

## The Nordic approach to lifelong learning

By Claus Holm

We live in times of profound economic crisis, and we also live in times of profound interest in lifelong learning. You can almost feel tempted to say that the interest in lifelong learning peaks when we experience an economic crisis. At least you could say that in the 1980s the interest in lifelong learning was connected with the contemporary economic crisis, and the current interest – and very high expectations of lifelong learning – is linked with an even more profound economic crisis.

It is equally tempting to say that the Nordic countries – Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland – are attracting global attention in this crisis situation. Recently the weekly publication *The Economist*, for example, published a special report called ‘The Nordic countries. The next supermodel’, as if learning to become Nordic would solve all the problems that nations around the world are currently facing. But how did the Nordic countries get to become Nordic – and interesting question to answer; also for many Nordic people as myself.

Before answering this question, I would like to emphasise that the Nordic countries are actually very small countries: only 26 million people in total, and only 5.5 million people in my home country, Denmark. So, we are talking about small and adaptive countries. To illustrate this you could compare Denmark with Singapore.

Denmark is the size of Singapore. Nevertheless – or maybe because of this smallness – Denmark has been one of the world’s most wealthy and prosperous countries for more than 40 years. While the political economy of Denmark has attracted interest for quite some time, this is partly due to the country’s welfare model and the inhabitants’ quality of life, but it is also because of the Danish ability to adapt to international changes. The same goes for all the small Nordic countries, as it is of crucial importance for these countries to be able to adapt to changing circumstances.

The main questions for this presentation are, firstly, which kind of lifelong learning model contributes to this relatively attractive situation of the Nordic countries? And secondly, in which way – if any – is this model especially Nordic? Expressed a bit differently: Can each and every nation learn to become Nordic? And last but not least, do the Nordic countries themselves still believe in a specific Nordic approach to lifelong learning?

### Three approaches

It is possible to identify three approaches to lifelong learning: the humanistic, the economic, and a mixture of a humanistic and an economic approach.

The first approach, the humanistic-inspired approach, was initiated 40 years ago when a UNESCO Commission led by the then Minister of Education in France, Edgar Faure, published the report *Learning to be*. This report presented lifelong learning as a philosophical–political vision to build a democratic and emancipatory system of learning opportunities independent of class, race, economic ability and learner age. The report was an example of a very typical approach to lifelong learning in the 1970s.

The second approach to lifelong learning gained footing in the 1990s. In summary, you could say that the concept of lifelong learning changed from being about ‘learning to be’ to ‘learning to be productive and employable’. And this change also reflected a change in which international organisations set the agenda for the discussion on lifelong learning. In the 1970s it was UNESCO, but in the 1990s I think it is fair to say that it was the more pragmatic, more concrete and, above all, more economically dominated interpretation of lifelong learning, expressed by the OECD in particular, that dominated the picture. OECD published the report *Lifelong learning for all* in 1996. It emphasised knowledge, information and ideas as elements in the economies of developed countries that were in the process of changing from the old industrial order to an emerging model of a learning economy.

The third approach to lifelong learning is not as clear as the two others, but, in summary, you could say that the concept is now changing from being about ‘learning to be employable’ to ‘learning to live well as employable learners’. Previously – for example, back in the 1970s – people would say that they worked to live, but today more and more people live to work, and they hold jobs that require continuous development – both personally and as employees – through learning, throughout life.

Having these three approaches in mind, my thesis will be that the attention that the Nordic countries are getting has to do with the impression that the Nordic countries have figured out how to balance the humanistic and economic aspects of living today as a learning individual in learning societies. Maybe the Nordic countries have arrived at the future before others, as it was expressed in the weekly publication *The Economist*.

## Equality through education

My point of departure for giving a short description of the Nordic approach to lifelong learning is to identify the social value that has traditionally underpinned the Nordic approach to nation-building. This is quite easy and obvious. The social value is equality. That is, lifelong learning systems in the Nordic countries produce more equal skills outcomes from school and benefit from high rates of adult learning participation. You can condense this approach by using the expression 'equality through education'.

So the first conclusion is that Nordic countries are substantially more egalitarian and are characterised by higher levels of trust than most developed countries. This is probably due to the fact that Scandinavian social democracy, since its emergence as a dominant political force in 1920s, has placed high value on social solidarity. This is manifested in the emphasis on cross-class solidarity achieved through consensus-seeking alliance politics. It has also been strongly promoted through socially integrationalist education policies, which emphasise social class mixing and the importance of nurturing co-operative behaviour and community values.

The second conclusion is that there seems to be a connection between the Nordic countries' lifelong learning approach and the approach to the knowledge economy. Thereby I am – with professor Andy Green from the Institute of Education, University of London – saying that the Nordic countries have an egalitarian school system that produces more equal educational outcomes and skills distribution, which contributes directly to income equality and indirectly to social cohesion. Likewise, adult learning contributes to high employment rates and social inclusion through employment, thereby also contributing to economic competitiveness.

So does this mean that the Nordic countries are not experiencing any financial crisis? No, of course not. The Nordic countries can also feel the effects of reduced world demand, and the mounting global competition also puts the Nordic countries' export economies under pressure. The Nordic countries are therefore also trying to constrain public spending so that taxation does not rise to levels that deter foreign investors and undermine market confidence. Therefore these Social Democratic Nordic states are currently vulnerable.

That being said, I must admit that it is hard not to be happy about the still relatively strong social solidarity. At least I think that the Nordic countries have

reason to be grateful considering the alternatives. In Britain and the United States the crisis is much more profound, not to mention the situation in southern European countries such as Greece, Portugal and Spain.

### **Learning to become Nordic?!**

But can any nation choose to learn to become Nordic or for that sake Danish. Francis Fukuyama told us in this book “The origins of political order” that Denmark as a Nordick country is a mythical known to have good political and economic institutions. But that may be the case but there is nothing mysterious or secret about how to become Nordic. Actually the recipe is quite official, so let me briefly try to present it for you.

The recipe was actually written shortly after the Second World War by two trade union economists, Rudolph Meidner and Gösta Rehn. And the important thing to notice about this recipe is that the Meidner–Rehn argument is general; it is not restricted to the special conditions of Scandinavia. They distinguished between two kinds of country.

On the one hand, there are countries characterised by large inequalities in the structure of pay, which permit technologically backward firms to stay competitive, despite higher unit costs, by paying their workers less than progressive firms. Thus a high level of inequality in the wage structure would be associated with weak technological dynamism, a lower rate of investment in best-practice technique, and, over time, a lower average productivity and standard of living than would otherwise be the case.

On the other hand, there are countries like the Nordic countries that deliberately adopt a policy of compressing wage differentials, which puts the technological laggards out of business. It therefore releases labour, especially since backward businesses tend to be labour-intensive. But with active labour market policies – that is, providing education and retraining for displaced workers, a large investment-goods sector replacing the lost capacity, and a policy of strong aggregate demand that aims to assure market growth sufficient to absorb the greater production – the end result can be rapid expansion by the technologically progressive firms.

And added to this is a policy of international openness – rigorous rejection of trade protection – encouraging the advanced firms to find an ever-larger share of their markets in the wider world. In this way, over time, a policy of social democratic wage compression increases average productivity and average living standards; this

is what actually happened from the 1940s through to the 1990s. *But it has to be stressed that the only thing that made the Meidner–Rehn model ‘Scandinavian’ was that it was invented and applied in the Nordic countries – and ignored everywhere else. That is, until today.*

So the general message here is – with the experience of the Nordic countries in mind – that regions with more equal pay structures will, others things held constant, experience less unemployment. And the basic explanation for this is that in local areas where the differentials between low-paid jobs and better-paid jobs are not great, people do not usually take significant action to improve their lot. The costs are too large, and the potential gains are too small. Further, for the Meidner–Rehn reasons also given above, regions with a long history of egalitarian pay are likely to be technologically progressive, competitive and relatively prosperous, so that even in the larger framework of national or international comparison people will tend to be content with their lot.

So once more I would like to stress that there is not any secret recipe behind the Nordic model. On the one hand you could say that the Nordic countries just applied a successful model before other countries, and this is one of the very simple reasons why these countries have reached the future of lifelong learning and the knowledge economy first. On the other hand you also have to say that for example extremely poor and chaotic countries it will in short order be difficult to become Nordic given how long time it take for nations to be build and Denmark also reflect cultural values that cannot take root in every cultural context. So there is certainly no quick fix to become a learning nation like Denmark.

### **Mobility through education**

But how do the Nordic countries themselves try to remain a successful learning nation today? The strategy for the Nordic countries has been named ‘mobication’ – mobility through education – by Professor Ove K. Pedersen from Copenhagen Business School in Denmark. Mobication is about the fact that the future employment policy must be able to create conditions that promote labour mobility and do this by using lifelong and systematic competence development for each and every individual. This demands at least two things in the current climate.

The first thing is that it demands a shift of focus. It is not enough – as, for instance, Denmark did in the 1990s – to focus on what happens when someone loses their job. It is not enough to have a labour market policy that seeks to solve an unemployment problem once it has happened, and to try to find out how to get the

unemployed employed again within a few months. Instead, the new and main focus should be on an employment policy that is much more future-oriented and long-term oriented, which tries to conceive what should happen in the next five to ten years to make sure that the whole labour force continually has the ability to adjust to a dynamic development of the labour market. So the first major change is a change from a labour market policy to an employment policy. In the future it is not nearly enough to concentrate on the difference between being unemployed and employed. Instead you have to create flexibility in relation to different kinds of employment through education and training.

The second thing that is of crucial importance for this mobility policy to succeed is that there is good co-ordination between employment policy and educational policy, because this is critical for business competitiveness. There should be a strong focus on education and training when you are employed or preparing for employment, so that the workforce maintains its ability to adjust to a dynamic labour market. The reason for this is that the Nordic labour markets are changing quite dramatically at the moment, where the Nordic countries are experiencing a shift in the direction of a knowledge-intensive production while many traditional industries are disappearing. If this change is not followed by intensive education and training efforts, the Nordic countries will experience a situation where there will be, on the one hand, a lack of qualified labour and, on the other hand, a large labour force where not enough people are qualified to take on the jobs that are actually available. So this is the big challenge for the Nordic countries right now: to be able to create one of the most mobile workforces in the world that continually uses education to be qualified for new jobs, in new places and in new functions.

So you could say that the Nordic countries are less focused on equality through education than they used to be in the past when they saw themselves as welfare states, but now they see themselves as competition states that are focused on mobilising the whole population through education.

## **Conclusion**

So let me sum up the main points of my presentation.

First of all, the Nordic countries' approach to lifelong learning is about finding a mix between a humanistic and an economic approach to lifelong learning that contributes to economic prosperity and well-being for all people in a knowledge-intensive learning economy.

Secondly, although the Nordic countries have managed to find a mix between a humanistic and an economic approach to lifelong learning, there is no big mystery to this achievement. In principle, every nation can, with eagerness and patience, learn to be Nordic – the Nordic countries just learnt it first.

Thirdly, the Nordic countries may have arrived at the future of lifelong learning first, but this is not without challenges. Right now the Nordic countries are still focused on education, but they are less focused on equality through education, and more focused on mobilisation through education.