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## **A NORDIC SPACE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION**

**A Statement by the Tromsø meeting of Nordic University Leaders  
August 15-17, 2002**

### **The Nordic Countries and the Bologna Process**

Nordic university leaders met in Norwegian Tromsø, with student participation, to discuss the challenges of the Bologna process to the higher education systems in the Nordic countries and ways for Nordic higher education to contribute to the Pan-European process.

The university leaders underlined *the importance of the Bologna process* as one based on mutual understanding between governments and universities and on this basis confirmed their willingness to co-operate with national authorities to further the Bologna process in the Nordic countries. They also paid attention to the fact that the Bologna process must be combined with institutional readiness to international co-operation with countries outside Europe.

The process must respect *the autonomy of the universities*. The Magna Charta Universitatum of 1988 stated that university research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power to meet the needs of the outside world. This is even more relevant now, the institutions constantly being exposed to pressure for immediately useful contributions.

The Bologna process must be one of recognition, not one of harmonisation;  
*a process of convergence, not one of uniformity.*

There is a tradition in the Nordic countries for *student involvement and student participation* in the governance of higher education institutions. The university leaders in Tromsø declared their willingness to co-operate with local and national student organisations in the further development of the Bologna process.

The Nordic Rectors' Conferences, working together through the Nordic University Association (NUS), will actively contribute to mutual recognition and convergence in the Nordic Area and willingly *share their experiences with regional networks* in other parts of Europe as well as with other regions of the world. A first example is the co-operation with the Baltic Rectors' Conferences in a Nordic-Baltic Space of Higher Education.

The university leaders meeting in Tromsø will assist in making the Nordic Space for Higher Education *an area of easy transition*. A first level degree from any Nordic country should be accepted as a sufficient formal platform for a second level degree in any other Nordic country, not only formally but also in practice – of course respecting special needs for qualifications with access to education at other universities. Ph.D.-programmes should be easily accessible from different degree structures, if the entrance level is fulfilled.

*Research training*, as part of the second cycle, should be a priority field for Nordic university co-operation. It is important to strengthen contacts and communication between institutions and between research groups in the Nordic countries and to increase the mobility of researchers and Ph.D.-students. The Nordic Academy for Advanced Study (NorFA) will also have a role to play here.

Another priority is *life-long learning*, which has a long tradition in the Nordic countries. All over Europe declarations are made in favour of life-long learning, but concrete measures still remain to be taken, at least on a systematic scale. We fully support the political desire expressed in the Prague communiqué about life-long learning. It is a challenge to the Nordic countries to come up to expectations in this respect.

There is a shared understanding of *academic quality and quality assurance* in the Nordic countries. The university leaders meeting in Tromsø would like to develop a Nordic platform for quality assurance in higher education. It is important that this work is done in collaboration between the national agencies in this field, the higher education institutions and the students. We propose a plan according to which these three partners - on a Nordic basis - report on their efforts every second year to assess their successive achievements. We suggest that mutual trust and strong involvement by those being evaluated be an overarching guiding principle for such co-operative efforts.

To Nordic higher education institutions *funds* for undergraduate and graduate education, research, research in the creative and performing arts, collaboration with society etc are a crucial issue. The Nordic

governments must see to it that also in the future higher education institutions are sufficiently funded. Nordic higher education is by tradition of good quality, and this asset in international co-operation must be safeguarded. This can be achieved by increased funding only, even if external funding can provide universities with additional income. Investments are necessary in the knowledge society – and they will pay.

The meeting also discussed the highly topical issue of *GATS* (General Agreement on Trade in Services). We support the statement in the Prague Communiqué of 2001 that higher education is a public good. This does not mean that there can be no trade in higher education, but that all proposals from the ongoing *GATS* negotiations must be measured against this basic principle. The inclusion of higher education into the negotiations is a serious challenge to our universities. *GATS* must also respect existing mechanisms and conventions in international higher education. Minimum requirements of any state exporting services in higher education should be the ratification of the Lisbon Convention – with the full implication of national recognition of higher education and information centres and the recognition of the Council of Europe/ UNESCO Code of Good Practice in Transnational Education. We strongly advise our governments to discuss the principles on which further negotiations will be based not only within the ministries concerned but also with representatives from the academic side as well as from the students' organisations. Such co-operation would be in line with the best Nordic traditions and safeguard common Nordic values in relation to higher education.

#### **Nordic Co-operation in Higher Education**

The Nordic co-operation in higher education between Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden has existed in its present form for several decades. In 1975, the Sigtuna Agreement preceded the Lisbon Convention as regards the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education in the Nordic Region. Each country recognises qualifications from any other Nordic country – whether for access to higher education, for periods of study or for higher education degrees – as similar to the corresponding qualifications in its own system. Nordic students may on equal terms seek admission to any Nordic university, bringing their student support with them.

Thus, a Nordic Space for Higher Education already exists. Although the Nordic process started long before the Bologna Declaration was signed in 1999, to-day the Nordic Space for Higher Education should be seen as a sub-space of the European Area of Higher Education, and the Nordic process should be seen as an element in the Pan-European Bologna Process.

In 1995 the five Nordic Rectors' Conferences set up a Nordic University Association (NUS) in order to learn from each other's experiences in higher education policy, to promote Nordic co-operation and to co-ordinate Nordic efforts internationally. The university administrators have since long gathered in The Nordic Association of University Administrators (NUAS). NUS and NUAS co-operate closely. The Nordic Presidential Meeting (Nordiskt Ordförandemöte, NOM) was established as early as in 1946 and is possibly the oldest still operating international student structure. The most important issues for NOM ever since its birth have been educational and student social issues in the Nordic countries .