Could you start by introducing NordForsk and explain how it came about?

The Nordic countries are all members of the Nordic Council of Ministers – a collaboration at the very highest political level, which has been in place between the five Nordic countries for decades. Ten years ago, the Nordic Council of Ministers decided to establish an umbrella organisation to promote cross-border collaboration between the countries, so that was how NordForsk was born.

NordForsk is not a joint research council – rather, it is a facilitator organisation to promote collaboration. It gets some of its money from the Nordic Council of Ministers – and its programmes are also financed by the national Research Councils. The way it works is that at least three Nordic countries need to join forces and put forward ideas for research projects, and the money is gathered and put into a common pot. For example, Finland puts a pre-decided amount of money into the pot and research applications come in and are evaluated. If no Finnish consortia are successful, the money will go to researchers from other countries.

What are some of the defining features of Nordic research cooperation over the past decade or so?

In the Nordic countries, our research systems are similar, meaning that fundamental research is conducted in universities rather than in state institutes like in France, Italy, Spain, etc. We are all either knowledge-based economies or striving to be knowledge-based economies. Many of us have moved from resource-based economies – for example, Norway with oil and Finland with paper and pulp from the forest industry – towards the knowledge industry, even though we still have the resources. Here, the basis is education and high-quality research, which will hopefully pave the way for innovation and commercial activities that cause growth.

Do you think that globalisation has made cooperation between the Nordic countries more important?

Yes, certainly. Nordic cross-border collaboration has great value in and of itself – however, for researchers who start out collaborating with their Nordic colleagues, it is far easier for them to step up their collaborative activities thereafter within the rest of the EU and of course globally. It helps them to progress to larger collaborations.

Also, cross-border collaboration between the Nordic countries gives researchers a stronger voice on the global stage. We are very small nations. All in all, we number just 25 million people! Together, we are much more prominent and that is a clear advantage.

Are there any challenges to effective research collaboration between the different Nordic countries?

I would say that the defining feature of Nordic collaboration is that there are few cultural differences between the five countries. The societies and fundamental values are similar; however, that does not mean that we are identical and so we do face some challenges. When we talk about research and research impact, one difference that I could highlight is the area of biomedical research. For instance,
Spotlight on Finland

Professor Marja Makarow describes what she sees on the horizon for Finnish research.

What do you see as the most pressing challenges facing Finnish academic researchers in 2016?

In Finland, the Government has slashed education, research and innovation budgets in a considerable way, which has already led to staff dismissals. So against this backdrop individual researchers are facing huge challenges. But the cuts have also impacted the research atmosphere. We are in a critical situation because the country’s financial situation is precarious. This is a new challenge for Finland because we have invested heavily in research and innovation for over 25 years with very good results. The present Government, however, is questioning the impact of fundamental research on society and economic growth. I am afraid that Denmark is also experiencing similar challenges at the moment.

Conversely, are there any exciting opportunities for Finnish researchers?

We certainly do have opportunities. The Academy of Finland, the Finnish Research Council, has a flagship programme – Centers of Excellence – which we have just reinvented in order to open it up to a younger generation of researchers with new themes and approaches, for the sake of renewal of science.

Another exciting development is the adoption of the tenure track system. The university renovation in 2010 detached the Finnish universities from public administration, giving them a high level of autonomy and enabling the creation of sustainable research career systems. The tenure track positions have attracted a lot of international interest and internationalised the researcher base rapidly.

Sweden and Denmark both have strong industrial sectors in the biomedical field, which have cooperated closely with academic research. However, in Finland we do not have the same strong, research-intensive pharmaceutical industry – and so we have always had to seek biomedical industry partners from outside the country.

Could the model of research collaboration in the Nordic countries be applied to other regions in Europe – or is it something that is quite unique?

This common pot funding has long been a dream in Europe, but it is only in the context of the EU framework programmes such as Horizon 2020 that this has been functional. Cross-border collaboration works well in the Nordic countries because we have similar cultures. Interestingly, there are some similarities in the German-speaking countries – Germany, Austria and Switzerland – where researchers are able to take their money with them to one of the two other countries. It can be much more difficult to implement this model elsewhere in Europe. The maturity of science and the research systems in different EU member states varies greatly – compare the UK and Bulgaria, for instance – making it difficult to push money across borders.

What are your hopes for the future of the research landscape in Finland and the other Nordic countries over the next decade or so?

I hope that we will have the courage to fund ambitious research – high-gain, high-risk research – and that we will trust the younger generation of researchers and give them real, sustainable opportunities. I would also very much like to see research delivering societal impact. I’m talking about all of the scientific and scholarly disciplines; each of the disciplines can deliver impact in their own way, and I would like to see this happen.

I would like to see researchers doing basic research considering how their studies could benefit society. Fundamental, blue sky research is the foundation of everything, but I would like to see a mindset more geared towards its impact on society and benefit for humankind, this would also influence the will of political decision makers to continue funding fundamental research.

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