by making recommendations at three levels: 1) the political/administrative; 2) in relation to education (career counsellors/teachers); 3) the practitioner.

Networks and networking possess enormous potentials in terms of information sharing, competence development and policy work. It is up to the members to use the networking according to their needs and for the benefit and added value of the membership and beyond.

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