

Public debate on globalization and research in the Nordic countries

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In the framework of the globalization debate, research and innovation are generally perceived as strategic resources in efforts to foster competitive national knowledge economies. However, a survey of the debate on research policy aspects of globalization in the five Nordic countries shows that the debate vary considerably according to the extent to which this view of research as a competitive asset has been incorporated into established policy frameworks.

Research as a competitive asset for meeting the globalization challenge

Globalization is generally conceived as a process driven mainly by changes that have taken place over the last 20 to 30 years in the economic structure: increase in trade, lower trade tariffs, deregulation and liberalization of financial markets, increase in the number and size of multinational corporations (MNCs), etc. These processes have promoted global economic integration, specialisation and division of work.

Within the context of research and innovation policy, the assumption of the increasing competitive pressure inherent to globalization is closely linked with the idea of an emergent "knowledge economy". Research and innovation have become strategic resources and assets in efforts to foster competitive national economies. As labour intensive production is relocated to lower-cost regions of the world, the developed countries have to consolidate and extend their competitive edge in knowledge and research intensive economic activities. Research institutions and clusters of world class quality and standing have to be constructed in order to attract the best qualified personnel and foreign direct investments from research-intensive, innovative MNCs. The rise of China and India in particular, not only as low-cost, fast growing economies, but also as large, ambitious knowledge economies in their own right, challenge already developed economies on their own turf.

Hence, globalization generally appears in debates on research in terms which emphasize close links between competitiveness and the knowledge economy. Our analysis also indicates that while debates on globalization in general are characterized by strongly conflicting views, its research and innovation policy implications are generally conceived in terms of meeting the globalization challenge by developing strong knowledge economies. This conception is rarely challenged by alternative perspectives, and may thus be seen as the hegemonic core of the globalization debate within research and innovation policy.

Our survey of the debate on research policy aspects of globalization in the five Nordic countries indicates that the debate varies according to the extent to which the core have been incorporated in the established policy frameworks in these countries.

Sweden – confidence and consensus

In Sweden, the globalization debate may to a large extent be seen as merely a new terminology for issues and approaches which are already strongly internalized in Swedish policy and debates on research and innovation. What is for other countries an approach that may have to be adopted through extensive institutional reorganisation and fundamental reframing of policy, may in Sweden appear as not much more than a re-description of socio-economic structures that are already in place, and of already fine-tuned, successful policy approaches. Globalization denotes opportunities which Sweden has proven highly adept at exploiting in the past, and the conditions are largely in place for continuing to do so in the future. Hence, confidence and consensus seem to characterize Swedish debate on the challenges and opportunities of globalization. Coping with the globalization challenges and the competitiveness/knowledge economy nexus is more or less an issue of “business as usual”. The tenets of the “Nordic model” – the combination of pro-active economic restructuring and social security – is also an integral part of the conceptualisation of that approach, although without much explicit use of that term itself.

Finland – moving on from front position

Finland is similar to Sweden in also having firmly incorporated the globalization process into the core of established research and innovation policy. Appropriate socio-economic structures and well-articulated policies responding specifically to the challenges of globalization are in place in both countries well. In contrast to Sweden, Finland however appears to be more acutely aware of the fragility of what has been achieved and of the need to anticipate threats and opportunities through continued efforts to restructure the research and innovation systems and to reframe policies. Debates on globalization are to a higher extent than in Sweden, and somewhat similar to recent Danish debate, characterized by strong initiatives and numerous suggestions on how to develop further and draw ever more radical policy implications from the globalization challenge. As a consequence, debates in Finland are more extensive and pervasive than in other countries, reflecting the highly central role of research and innovation in Finnish general politics. Additionally, and perhaps contrary to some prejudices, there appears to be more controversy in debates about some of the core issues, i.a. on regional policy issues, on tensions between economic and social demands and on the restructuring of universities.

Denmark – the new globalization agenda

In Denmark, the globalization term and frame appears to have played a relatively subdued role in Danish research policy debate until the governmental initiative in 2006 to launch a globalization policy process. Since then it has become intensive, addressing contentious issues in the process of the quite radical reorganisation that has been initiated. The public debate is to a large extent an extension and integral part of the governmental process itself. Players directly involved in that process wrote numerous articles or their statements were directly quoted in the media. The Danish globalization initiative and debate has attracted public interest in other Nordic countries as well. The establishment of a Globalization Council modelled on the Danish was announced by the new, incoming Swedish Government in 2006, without, however, triggering much wider public debate. In early 2007, the Norwegian Minister of Education and

Research responded positively to a proposition by NHO (Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise) that a similar council be established in Norway, but the issue has not reappeared.

Norway – no imminent threat

While the globalization theme *do* figure in Norwegian debates on research and innovation, it appears to be relatively marginal. It has not lead to any initiatives of radical and/or contentious restructuring and change, and consequently it has not become a controversial topic. The voices promoting the hegemonic globalization debate are all to be found among a narrowly defined group of stakeholders, i.e., representatives of industry and economic experts. A distinctive aspect of Norwegian debates about these issues, is that they tend to downplay the idea of a knowledge economy, reflecting, no doubt, the apparent ‘Norwegian paradox’, i.e., that Norway has profited immensely from the globalization of the economy *without* having moved much beyond its character as an economy based on raw materials. Hence, generalised and knowledge-based innovation is emphasized, rather than research- and high tech-based innovation.

References to the Nordic model have recently become more numerous, particularly in statements by representatives of the present Centre-Left government. Sporadic voices in the debate address, if barely, aspects of globalization that go beyond those of the core debate, e.g., issues of global health, poverty and environment.

Iceland – gaining attention and pace

A key event for Icelandic research policy and public debate on research was the establishment in 2003 of the Science and Technology Policy Council (STPC), based on the Finnish model. This was an important move towards the inclusion of science and innovation policy in main-stream policy areas like industrial and education policies. Since then, public debate on research has increased considerably, one central topic of which was the place and strength of a small nation in the era of multiculturalism and globalization.

Universities under pressure

The globalization debate has in most Nordic countries driven a process of, and hence triggered a discussion on, restructuring the university system and systems for funding university research. In both Sweden, Finland and Denmark the globalization agenda tend to emphasize the need for institutional reorganisation and concentration of resources, in order to create research institutions and groups of world class quality. This agenda seems to be particularly “aggressive” in Finland, where it has triggered debates about the need to concentrate resources and reorganise its large and dispersed university system. This includes a debate on the value of consortiums, federations and mergers inside the university system, the primary argumentation being that the days of university expansion are over and that it is time to cater to innovation policy needs.

Predictably, the fast and extensive reorganisation of the Danish research system in terms of creating world class universities and research institutions is also accompanied by extensive public debate. Similar concerns are expressed in the Swedish debate on its research funding

system, which is seen by many as inappropriate and ineffective for sustaining the development of world class research. While similar reform processes do take place in Norway, they take place at a relatively slow pace, are less radical than in some other Nordic countries, and the globalization debate seem to play a relatively more marginal role in framing and driving those changes. Hence, globalization plays a minor, although not non-existent, role in debates about these issues in Norway.

In conclusion, the authors estimate that further studies may add to the understanding of both common and divergent aspects of the role, characteristics and dynamics of public debate in research and innovation policies in the five Nordic countries.

BOKS

Inspired by an analysis of public debate on research policy issues in Sweden, NordForsk has initiated an exploratory, comparative study of public debate regarding one specific research policy issue, globalization. The objective of the study was to investigate the viability of a full comparative research project on research policy debate in the five Nordic countries and gain experience for the eventual design of such a project. The exploratory study was carried out by a team of Nordic researchers and is based upon a selection for each country of two or more newspapers and periodicals whose archives are available on-line. The study covers debate during the 3-year period from 2004 to 2006/2007. It does not map debate on the concept and issue of globalization in general, but focuses on the rise of globalization issues on the agendas of national research policy, and its current expansion into innovation policy.

The preparatory project supports the conclusion that further studies may add to the understanding of both common and divergent aspects of the role, characteristics and dynamics of public debate in research and innovation policies in the five Nordic countries. The heterogeneity of both sources and agendas indicate, however, that the full realisation of the comparative potential of such studies will depend on the initial development of a detailed, common research protocol.

PUNKTER:

Sweden; a re-naming of socio-economic structures that are already in place, and of already fine-tuned, successful policy approaches.

Finland; a strong debate on the need to restructure the research and innovation systems

Denmark; a globalization policy process that addresses contentious issues and entails a quite radical reorganisation

Norway; a relatively marginal debate and a tendency to downplay the idea of a knowledge economy

Iceland; a public debate on research that has increased heavily after the establishment of a Science and Technology Policy Council