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Nedergaard, Peter; Nobel, Trine Cosmus

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The Nordic formula: an analysis of policy learning in sectorial networks of the Nordic Council of Ministers

Peter Nedergaard¹  | Trine C. Nobel²

¹Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen, København, Denmark

²Department of Social Sciences and Business, University of Roskilde, Roskilde, Denmark

Correspondence: Peter Nedergaard, Department of Political Science; University of Copenhagen, København, Denmark. Email: pne@ifs.ku.dk

Abstract

Organised policy learning among the Nordic countries—Finland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Iceland—has been around for more than 50 years, but it is an under-researched subject. This article analyses the process as well as the output of policy learning among Nordic countries on adult education in networks under the auspices of the Nordic Council of Ministers. The data material consists of 10 in-depth interviews with actors herein over a period of 2 years, as well as the few documents available. The most important results are that the policy learning process is characterised by so-called epistemic and reflexive learning modes dominated by cooperation, inputs from science and dialogue. The output from the Nordic policy learning networks mainly consists of combining elements from other Nordic countries that are frontrunners in the relevant policy area. The output of Nordic policy learning is certainly much more than just being inspired by practices in Nordic countries. The results from the analysed networks can easily be generalised to other Nordic networks, but to a lesser extent to international policy learning networks where ‘value consensus’ is not as pronounced as among the Nordic countries.

KEYWORDS

adult education, Nordic cooperation, Nordic Council of Ministers, Nordic networks, policy learning

INTRODUCTION

Internationally, there is growing interest in the polity, politics and policies of the Nordic countries with their many similarities as far as their combination of high standard of living, stable institutions, low Gini coefficients, and high standard

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of welfare services, and so forth are concerned (Einhorn, 2021; Nedergaard et al., 2017, p. 2). One factor that has often been overlooked in regard to Nordic countries concerns the decades of cooperation among them, and as a true subset of this, the ongoing and intensive policy learning among them under the auspices of the Nordic Council of Ministers since 1971. This phenomenon has very seldom undergone scholarly treatment (Nedergaard, 2009) whereas policy learning in the European Union is more intensively studied (e.g., Goyal & Howlett, 2018; Lange & Alexiadou, 2010).

We claim that the intensive policy learning among Nordic countries deserves a stronger place in the landscape of literature on understanding the successful Nordic societies. This article will contribute to exactly that. It is a case study of one of the many types of policy learning among the Nordic countries based on a collection of data via documents, and 10 in-depth interviews designed on the international policy learning literature. The primary data consist of interviews conducted over a 2-year period.

The case of policy learning we have chosen for further investigation is adult learning as organised in the network of Nordic Adult Learning—or in one of the Nordic languages: ‘Nordisk Netværk for Voksnes Læring’ (NVL) as part of the cooperation in the Nordic Council of Ministers. We will use NVL as the acronym for this network throughout the article. We present NVL in detail below.

It has often been pointed out in the literature on policy learning over the years that more solid empirical research is in demand (e.g., Dunlop & Radaelli, 2022; Goyal & Howlett, 2018; Meseguer, 2005; Stone, 1999). This article will attempt to supply that.

The aim of the article is to uncover what policy learning is taking place behind the NVL. Our research questions are the following: How can we understand the processes of policy learning of Nordic cooperation in the networks of NVL? What are the outputs of the policy learning of NVL as perceived by its participants? As such, we wish to contribute with an understanding of an example of the layout of a seemingly efficient policy learning forum, as well as of the output of policy learning taking place therein. We will limit the analysis to the imagined output by the participants, that is, we do not analyse whether or not the result of the Nordic policy learning processes is implemented or not.

After sections on the theories of policy learning and on the research methodology of the article, we present and analyse the sectorial network of NVL. We split the analysis into two parts for answering the two research questions outlined above.

WHAT IS POLICY LEARNING?

Crucial to further academic work within the subject is a description of the crux of the matter. What *is* policy learning? Although this seems like a trivial issue, it is hard to pinpoint exactly this in the existing literature. As pointed out by,

among others, Lange and Alexiadou (2010, p. 445), policy learning has been defined in a wide array of ways, and the choice of definition has implications for its analysis. Policy learning is mainly based on the learning literature as a whole, and thus many define it according to various definitions of learning as a general principle. For example, Borrás and Højlund (2015, p. 100) define learning as ‘the adaptation of beliefs and views that result from a learner’s sense-making of past experience.’

Likewise, Dunlop and Radaelli (2013, p. 600), although they state they do not point to a specific definition of learning, treat it as ‘the updating of beliefs at its most general level.’ In a later work, Dunlop and Radaelli (2022) distinguish between four modes of policy learning: epistemic, reflexive, bargaining and hierarchical. As we argue later, NVL has never been a real hierarchical learning forum, and it has moved away from applying a bargaining mode of policy learning. Instead, NVL is today basically characterised by epistemic and reflexive modes of policy learning.

According to Dunlop and Radaelli (2022, p. 56), we can unpack the epistemic mode of policy learning in the following way: ‘Teaching’ is the metaphor for this type of policy learning. The predominant actors are experts. Moreover, what is learned is the cause and effect relationship in the analysed policy area based on input from science.

‘Dialogue’ is the metaphor for the reflexive mode of policy learning. The predominant actors are citizens interested in the policy area. In addition, what is learned is exposing norms as well as learning how to learn.

Even though NVL has distanced itself from the bargaining mode of policy learning in recent years, there are still reminders of this type of policy learning where ‘exchange’ is the learning metaphor, where various interests are the predominant actors, and where what is learned comprises the composition of preferences and costs of cooperation (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2022, p. 56).

Both epistemic and reflexive policy learning are cooperative modes (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2022, p. 61). However, one of the differences is that the epistemic mode mobilises scientific and professional beliefs. Reflexive policy learning, on the other hand, hinges on beliefs about what is correct, appropriate and acceptable (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2022, p. 61). In addition, to qualify as an epistemic community, the expert group of the learning forum must have originated outside the government as opposed to having been assembled by the bureaucracy (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2022, p. 64).

In this article, we maintain a rather empirical and inductive focus. Nevertheless, theoretical insights from the field of policy learning mentioned above are necessary in terms of providing a systematic language to understand the policy learning process.

Alexiadou (2014, pp. 123–140) points out that policy learning is not linked to any specific theoretical framework, continuing to argue that it is a fluid concept ‘that can be attached to different theoretical approaches.’ However, as

pointed out by Dunlop and Radaelli (2022, p. 59), social constructivism corresponds better to analyses of policy learning issues than naturalism (cf. Moses & Knutsen, 2019). The mechanisms of social constructivism connect learning and outcomes via meanings, norms, values and, more generally, ideas and ‘persuasion’. Reflexivity and epistemic learning are closer to this type of logic (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2022, p. 59). This article will address the research question as to how we can understand the processes of policy learning of Nordic cooperation in the networks of NVL. This is dealt with in the first part of the analysis below.

The second part of the analysis deals with the policy learning output from NVL. The research question addressed in this part concerns the output of policy learning of NVL as perceived by its participants. Dolowitz and March (1996, p. 35) distinguish between four options as far as policy transfer or policy learning is concerned. One option is copying, that is, transfer of a programme in use elsewhere. A second option is emulation, that is, not copying everything in detail, but only the best standard. A third option is hybridisation and synthesis, that is, combining elements found in other countries. A fourth option is inspiration, that is, expanding ideas and fresh thinking. These four options of policy learning in NVL will be discussed in the second part of the analysis.

METHODOLOGY

The present study is about policy learning in NVL. This policy learning network was chosen because it—according to actors in and around the Nordic Council of Ministers—represented a ‘typical’ Nordic policy learning forum (cf. also Nordic Network for Adult Learning, 2021b). The data material of the analysis in this article consists of 10 in-depth qualitative interviews with members of different networks within NVL over a period of 2 years, as well as documents from the Nordic Council of Ministers. The interviewees comprise regular members with and without executive responsibilities in their network, in their national branch of the overall network or in NVL as a whole. We established contact with the interviewees through executive and administrative members of NVL.

As a reference for the interviews, we developed an interview guide that operationalised theoretical insights from the scholarly field of policy learning. The basis of this comprised 15 hypotheses on policy learning deduced from Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1999) and the later modification and elaboration by Nedergaard (2009). These concern the institutional context and set-up of policy learning organisations and relate to issues such as discussion norms, openness to public opinion, as well as to who participates in the forums; for example, one hypothesis put forward by Nedergaard (2009) is that the degree of learning for the individual in an international committee is likely to be higher when there is a prestigious forum. Thus, the hypotheses functioned as a

reference point for the structure of the interviews as well as the subsequent analysis. As such, we wished to gain insights into the organisational processes of the networks and how they affected the assessment of the policy learning output. During the interview process, interviewees were informed that their responses would be anonymous.

The article draws on a case study approach, and we focus on the case of NVL. The goal with the case study approach is that it can potentially tell us something about policy learning in international and regional networks and committees in general. Thus, we aim to draw on the knowledge acquired through the exploration of NVL as a policy learning organisation in order to infer broad conclusions about policy learning in other similar networks on a more general level (cf. Flyvbjerg, 2012, chapter 6), especially in networks where the core beliefs are quite similar. We will return to the question of generalisation in the conclusion.

Table 1 shows a list of all interviews. We cite the interview numbers when referring to them in the article. Even though not all interviewees are quoted to the same extent, they are all important parts of the data of this article. As can be seen, all roles as far as NVL is concerned are represented, that is, Nordic head coordinator, national coordinators, sectorial network coordinators, and sectorial network members, cf. below in the section with a presentation of NVL.

The argumentation is that in almost all interviews, no matter the roles of the interviewees mentioned in Table 1, these should not be understood in hierarchical terms. On the contrary, NVL is rooted in 'a Nordic tradition built

TABLE 1 Interviewees, their roles and the date of interview

Interview number	Function of the interviewee	Date of the interview
Interview 1	Nordic head coordinator of NVL	6.12.2019
Interview 2	National coordinator of NVL expert networks	9.12.2019
Interview 3	Member and coordinator of NVL expert network	14.01.2020
Interview 4	Member and coordinator of NVL expert network	14.01.2020
Interview 5	Member and former coordinator of NVL expert network	05.02.2020
Interview 6	National coordinator of NVL expert networks	05.02.2020
Interview 7	Member of NVL expert network	01.11.2021
Interview 8	National coordinator of NVL expert networks	01.11.2021
Interview 9	Member of NVL expert network	10.11.2021
Interview 10	Member of NVL expert network	10.11.2021

upon low distance of power, based on experience, practice orientation, and dialogue' (Interview 2, cf. also Nordic Network for Adult Learning, 2020).

As mentioned, the most important data material of this article comprises the interviews. They are anonymous, and often contain sober self-judgement and self-reflection concerning the policy learning taking place in NVL. Several interviewees stressed that the ability to be self-critical was one of the strengths of the NVL (Interview 1, Interview 6 and Interview 7). Nevertheless, if relevant, we contextualise the information given in the interviews with data from the few newer documents available on NVL and the policy learning taking place herein (e.g., Nordic Network for Adult Learning, 2019, 2020, 2021a, 2021b). Therefore, this article relies on the interview study in answering the research questions. In addition, we compare whether the words of one interviewee are confirmed by another respondent.

The interviews were coded based on the concepts contained in the previously mentioned 15 hypotheses which were deduced from Nedergaard's (2009) modification and elaboration of Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1999). For example, on the basis of Nedergaard pointing to prestige as a crucial factor for policy learning success, we coded sections of interviews related to *prestige*; and likewise the strong focus on the success of the countries that take part on the specific issue that the network covers was mirrored in codes that included the participants' perceptions of the success levels of the countries involved in the respective network. The codes guided our work thematically in the subsequent analysis. As such, the basic nature of the coding process was thematically deductive; however, we maintained an explorative approach to the interviews, as we discovered issues that were not mentioned in the work on policy learning hypotheses: for example, there was a strong focus on output in a broad sense. These 'coding units' were analysed by both authors independently of each other in order to increase intercoding reliability (Bryman, 2012, p. 304).

What is NVL?

To provide context, we will briefly present the organisational layout of NVL as well as its activities. NVL was established by the Nordic Council of Ministers, which is one of the institutional pillars of Nordic cooperation. The Nordic Council, which was established as early as in 1952, is the other.

The Nordic Council is an interparliamentary platform, but also involves government leaders from the Nordic countries, however, only until the Nordic Council of Ministers was established. Because of decisions taken by the Nordic Council already in 1954, the Nordic Passport Union was established. Later came the Nordic labour market and freedom of movement between Nordic countries (Nordic Council, 2022).

In 1971, the Nordic Council of Ministers was established as an intergovernmental body of Nordic cooperation in order to enhance

collaboration on everything from social policy and economic policy to education policy. The task of ministers meeting in the Nordic Council of Ministers is both to fund projects of common interests and to enhance mutual policy learning in all the areas involved (Nedergaard, 2009).

NVL was set up in 2005 because adult learning was a policy area with increasing salience in all Nordic countries. In addition, it was an area where Nordic education ministers saw a potential for harvesting economies of scale through cooperation (Nordic Network for Adult Learning, 2021b). The salience of adult learning was and is due to the need to continuously upgrade the Nordic labour market in general and for foreigners arriving in the Nordic countries in particular (Prøitz & Aasen, 2017). The Nordic Council of Ministers also funds NVL and exerts a *'soft pressure through political priorities'* on NVL (Interview 1).

Policy learning in NVL is helped by the fact that there seems to be a 'Nordic model' for adult education. In the policy learning literature, it is assumed that policy learning from other countries is more likely if 'the policy is consistent with the dominant political ideology in the "host country"' or if there is some kind of 'value consensus' among the countries learning from each other (Dolowitz & March, 1996, p. 354). An example of this is from the NVL network on education in prisons. As an interviewee said: 'I know that we are based on the same values, at least in the Nordic network. With the same norms of a humane prison service. And everyone has the ambition that inmates should come out "better"' (Interview 3).

However, the consensus in NVL is far from complete. There is also a 'diversity that I see as a gift in my Nordic and NN [the name of the country is mentioned] networks—if participants learn from and with each other, then that ensures a different and often more nuanced and deep form of learning' (Interview 2). As one of the interviewees said: 'This is a Nordic model for collaboration and it is partly about some forms of collaboration without everyone needing to agree; it is about listening to different views, and then seeing what the majority comes to agree, so it is a relatively democratic way to work, as I see it' (Interview 6). In other words, the interviewee stresses that learning in NVL is non-hierarchical. Hence, it is outside one of the modes of policy learning mentioned by Dunlop and Radaelli (2022, p. 56). This leaves only three modes of policy learning possibilities back in NVL: epistemic, reflexive and bargaining (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2022, p. 56). In particular, the first two cooperative modes of policy learning are found in NVL, as we will demonstrate later in the article.

One of the interviewees also said the following about the Nordic style of policy learning: 'No country says to the other, "you need to do something like this," but you say more like: "we did it like this, and we had this result, and therefore we think..."' (Interview 1). Or as stated by another interviewee: 'We don't come to them and say: "we have the solution"' (Interview 2). Instead, NVL

is “an offer they can take if they want to. And we can be the ones to call for meetings on neutral ground” (Interview 2). Again, the non-hierarchical nature of NVL is stressed. Also, when it comes to output of policy learning, all four options mentioned by Dolowitz and March (1996) are potentially at play. But the analysis hereof later in the article will indicate that the hybridisation/synthesis output option seems to dominate.

The NVL network members are made up of relevant actors across various sectors. They should be ‘dedicated’ and have a ‘feeling of purpose.’ They join the networks ‘to get something out of it’ (Interview 1). Among the represented institutions are national agencies, ministries, colleges and universities, language centres, municipalities, and penitentiary care (Nordic Network for Adult Learning, 2020, cf. also Figure 1). Executively, NVL consists of one head coordinator and eight country coordinators from each of the five Nordic countries—Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Finland and Denmark—as well as from the three autonomous areas of Faroe Islands, Åland Islands and Greenland. The head coordinator is both the ‘face and voice’ of NVL and takes care of the

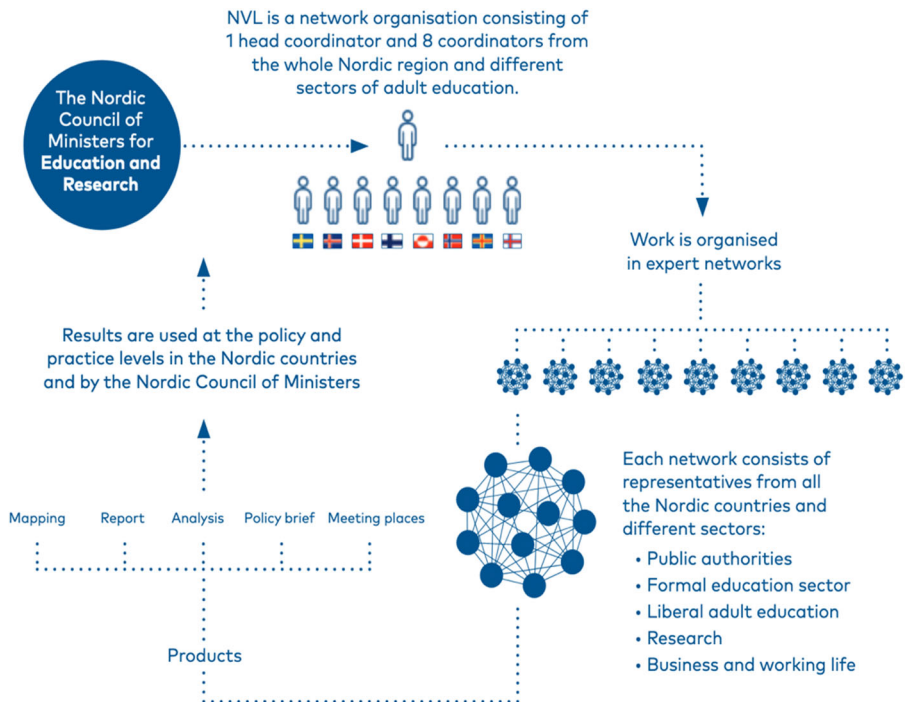


FIGURE 1 Structure and organisation of NVL. *Source:* Nordic Network for Adult Learning (2021a). [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

connection to the Civil Servant Committee for Education—the steering committee of NVL—within the Nordic Council of Ministers for Education, cf. Figure 1 (Interview 1). The head coordinator is also a coach as well as a ‘neutral actor’ for all networks of NVL.

The main task of the eight country coordinators (or national coordinators) is ‘to know what goes on within adult education in their respective countries’ (Interview 1). The country coordinators—at least in Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Norway—often have an adult education reference group ‘that consists of many actors from the field of adult education—umbrella organisations, social partners and practical actors, educational institutions, municipalities, NGOs etc.’ (Interview 2). The country coordinators discuss general questions, obtain information and recruit people for the networks (Interview 2). This also means that country coordinators ‘have a responsibility to disseminate the results from NVL’ and to ensure that actors ‘work nationally with themes and areas that NVL works with in a Nordic context’ (Interview 6). In this respect, the aim is ‘to reach beyond the current scope where national actors are considered mere recipients of NVL results towards a situation where they claim ownership and responsibility’ (Interview 6).

Finally, each sectorial network is led by a network coordinator (Nordic Network for Adult Learning, 2019). According to an interviewee (who is also a network coordinator), the person in this role should conduct ‘gentle leadership’, be an ‘observer’ and ‘make decisions in a very democratic way’ (Interview 4).

The organisation of NVL is illustrated in Figure 1.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the layout of NVL is quite complex, and the work is conducted in the many smaller, rather autonomous sectorial networks with their own coordinators. This composition ensures that networks can be opened and closed according to the priorities and focuses of the Nordic Council of Ministers as a whole. The sectorial network in the area of NVL deals with, among other things, validation of adult education, adult literacy, guidance, competence development in adult teaching and prison education.

Some of these networks have existed for a few years, others have lasted for more than a decade (Interview 1). However, all NVL networks—including those which have been closed down—in some way or other aim to provide citizens with the necessary skills to find a satisfactory place in the labour markets of today and tomorrow (Interview 10).

In the official document of the Nordic Council of Ministers in the area of NVL, the following is stated about the political priorities. The NVL should:

- support Nordic co-operation in a lifelong learning perspective;
- facilitate exchange of experience and innovations;
- support the development of policy and practice;

- highlight Nordic expertise within priority areas such as adult education competence development, validation of prior learning, digital support to learning, workplace learning, and so forth;
- be a meeting place for Nordic adult learning and supports networking (Nordic Network for Adult Learning, 2021a).

In sum, the NVL networks cover a wide area within adult learning; their organisational structure is both flexible and complex, and they draw on expertise and experience in all Nordic countries.

Analysis—the process

This part of the analysis will address the first research question about the process of policy learning mentioned in the introduction. As claimed by Dunlop and Radaelli (2022, p. 58), ‘conceptually reflexivity and epistemic learning are grounded in changes of preferences, in some cases norms too, and evidence-driven enlightenment guided by experts (epistemic) and entire communities (reflexivity)’. As indicated above, both of these traits are also found in NVL as far as NVL learning processes are concerned.

Normally, the experts and professionals in the sectorial NVL networks act without any mandate from their organisations (Interview 3). It is ‘expert-oriented to a large degree’ (Interview 6). The members of the NVL sectorial networks are there because of the inputs they go home with, as well as the contributions they bring, not generally because they have to articulate certain national points of view (Interview 3). This points in the direction of the NVL networks being characterised by an epistemic policy learning mode, because the experts have most often originated outside the government (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2022, p. 64).

The fact that the sectorial NVL networks predominantly consist of experts and professionals without mandates and without having to act as national representatives contributes to enhancing the level of epistemic policy learning. The reason is that national representatives have difficulties admitting policy failures in their own country when evidence points in that direction. An interviewee explained what a shift from national government representatives to experts had meant for an NVL sectorial network:

Because, at some point, we had government representatives, for example, people from the ministry. Of course, they have their own fingerprints in the policy, so they were very defensive about them. [...] [T]his was a bit of a problem. Then we also started having more people from different educational sectors, and then we had these couples—that one person from the country was, for example, from the government agency or something, and the other one was from

an educational sector. So it became much easier in that sense. There was not so much defensiveness in the air anymore, and there was a very healthy discussion about what was not working, what the problem was in the respective countries, what we have not been able to achieve... (Interview 4).

In the same interview the conclusion is that after the shift, 'we are talking about our problems constantly' (Interview 4). Or as another experienced NVL member said: There should 'be room for discussing things that do not work' (Interview 5). This also implies that NVL networks should not be under any form of political pressure (Interview 5). However, another interviewee stated that there is a difference between internal openness in the NVL sectorial networks and less so externally: 'We can quite peacefully criticise one another and also acknowledge our own flaws. When we do something publicly, it's often much harder' (Interview 6). In other words, not only the epistemic policy learning, but also the reflexive policy learning mode with 'dialogue' as the metaphor characterises NVL. At the same time, there are still reminders of the bargaining policy learning mode when NVL goes public (cf. Dunlop & Radaelli, 2022, p. 56).

Members of the NVL sectorial network have to live up to a set of process rules formulated by the head coordinator and the Nordic Council of Ministers (Interview 1). A more informal rule of the sectorial networks is that they are about give and take. All members should contribute—at least if they are from Finland, Denmark, Norway or Sweden. However, this demand is less strict vis à vis Iceland and even less so as far as Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and the Åland Islands are concerned (Interview 5, Interview 7) because it broadly recognised within NVL that they have fewer resources at hand.

If sectorial networks want to be independent of the Nordic Council of Ministers without any obligations as far as meeting sequence, reporting, activities, and so forth are concerned, they are free to be so. They can even keep their website at the Nordic Council of Ministers, but they will not get any funding for travel expenses, accommodation, and so forth etc. (Interview 1). Some sectorial networks have 'gone independent', but they have so far always returned after a period of time to the auspices of NVL under the Nordic Council of Ministers (Interview 1). This could be interpreted as a clear sign of the anti-hierarchical mode of policy learning in the NVL; however, it might also be viewed as reminiscent of the bargaining mode of policy learning where 'exchange' is the metaphor for this particular mode.

Crucial to the layout of the NVL learning process is that it contains both a flexible and rather complex network structure. Or as an interviewee said: 'I think that what NVL can offer is the flexible organic model' (Interview 2). The flexible organic structure can be interpreted as if the NVL is able to handle and ensure that the networks work towards the sometimes shifting priorities pointed

to by the Nordic Council of Ministers' Civil Servant Committee for Education, cf. above in the article. Another interviewee presented the *raison d'être* in NVL networks in the following way:

But I think the outcome and the advantage of each other's experience and skills in the field is number one, which is so valuable. Just the thing where you get to know how you have solved different questions in other countries, and that can provide good examples. It can also be the opposite — that it is hard for us, there are difficulties. (Interview 3).

According to this interviewee, when judging whether the epistemic or the reflexive mode of policy learning is the most important in NVL, it seems to be the former version because 'skills' and 'experience' are 'number one'. This was also stressed by an interviewee when mentioning the clear expert-orientation of NVL (Interview 6).

In the last few years, some of the sectorial networks have deliberately changed from the conference model to a work group model as the yearly biggest event. For example, earlier, the sectorial network on education in prisons invited all relevant persons to Nordic conferences on a yearly basis. Now, a number of work groups are instead discussing themes relevant for educating inmates (Interview 3). The new model is both more flexible and activates participants more intensively, thereby potentially contributing to increased learning through upgrading beliefs and via more new ideas being presented and perhaps later implemented in practice (Interview 3). The network for teaching immigrants Nordic languages still sticks to conferences, but only holds them every second or third year (Interview 7). This organisational change can also be interpreted based upon the theoretical concepts of this article, as a clear move in the direction of epistemic and reflexive policy learning in smaller and more intimate organisational settings where 'cooperative' modes of policy learning are most pronounced.

Simply put, the layout of the flexible NVL network structure is a method to work towards shifting needs, as it allows the networks to reflect on which issues are regarded as important in the Civil Servant Committee for Education in the Nordic Council of Ministers. As one respondent puts it: 'It is very dynamic. It is a dynamic network organisation that responds to needs'. (Interview 1).

Upholding a flexible network structure, which also includes the possibility of ending and initiating networks entails a continuous focus on the layout of the networks, which one respondent stresses:

When we gather in our meetings, we constantly need to be aware of where we are now, whether we have the right people present, are we answering to the right needs [...] (Interview 1).

As the quote illustrates, the issue of flexibility within the network again refers to the constant stressing of problem orientation as far as policy learning processes are concerned. The flexibility of the networks corresponds with the epistemic mode of policy learning characterised by thinking through the links between policy means and ends. Problem orientation, on the other hand, corresponds with conflict resolution, which characterises the reflexive mode of policy learning (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2022, p. 56). However, both these two policy learning modes are grounded in changes of preferences where a continual focus on responding to policy needs is upheld.

In sum, the NVL learning processes correspond with the epistemic and reflexive modes of policy learning where participants' preferences are constantly changed to a greater or lesser degree.

Analysis: the output

This part of the analysis will address the second research question in the introduction. Above in this article, policy learning was categorised into four options: copying (transfer of a programme in use elsewhere), emulation (not copying everything in detail, but only the best standard), hybridisation/synthesis (combining elements found in other countries) and inspiration (expanding ideas and fresh thinking) (Dolowitz & March, 1996, p. 351). According to the interviewees, all these four options are found in NVL. However, the predominant policy learning output from NVL networks seems to be about emulation and hybridisation/synthesis. The interviewees even seem to indicate that the last option is the most important one for Nordic policy learning, cf. below.

But how does the NVL find out what the output of its activities should comprise? A leading member of the network answers the question in this way:

[...] the starting point is a well discussed mutual interest and priority. When the Council of Ministers says that you have to work with validation, counselling, basic skills, and so forth, we then go - our coordinators - to their country and find the key organisations which are related to the case, you could say, which develop, decide, or work with it concretely. And then we investigate the way in which, for example, Sweden, Norway and Denmark work with validation, and then we invite these key organisations and meet here in a network. The network always has a starting phase that maps the needs in every country. A network also works where you as a Swede, you as a Norwegian, need to bring something. We can do that. However, at the same time, we also have some things we need to take home — there is a give and take principle in the network (Interview 1).

As illustrated, the starting point of getting the right output rests on a concept of mapping the needs within each country, ensuring that the topics covered are relevant to actors in all of them. Then the work within the NVL networks begin.

The networks under the NVL umbrella meet three–five times per year. They continuously produce and update handbooks or reports online with ‘to-do-methods’ in the respective areas (Interview 1) as well as sometimes also policy briefs (Interview 4, Nordic Network for Adult Learning, 2020). In any case, several interviewees stressed that just being part of a network is also important because ‘it makes us able to mail, call and help each other’ (Interview 5). As one of them said: ‘When I am part of the network and have a problem that I have been asked to solve I can pick up the phone and call the central persons in Denmark and Sweden’ (Interview 7). In principle, this output of the NVL might include all four policy learning options mentioned in Dolowitz and March’s seminal paper from 1996.

It should be noted that the problem orientation in NVL is quite institutionalised. As mentioned, the Nordic Council of Ministers, the overarching institution of the NVL, has decided that NVL works on the basis of five concrete goals, which provide a common direction for the network: a ‘guiding star’ that can inform the work as well as help with questions as to which networks ought to be continued and which ought, on the other hand, to be discontinued, cf. above in this article where the priorities of NVL are stated in bullet points.

The orientation towards concrete solutions permeates the NVL network and its publications as well as external communications. For example, in their introduction, NVL notes that the results from the sectorial networks are ‘translated to practice by the organisations and authorities in all Nordic countries’ (Nordic Network for Adult Learning, 2021b. Own translation by authors), highlighting specifically the importance of network activities actually being used in a policy context. Likewise, it is generally stressed that the sectorial networks are centred around ‘themes prioritised in the Nordic countries, where there is a need and a Nordic interest’ and that ‘Organisations that participate in Nordic networks can use the Nordic knowledge in their activities’ (Nordic Network for Adult Learning, n.d., own translation by authors). Again, the output of these policy learning processes might be consistent with copying, emulation, hybridisation/synthesis and inspiration.

It seems that the strong focus on responding to concrete needs within NVL constitutes a large part of its relative success. It can be operationalised as the relatively high satisfaction with the work among our respondents as well as the high degree of participation of all Nordic countries. Working towards clearly defined goals and from the onset of institutionalised priorities seemingly ensures good conditions for an effective use of the resources posted in a policy learning

network. This is probably not least the case when it is combined with the epistemic or reflexive modes of policy learning, cf. above in this article.

One interviewee describes how the output orientation works in practice:

What can they draw out from the Nordic network and communicate, multiply, and adapt? So they don't just make their plans like that. So it is with a basis in the Nordic that it can be implemented. And then we talked about methods: How can you best implement them? How can you reach your ministry, or how can you reach your schools? Why do they not come? Which tricks have others used to take part in dialogue? So here, they share experience about the national level (Interview 1).

The interviewees gave a number of examples of specific learning from being part of NVL. A concrete result of the work in the sectorial network on education in prisons is that it is now possible—via various models emulated from both Norway and Finland—to use the internet as a tool in the education of inmates (Interview 3). Generally, NVL sectorial networks often look to Nordic countries for inspiration that are most advantageous in the various policy areas (Interview 8). That could be emulating Finland as far as validation of adult education is concerned (Interview 8), Norway for online adult educational guidance (Interview 9) or Denmark for labour-relevant language training of immigrants and refugees (Interview 6). Again, these indications of policy learning are about how they were perceived by NVL network participants.

However, many NVL policy learning projects also require some sort of combination of elements found in more than one Nordic country. Validation of adult education is another example of how policy learning in NVL can be understood through the concept of hybridisation/synthesis of Dolowitz and March (1996). An interviewee responded with this statement about beliefs in the network on validation of adult education:

These different projects that we have been doing have been educational, and they are deep learning processes as well. Because of course, creating a common Nordic tool requires a lot of debate, a lot of discussion, because we cannot have any one country or any one area being overly presented in those talks. But it has to be a consensus decision of what we are going to have presented—what is the sort of medial (Interview 4).

Here, we can interpret 'consensus' and 'sort of medial' as a sign of presence of a hybridisation/synthesis policy learning output. An interviewee also stressed that, concerning career guidance in her home country, they needed 'a lot of that

information we got from this network.’ And she added that her country was not copying and that ‘we do not translate guidance from other countries, but we hear about what they are doing, and we learn a lot’ (Interview 9). Another interviewee stressed that her country had a ‘great utility from Nordic cooperation’ through ‘sharing experiences’ (Interview 7). Yet another interviewee emphasised the ‘synergies’ of Nordic cooperation as far as learning about validation of education is concerned (Interview 10). These statements all point to the fact that the output of policy learning in NVL networks is much more than just a result of ‘inspiration’.

An interviewee elaborated on the output of the learning process indicating that hybridisation/synthesis of experiences in all Nordic countries might be the important way to create output in this particular case.

So then we decided to start developing this kind of tool, both for practitioners and policy-makers. And that was a long process, because the first part was the mapping process, so each of the Nordic countries went through the legislation meticulously, the validation-related legislation, and read through what kind of quality assurance issues were mentioned in that... [...] And then after that, there was a team of researchers who put all these country reports together, and they then funnelled the most important aspects that were visible in each country; from that, we started working as a group without the researchers; we started working as a group to create the quality assurance tool. (Interview 4).

This sectorial network on validation has been able to come up with proposals that could potentially change national policies, even though we have not investigated whether this piece of policy learning was actually implemented. In the case of validation, it was mostly the experts from Norway and Finland that their counterparts from other countries were listening to. The reason was that these two countries had established systems beforehand (Interview 4). In other areas, it might be other Nordic countries that are frontrunners, but even in the validation of adult education—it should be stressed—Nordic countries other than Norway and Finland could bring new ideas and technical solutions to the table (Interview 4).

Another example of the policy learning output from NVL is the that from the sectorial network on adult learning of foreign languages, which works ‘with language training for newly arrived immigrants or people with insufficient language skills when they are learning Danish, Finnish, Norwegian or Swedish as a second language’ (Interview 6). In this respect, the common belief among participants is that the public should assist people in an efficient and professional way when learning Nordic languages in order to integrate better in society. Or in the words of a member of the network about its *raison d’être*:

‘everyone in society must have equal opportunities’ (Interview 6). This common belief is there from the beginning of the policy learning processes in NVL, and—as mentioned above in the article—this ‘value consensus’ enhances the probability of a successful output of the process (Dolowitz & March, 1996, p. 354).

Generally, hybridisation/synthesis is probably the most important policy learning option exploited in the NVL when it comes to the output of policy learning. However, emulation of practical tools found in the Nordic countries are also an option as far as language training of newly arrived immigrants is concerned. These are concrete teaching plans, quality assurance systems for teaching, detailed competence descriptions for educators teaching Nordic languages, and so forth published under the auspices of the network (Interview 7).

In sum, combining elements found in other Nordic countries (i.e., hybridisation/synthesis) and copying the best standards (i.e., emulation) seem to be the dominant output of the learning processes of NVL.

CONCLUSION

Policy learning across countries is very important, but it is a difficult subject to investigate. The subject of this article is policy learning among the Nordic countries, where it has been cultivated for more than 50 years. Over this period, many lessons have been learned and much experimentation has taken place as far as maximising the output of policy learning is concerned.

This article points to the necessity to analyse both the process and output in order to understand policy learning in NVL at its fullest. In response to the first research question about what characterises the process, the conclusion is that it is dominated by epistemic and reflexive modes of policy learning. In historic terms, the bargaining mode of policy learning also played a role in NVL, but its importance has now diminished. In response to the second research question about the output of the policy learning of NVL as perceived by its participants, emulation and hybridisation/synthesis dominates, according to the interviewees, with the latter option probably the most pronounced. This reflects that policy learning in NVL seem to be much more than ‘inspirational’, but also less than ‘copying’ policy programmes from other countries.

There is a ‘value consensus’ where beliefs are largely similar among the Nordic actors of NVL because of the common policy attitudes among those countries as far as adult learning is concerned, which is far from always the case in other regional settings. This fact certainly helps policy learning processes to take place; however, it is the organisation of NVL that explains its success in triggering this policy learning potential. Hence, we do think that lessons can be generalised from the Nordic policy learning network in NVL. That is, that international policy learning should focus exactly on solving problems as well as

keeping the organisation surrounding the policy learning flexible and free of national political pressures. This is probably the essence of policy learning among the Nordic countries.

Even though this article is a case study of NVL networks, it seems clear from the interviews and other contacts during the data collection phase that the results from this study can be generalised to other Nordic policy learning networks. On that dimension, the validity of the results is high. Yet, it remains an open question as to whether the results can be generalised to other international policy learning networks. Probably, it can if the 'value consensus' among the analysed countries is also high, as is the case of the Nordic countries. And probably it can be generalised to a lesser degree, if the 'value consensus' is low. Nevertheless, there seems to be at least a handful of potential generalisable lessons to be learned from Nordic policy learning in NVL. If and when policy learning networks in other international networks want to learn from the Nordic countries, they could do so in the following way: (a) By member states sending mainly experts to the networks. (b) By not giving participants in the networks any strict mandates. (c) By being more flexible when it comes to closing down and setting up new networks. (d) Finally, by cultivating 'value consensus' when it comes to the foundation of policy learning in the various networks.

However, these are just some preliminary results of an investigation into Nordic policy learning. Much more research is needed in that area.

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ORCID

Peter Nedergaard  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5363-3301>

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