

Nordic Webinar Series

Summary – First webinar

In the following sections you will find some of the most important points from the group discussions at the first webinar on 25 September. All groups discussed key learnings from the Corona crisis and differences and similarities across the Nordic countries within each their unique perspective.

Group 1: Corona research

- In general, the crisis has brought about a **strong research orientation**. However, Corona research is about much more than just issues related to healthcare – it is also important to focus on **societal issues as a consequence of/reaction to the crisis**.
- During the Corona crisis there has been an increased focus on more mission-oriented research, which can be used as inspiration in the future.
- In the research sector, it is striking how similar the response has been across the different countries.
- Many institutions in the front line have not had the means necessary to start doing research into these issues – for example hospitals. They cannot design and initiate this research by themselves.
- Even though the crisis has resulted in a lot of collaboration nationally, there has also been a lot of **competition when it comes to research**. The question is, how this competition can ultimately benefit society and create results for the common good.
- In terms of research funding, whereas the allocation of research funds is usually a process that takes several months, such processes have been sped up significantly.
- In Norway, the Research Council reacted quickly. They were **broad in their funding of research**, and also focused on social sciences.
- Down the line, it is important to learn from the experiences during the Corona crisis and **strengthen others with that experience and knowledge**.
- A key question is how we can benefit from our learnings in the future, when the crisis is not necessarily as dramatic and urgent. What can be learned from the cooperation across countries, sectors, disciplines etc.?

Group 2: Changing the research setup

We are facing a **new normal with many disruptive transitions continuously happening**. There is a need to restructure our systems of networks, collaborations, and a new focus for advantages – more global collaboration and network. Attention to increasing inequality in adjusting to the new normal (going digital) but also the many positive learnings and opportunities for the future. E.g. webinars can open for African universities to join.

- We need to build a **capacity to respond quickly to future crises** (SDGs, the green agenda etc.).
- To meet the demand for more cross-disciplinary research **new networks between researchers must be built**. The new digital tools, competencies and culture can be used in a more powerful way.
- **More cross-sector collaboration/interaction** is needed to secure better preparedness for future crisis. Need for the academic society to **acknowledge/merit researchers communicating and interacting with society** (taking part in knowledge transfer). The main mode (culture, organization)

of research is the long-term response. Researchers need to be more curious and open-minded to societal problems for academia to be a relevant player for society.

- Lastly, a need for more **flexibility in the funding structure (Islandic setup)**. Private sector funding is under pressure and the majority of companies will not be able to keep up their R&D funding.
- The focus on climate and health (Covid-19) is dominating the research agendas. There is a need to **broaden the focus to other areas**, for example by investigating the crisis response and transitioning into a new reality/society.

Group 3: Proactive knowledge mobilization

Ways to mobilize existing knowledge and to create new knowledge during a crisis:

- A good balance between research (and innovation) with **immediate impact and research with long term goals is needed**. Investment in basic research is important at all times in order to be able to deal with the “unknown unknowns”. We must also be able to obtain results that produce an immediate impact. There is a need for **specific calls for funding during a crisis** where the focus is on the possibility to achieve results that can be of immediate use. These calls have to follow a process with short response time. However, we have to make it clear to, e.g., policy makers that it takes time to set up and organize a research program. We cannot expect results immediately, but we can **do our best to shorten the time to results**.
- **Bold decisions have to be taken faster** than what we have seen so far during the Covid-19 pandemic. Dialogue between scientists and policymakers is essential. Well established structures and networks are important to **mobilize knowledge and provide the best possible science advice**.

Group 4: Collaboration between sectors

- Within the countries, we are doing things at a **much higher pace than we are used to**. The base for discussions has been sped up, and it has become easier to create dialogue with decision makers. If we sincerely want to get something done (with urgency), it is possible to do so. However, we need more Nordic collaboration in this context.
- When a crisis such as Covid-19 sets in, the countries tend to **become more introvert and focus on solving national issues** first and foremost. As a result, many solutions and responses have been “local” without much connection to the rest of the countries. Meanwhile, there can be no doubt that **collaboration between the countries is vital and necessary** for getting through the crisis in the best way possible.
- It has been slightly difficult to maintain the dialogue, as the private sector have had other urgent work and refocus, that took time. Collaborative activities have been delayed, which will have consequences for months, maybe years.
- There has been a **big difference in the approach to scientific advisory** across the Nordic countries as well as in the relationship between the scientists (delivering the scientific advice) and the policy makers (responsible for receiving and realizing the advice through political decisions).
- The rapid transition of the universities has to a large extent involved university management. However, this has primarily been at an operational level. There has **not been much room to discuss long-term solution and movements/decisions**. While there has been a close and on-going dialogue with the ministries and decision makers, this was only enacted if you followed the rather narrow premises that was being put forward.
- In the future, how can we create the same collaborations with a similar feeling of “urgency” as we have seen during Covid-19?

Group 5: Creating a sense of urgency

- A **sense of urgency is strong** in all of the Nordic countries.
- The **university sector was surprisingly agile** and reacted to crisis in an efficient way making teaching available digitally.
- There has been a great leap forward in the use of digital tools.
- Communication from leaders was highly important.
- Differences in groups in the society in how strong their network is, can lead to (larger) inequality in the society.
- Trust is more important now than ever.
- There is a **strong sense of fatigue as the second wave hits**.
- We have to talk about the new normal to be able to move forward.
- The group agreed on the **importance of Nordic and European cooperation** going forward.

Group 6: Digital education

- There is no doubt that **education and pedagogics are becoming increasingly important** for us. Today, we are seeing an entirely new situation, which we are not going back from.
- One concrete suggestion is the **creation of a Nordic “bank of best practice”** regarding digital education to share new ideas, developments, and evidence-based approaches to education within a post-Corona reality.
- As the crisis is continuing and we are now seeing hints of a second wave across several of the Nordic countries, we have to start thinking more about the **social life as a student (campus life)**. How can this be translated and realized into the digital perspective?
- We are seeing an increasing amount of shared research on students’ and teachers’ experience during corona (the social perspective within the digital reality).
- We can also start looking at education in other ways, as digitally capable students share advice to teachers.
- Initiatives within the *digital education* agenda should be **network oriented** instead of being led by top-down government. To set the wheels in motion of course we need to finance the transition. Do we finance these proposals ourselves? Or should we also look for new funding opportunities?

Group 7: The role of funding agencies

- Norway doubled their funding – to support both companies and to support a sustainable transition.
- All countries have moved into virtual panels, which generally works – maybe not for site visits – but it has worked great as a **platform for exchanging experience**.
- In Sweden private funding will be reduced in the next year – in Denmark they will increase or at least remain at the same level. Sweden chose not to inject new funds for research.
- Currently, Norway has the lowest number of companies going bankrupt.
- In Finland, they allowed researchers to switch the focus of their research into Covid-19 solutions.
- A recommendation could be to set up **collaborative research activities** around topics that any one country will not be able to provide enough data for.
- New humanities and social science aspects/research regarding working from home. This could have a Nordic dimension – also in this context. Do we need to travel at all in the future?
- Countries have seen both **top-down and bottom-up research in respect to Covid-19 initiatives**.
- Physical networking is lost for many – which many foundations are missing and are hoping very soon to come back to normal levels.

- We should be able to use this pandemic to better **predict how climate change will impact us** as a society over a longer period.

Group 8: Private sector change

- Leadership: Importance of **close contact and follow-up with employees** – many reporting daily dialogue. Worry that we might be underestimating the long-term effects of a stressful situation.
- Network capital – travel restrictions for researchers and students are very problematic in the long term. Keeping a **strong Nordic cooperation and avoiding protectionism** and isolationism is key.
- The transition and ability to adapt quickly has made an impression. The **power of freedom with joint purpose** is strong and we see unprecedented agility, speed, and ability to work across organizational and sectoral silos. **Employee empowerment and freedom** to find solutions in times of crisis. What can we learn from this? How do we make the most of this momentum to take down barriers and work cross sectoral, and will the energy last?
- Some differences between countries in regard to importance of innovation and research as counter crisis measure.
- Importance of striking the right balance between counter conjuncture and counter structure in handling the crisis.
- As a follow-up, there is a need for **Nordic level research projects**, understanding what went down and how we dealt with it.
- We will **never return to where we were**. Business models will change. Interactions will change. What will leadership in the new normal be like? Who wins, who loses, and will we see new social divisions?

Key points across the forum

- Significant changes have been enacted as a direct result of the Corona crisis. A few good examples across the Nordic countries are: All governments have provided larger degrees of freedom when it comes to the role of the funding agencies. Universities, among many other institutions, have digitized large parts of their structures when it comes to both research and education.
- However, while the Nordic countries are similar in many ways, there have been significant differences present when it comes to handling the Corona crisis. These differences must be highlighted and further discussed in the process of the Nordic Webinar Series to facilitate learning across national borders.
- At the first webinar there were many calls for increasing the collaboration across the Nordic countries – in a real sense that can have direct impact on the way we think about and work with for example online teaching. Efforts can be made to pool our collective knowledge and lesson plans among things to be able to share these with each other.
- Such a collaboration is going to take more than formal procedures, as the importance of personal, more informal, networks is equally high – especially in research, education, and innovation environments.