

Workshop summary:

The use of Norway grants and EEA grants in future Baltic–Nordic research collaboration

Workshop hosted by NordForsk 24 January 2024 in Riga, Latvia.

Participating institutions: The Latvian Ministry of Education and Science, the Research Councils of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, the Nordic Council of Ministers Secretariat, the Nordic Council of Ministers Offices in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and NordForsk.

Key takeaways:

The national funders in the Baltic countries are very positive towards increased co-operation with the Nordic countries under NordForsk, which can lead to:

- improved access to funding and resources, as it is complementary to national research initiatives and EU initiatives,
- enhanced research quality, relevance, and increased competitiveness and chances for success in EU calls,
- leveraging research areas of specific strategic importance providing and strengthening Baltic research, e.g. in the humanities and social sciences,
- new knowledge on societal challenges in the Nordic and Baltic countries that can impact policy development,
- high level dialogue on research policy and strategic priorities,
- sharing best practices in research funding processes,
- stronger links between research and innovation, facilitating collaboration with industry and public sector within certain areas,
- reduced administrative burdens and cost efficiency,
- increased mobility, knowledge sharing, especially important for early career researchers,
- important knowledge exchange and collaboration in times of political instability and financial challenges,
- increased intra-Baltic collaboration, e.g. by forming a forum for Baltic heads of research councils (BALTHORCS).

What effects can Baltic–Nordic research collaboration have on the research system?

1. Effects on/for research funding organisations

The Estonian research council (ETAG) has positive experiences working with NordForsk, which is seen as efficient and flexible, and is in favour of continuing the collaboration. One important value would be the joint evaluation and unified submission scheme, which would save time and resources in management of calls.

Joint calls under NordForsk administration, would also make it easier to avoid conflict of interest issues. With access to a broader research environment rather than small communities where it is very challenging to find reviewers. It would be helpful to coordinate the Baltic input to joint initiatives.

Research Council of Lithuania (RCL) are also very happy with both the NordForsk collaboration and the Baltic Research Programme. It is important that if EEA grants can be channelled into NordForsk call, as Baltic funding, it must not increase the administrative burden or level of bureaucracy. It is important that focus on common priorities will be kept.

The Nordic countries and the Baltic countries have similar societies and ways of living. There are similar societal structures and geographic proximity. This makes it easier to collaborate with the Nordics, as compared to more culturally distant European countries.

Estonia expressed interest in the Arctic research initiative. ETAG no longer have polar programmes, but the relevance for Estonia is still significant. There are icy ports and ice-covered lakes between Estonia and Russia.

A priority for Latvia is security, cyber security, and critical infrastructure. Cyber security is also as part of AI. The Baltic countries well advanced in technology and would welcome collaboration with the Nordics via NordForsk on AI in research funding.

In Baltics, research communities within certain areas are not represented sufficiently thus Baltic-Nordic collaboration can be beneficial to create critical mass, sufficient capacity, and enhance expertise.

2. Effects on research performing organisations and researchers

For the researchers and grant holders, it is important with mainstreamed procedures and efficient administration. Researchers should focus their time on research, not administration. Collaboration with partners can be challenging, especially new partnerships. Participation in NordForsk calls and projects has created partnerships which they continue to build upon. Nordic-Baltic research collaboration can have a positive influence on the quality of research, as Nordic research environments hold international high quality. Through Baltic-Nordic research collaborations, researchers in both regions can demonstrate that their research is relevant for a larger context and that they can compete on an international arena.

Nordic-Baltic research collaboration can have positive effect on the chances for success in EU calls. The starting point can be either Nordic or EU, both will be beneficial for the competition on the other arena. Junior researchers can gain and share important experiences, build networks, and create new contacts.

Nordic-Baltic research funding opportunities can help prevent brain-drain from Baltic countries.

What is the relevance and importance of Baltic–Nordic research collaboration on society in general?

1. In a period with political instability in Europe

Collaboration with the Nordic is increasingly important to all three Baltic countries. There are security issues east, and travel is much easier westwards. The development of green technology and regional collaboration increasingly important. The Nordic and Baltic countries have similar challenges – green transition, climate, demographic changes and depopulation of areas, urbanisation.

For Latvia, it takes time. But they are developing closer collaboration year by year, both in research and education. Scholarships used to be an important activity, for mobility for both students and university staff. Now, students will not come from Norway to Latvia due to the proximity to Ukraine and Russia, and the unstable situation. Many have restrictions on travel to countries bordering to Russia. Now one need to convince researchers that it is still safe to live in the Baltic countries.

2. Impact and outcomes of research results on society

In the Baltic research programme, impact on society is an important goal. In annual and final reports, the grant holders should describe this in clear terms. Much of the funded research is applied oriented research. In Lithuania, scientific experts follow up the annual reporting.

The Nordic and Baltic countries could share best practice concerning research conduct and ethical rules, including code of conduct on use of AI. Open Access is another such area where international collaboration can have effects on national policies, with the potential to facilitate and speed up the national processes.

3. Impact on policy development

In Estonia, there is a strict separation between policy and research. The research council is executive, but still support policy development with data etc. In reality it is difficult to distinct. Sharing best practice with other countries would be helpful, to understand how other the research council can collaboration with ministries in most effective ways.

International benchmarking is important. The Nordic-Baltic collaboration can benefit from joint analysis and overviews. Joint analysis would help raise the added value. One could look into what motivates the researchers for international collaboration, and what are the barriers. Comparison with the Nordics can be of another value than with Germany or other large European countries. Benchmarking in similar size and geographical proximity, social structure. Benchmarking also on research infrastructure. Estonia has a new roadmap on research infrastructure and would like to share information with the Nordics.

Sharing research infrastructure across borders would be a clear benefit. One could make it easier for researchers to apply and to use current infrastructure. Currently there is no structured research infrastructure collaboration across the Baltics. It would also be helpful for the young generation of researchers to share best practice on how to facilitate work-life balance.