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***Chapter 7. The Impact of the Nordic Council of Ministers: Cases of Policy Learning in the Nordic Council of Ministers***

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**Abstract:** Institutionalised policy learning among the Nordic countries has been around for more than 50 years. This chapter analyses the Nordic Council of Ministers and its role in the process as well as the output of policy learning among Nordic countries on adult education in networks. 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 policy learning networks of the Nordic Council of Ministers 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 be generalised to other Nordic networks, but to a lesser extent to international policy learning networks where ‘value consensus’ is not as pronounced.

**Keywords:** NORDIC COUNCIL OF MINISTERS; POLICY LEARNING, ADULT EDUCATION, MODES OF POLICY LEARNING, OUTPUT OF POLICY LEARNING

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**Chapter 7. The Impact of the Nordic Council of Ministers: Cases of Policy Learning in the Nordic Council of Ministers**[[1]](#endnote-1)

# Introduction[[2]](#endnote-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. Lange & Alexiadou, 2010; Goyal & Howlett, 2018). This is the raison d’etre for this chapter.

This chapter is based on a collection of data via documents, and 10 in-depth interviews designed on the international policy learning literature. The primary data consists of interviews conducted over a two-year period with a specific policy-learning network. However, we claim that the findings here – at least to a certain extent – can be generalised to all policy learning networks of the Nordic Council of Ministers. The reason is, according to our sources in the organisation, that the chosen network is ‘typical’ for other networks in the Nordic Council of Ministers.

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: ‘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.

The aim of the chapter is to uncover what policy learning is taking place behind the NVL. We want to find out what characterises the process of policy learning of NVL? And 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, i.e. we do not analyse whether or not the result of the Nordic policy learning processes is implemented or not. We admit that this is a critical point of the chapter, however, the format of this book forces us to choose this angle.

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

**The Nordic Council of Ministers**

Before we address the practical example of Nordic cooperation resulting from the Nordic Council of Ministers in the shape of NVL, we briefly introduce the structure of the Nordic Council of Ministers (chapter 8 will elaborate on the history of the Nordic Council of Ministers).

The Nordic Council of Ministers is one of the institutional pillars of Nordic cooperation while the Nordic Council is the other (see chapter 6 for an thorough analysis of the Nordic Council). The Nordic Council is an interparliamentary platform which was established by Iceland, Denmark, Norway and Sweden in 1952.

In defiance of the interparliamentary feature of the Nordic Council, the council also gave room for government representatives to take part in committee meetings though they had no right to vote (Etzold, 2020, p. 12; Wendt, 1973, p. 6). The cooperation at government level mainly took place within international cooperation committees or commissions such as the Nordic Economic Co-operation Committee or the Nordic Social Affairs Committee (Drzewicki, 1980, p. 341; Wendt, 1973, p. 16). In continuation of that, Etzold (2020, p. 12) points out that the Nordic cooperation among the governments in this period up to 1971 were “sidelined, weak and uncoordinated”, because the main Nordic cooperative focus was at the parliamentary level.

The way cooperation functioned at government level changed with the revision of the so-called Helsinki Treaty in 1971 when the Nordic Council of Ministers was created. In the years up till the revision of the Treaty the span of cooperation had developed and the failure of the attempt to strengthen the Nordic cooperation further in form the Nordic Economic Union (Nordek) pushed in direction of a stronger and more permanent cooperative Nordic institution for Nordic governments (Wendt, 1973, p. 3; Eztold, 2020, p. 12). It was in the light of this, the Prime Ministers of Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland and Iceland 13 February 1971 signed the update of the Treaty with the intention to structure and strengthen the Nordic cooperation by, among other things, creating the Nordic Council of Ministers.

The creation of the Nordic Council of Ministers changed the overall landscape of the Nordic cooperation. The Nordic Council became a solely interparliamentary organ that should watch over the Nordic Council of Ministers work while having close discussions with the very same and thus preserving the relationship between the two councils (Eztold, 2020, p. 12). The Nordic Council of Ministers took charge of the tasks that previously belonged to committees (Wendt, 1973, p. 19).

The Nordic Council of Ministers has, opposite the Nordic Council, the ability to make binding agreements that come into force for the individual countries. The production of binding agreements is yet dependent on unanimity and that each country is represented if the question concerns all countries (Wendt, 1973, p. 18). If one country is represented, but refrains from voting, an official decision can still be made.

In the tender beginning of the Nordic Council of Ministers, the council was not formally divided into several councils in charge of a specific department as it is today. It was the question of discussion that determined which ministers from the governments that represented their country which rendered the possibility of several meetings taking place at the same time (Wendt, 1973, p. 19). Today, the Nordic Council of Ministers is comprised of eleven regular Councils in charge of a specific department, and the Council of Ministers of Cooperation which is sort of a 12th Council that has the overall responsibility for the Nordic cooperation (Wendt, 1973, p. 20; Etzold, 2020, p. 13). The number of different councils have varied over time. For instance, in the beginning of the 2000’s there were 18 ministerial councils (Eztold, 2020, p. 14).

Formally, the Nordic Prime Ministers carries the responsibility for the Nordic governmental cooperation, but in practice it is the ministers of Nordic cooperation in each country that through the Council of Ministers of Cooperation handle this task (Nordisk Samarbejde, n.d.h; Wendt, 1973, p. 20). Every year, the presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers rotates between the government leaders that are holding office. With the presidency follows a right to sketch and prioritize what issues that should be on the carpet the following year and on the annual meeting between the government leaders (Eztold, 2020, p. 13).

Parallel to the Council of Ministers of Cooperation there is a Nordic Committee of Cooperation comprised of high-level civil servants from the countries’ state administrations. This committee takes care of the coordination given that the government leaders and ministers do not meet so often. Furthermore, they constitute the board of the Nordic Council of Ministers secretariat in Copenhagen (Nordisk Samarbejde, n.d.g; Eztold, 2020, p. 13).

The purpose of the Nordic Council of Ministers is 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). Traditionally, the areas with the highest degree of cooperation and attention from the Nordic Council of Ministers in education, environment, culture, labour market issues and social policy (Eztold, 2020, p. 12; Waldemarson, 2017, p. 24).

One of the rules in Nordic Council of Ministers regarding cooperation is that it “never goes further than the interests of each country permit” (Eztold, 2020, p. 12). This rule may explain why policy areas such as defense, foreign, security and close economic policy have had little collaborative attention and success. However, these matters are included in discussions but not in the same institutionalized way as the previous mentioned subjects (Waldemarson, 2017, p. 24; Eztold; 2020, p. 12).

As mentioned above, the Nordic Council of Ministers consists of several ministerial councils that have varying scopes and extents which result in different ramifications such as institutions, groups, committees, networks, projects, organizations and collaborators. Yet, all the councils have at least one civil servant committee to assist them. The Nordic Council of Ministers fund and monitor in total approximately 12 Nordic institutions of different kind (Nordisk Samarbejde, n.d.a). Some examples of these are Nordic Innovation, Nordic Energy Research (NEF), Nordic Generessourcecenter (NordGen) and several cultural institutions such as “Nordens Hus” (Nordisk Samarbejde, n.d.b,c,d,e). Below the ministerial level, there is a parallel structure of civil servant committees, and these committees set up and supervise all the networks, working groups, etc. of the Nordic Council of Ministers.

The Nordic networks can vary in structure, subject and size. The network groups in the Nordic Council of Sustainable Growth are comprised of national civil servants, while the Nordic Network of dementia or the Nordic Network of Adult Learning are comprised of experts of different kind. Furthermore, the network of dementia consists of 3 theme networks, while NVL consists of at least 8 subnetworks (Nordisk Samarbejde, n.d.b; Nordens Velfærdscenter, n.d.; Nordic Network for Adult Learning, 2021b).

The Nordic Council of Ministers has been criticized for inter alia shutting down Nordic networks and institutions. Furthermore, the informal contact between civil servants and politicians from different countries is decreasing according to evidence (Strang, 2012, p. 76-79). In Strang’s book (2012) with proposals on how to strengthen the Nordic cooperation ordered by the Nordic Council, the need for and importance of networks is emphasized in regard to enhance and preserve Nordic cooperation. Networks are both important in creating Nordic communities, getting more experts involved and strengthening the Nordic cooperation in the area of defense and foreign policy (Strang, 2012, p. 8, 28, 39). In the light of this, it is therefore a significant responsibility and impact that lies with the Nordic Council of Ministers since it is the council that funds and initiates different kinds of networks and maybe lay the foundation stones for more informal contacts that otherwise is out of the councils hands.

Clearly, the Nordic Council of Ministers funds and initiates many different undertakings to better the Nordic Cooperation and plays a significant role for the very same. Later in the chapter, we will look closer at the practical unfolding of one type of Nordic Cooperation by zooming in on of the use of one of the networks in the Nordic Councils of Ministers. The Nordic network for adult leaning (NVL) will via interviews and the theory of policy learning be examined focusing on how NVL facilitate policy learning.

# What is policy learning?

Before we begin answering the research questions in the Introduction, another important question to answer is: What *is* policy learning? Although this seems like a trivial issue, it is hard to pinpoint exactly this in the existing literature.

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. Our hypothesis is that this is generally the case as far as policy learning networks in the Nordic Council of Ministers is concerned.

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.

In contrast, ‘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 reminiscences 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 (cf. the definitions by 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 chapter, 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 of the Nordic Council of Ministers.

This first part of the analysis will address the research question as to how we can understand the processes of policy learning of Nordic cooperation in the network 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. Dolowitz and March (1996, p. 35) in their seminal paper distinguish between four options as far as policy transfer or policy learning is concerned. One option is copying, i.e. transfer of a programme in use elsewhere. A second option is emulation, i.e. not copying everything in detail, but only the best standard. A third option is hybridisation and synthesis, i.e. combining elements found in other countries. A fourth option is inspiration, i.e. expanding ideas and fresh thinking. Based on these four options, we will analyse the policy learning output of NVL.

# Methodology

The policy learning network of NVL 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 chapter consists of 10 in-depth qualitative interviews with members of different networks within NVL over a period of two years, as well as documents from the Nordic Council of Ministers. The interviewees comprise regular members with a wide range of responsibilities in their network. We established contact with the interviewees through executive and administrative members of NVL.

Table 7.1 shows a list of all interviews. We cite the interview numbers when referring to them in the chapter. Even though not all interviewees are quoted to the same extent, they are all important parts of the data of this chapter. As can be seen, all roles as far as NVL is concerned are represented, i.e. Nordic head coordinator, national coordinators, sectorial network coordinators, and sectorial network members, cf. below in the section with a presentation of NVL.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 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 |

*Table 7.1:* *Interviewees, their roles and the date of interview*

The interviews were coded based on the concepts contained in the 15 hypotheses on policy learning from Nedergaard (2009). These ‘recording units’ were analysed by both authors independently of each other to increase intercoding reliability (Bryman, 2012, p. 304).

# A presentation of NVL

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 (Nordisk 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 funds NVL and, thereby, 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). Hence, the NVL is a fine example of the raison d’etre of the Nordic Council of Ministers.

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).

The NVL network members are made up of relevant actors across various sectors. Amongst the represented institutions are national agencies, ministries, colleges and universities, language centres, municipalities, and penitentiary care (Nordic Network for Adult Learning, 2020). 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 connection to the Civil Servant Committee for Education – the steering committee of NVL - within the Nordic Council of Ministers for Education (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 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). 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).

The work of NVL 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. Hence, the possibility of quickly setting up and closing down networks, working groups, etc. seems to be one of the strengths of the Nordic Council of Ministers. 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).

# Analysis of the policy learning process

This part of the analysis will address the first research question mentioned in the Introduction about the process of policy learning.

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).

This fact increases the potential for policy learning in the NVL. The reason is that national representatives have difficulties admitting policy failures in their own country when evidence points in that direction. An interviewee explained that there had been a shift from national government representatives to experts and what it 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).

This also implies that NVL networks should not be under any form of political pressure from government representatives. However, another interviewee stated that there is still 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.

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. The new model is both more flexible and activates participants more intensively, thereby potentially contributing to increased learning and cooperation 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 chapter, 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.

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.

# Analysis of the policy learning output

This part of the analysis will address the second research question on policy learning output in the Introduction. According to the interviewees, all four options of policy learning output categorised above in this article 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). In principle, this output of the NVL might include all four policy learning options explained above in the section on ‘What is policy learning?’.

It should be noted that the problem orientation in NVL is quite institutionalised. 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), highlighting specifically the importance of network activities actually being used in a policy context. Again, the output of these policy learning processes might be consistent with both 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. This is probably not least the case when it is combined with the epistemic or reflexive modes of policy learning, cf. above in this chapter.

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 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.

An example of the perceived policy learning output from NVL is 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 of 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 Nordic ‘value consensus’ enhances the probability of a successful output of the process (Dolowitz and March, 1996, p. 354) (see also chapter chapter 5 of this book).

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, etc. published under the auspices of the network (Interview 7).

# Conclusion

The subject of this chapter is policy learning among the Nordic countries, where it has been cultivated for more than 50 years. We have selected NVL as a case because it seems to represent Nordic Council of Ministers networks in general.

The Nordic Council of Ministers is a very flexible organisation, which is able to respond to varies political wishes. It is organised via a layered structure with ministers at the top, senior civil servants in the middle with supervisory tasks, and experts in the many networks at the ground level where the active policy learning takes place.

In response to the first research question about what characterises the policy learning process in the Nordic Council of Ministers, 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.

However, 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. 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 and not country representatives 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.

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