

9. Good friends and faceless partners: educational cooperation for community building in the Barents Region

Marit Sundet

INTRODUCTION

Can educational cooperation between higher educational institutions (HEIs) in Russia and Norway contribute to developing a sense of community in the Barents Region? This question stems from political intentions to strengthen the social, cultural and economic relations between the countries. In speeches, treaties and statements (e.g., Putin, 2010; White Paper, 2011–2012), institutions throughout the region are encouraged to work together to develop joint academic programmes and research projects with the idea of raising the level of regional expertise and producing new and sorely needed knowledge across a wide range of fields. The Barents Region is a 21-year-old macro-political construction; a formalized multilateral collaboration between a number of countries within a geographically limited area. Aside from strong commercial, environmental and resource-related interests, there is also a so-called ‘people-to-people cooperation’ among the leading objectives for development of the region. The idea is that such projects may build bridges across international borders and create a close and beneficial coexistence. Various types of educational collaborations are involved in this particular category of objectives.

In attempting to provide an answer to this question on whether bilateral educational cooperation contributes to the development of a regional community, I begin by presenting an empirical example that will be described in greater detail later on in the chapter. I will then briefly point to several perspectives on the factors that encourage organizations to incorporate institutional changes such as those that have been initiated by countries in the Barents Region. Thereafter, I will elaborate on what characterizes the actual cooperation referred to in my example. The idea is to explore how

the involved HEIs' motivation to participate is associated with the political expectations that these types of people-to-people projects will result in closer and improved relations between people in the region.

EDUCATIONAL COOPERATION

The educational cooperation used as an example here is comprised of one Norwegian and seven Russian institutions of higher education. Geographically, these institutions are spread over a large area (1 755 800 sq. km) known as the Barents Region. This collaboration began on a small scale, at the time of the new millennium. At the outset, one enthusiastic academic at the Norwegian HEI primarily drove the project. The establishment process, in and of itself, was quite typical for how a strategically gifted individual may take advantage of new negotiating terms that arise as a result of changes in an organization's institutionalized surroundings. Among the changes involved, there were two factors in particular that should be highlighted. One factor was the awakening of possibilities after the Cold War, born of a close political cooperation to face unresolved issues and challenges encompassing a range of fields. The other major factor was the realization of large and ample opportunities to harness natural resources and develop business in the northern regions. The oil industry, fisheries, mining and other businesses based on natural resources, however, are connected to environmental considerations and sustainability. Exploitation of natural resources and environmental challenges are, therefore, central issues in the political cooperation. Additionally, both Russia and Norway have strategic geopolitical and defence interests in the region. The development of the bilateral relationship, therefore, has the function of preserving the peace as well.

From the Norwegian perspective, Russia comprises a cornerstone of the northern political arena (White Paper, 2011–2012: 11), while the northern regions are simultaneously described as Norway's most important strategic area in foreign politics. From the Russian side, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov spoke at a 2008 meeting in Kirkenes about the Barents Cooperation as an example of Russia's desire to work together with its neighbouring countries. In a speech in Moscow on the Barents Cooperation, President Putin emphasized the significance that the Russians place on such work by pointing out, among other things, that 'preserving the Arctic as a zone of peace and cooperation is of the utmost importance for Russia' (Putin, 2010).¹

As a foundation for the educational collaboration, two areas of prioritization are often referred to. One is the development of knowledge

in a range of different fields that primarily include the natural science disciplines. The other is the so-called ‘people-to-people cooperation’ involving approximately the same number of fields, where education is brought into focus as a particularly critical area of collaboration. With cooperation in the areas of research and education as a priority, the Norwegian side has invested a considerable amount of financial support, primarily toward the natural sciences here as well. Additionally, they have provided clear expectations in the form of politically formulated goals for all the relevant institutions including treaties, White Papers and speeches. These types of political expectations have had a clear influence on the adaptations made by HEIs in the Barents Region; a subject that will be addressed in more detail below.

The other institutionalized innovation that is important to highlight is the net-based University of the Arctic, which was established in 1997 by the Arctic Council and, therefore, is primarily a circumpolar collaboration between eight member countries. It was through University of the Arctic that the Norwegian catalyst discovered how he would connect his own HEI to Russian educational institutions. Over time, he succeeded in establishing what, today, is a relatively well-functioning educational cooperation between eight HEIs in the Barents Region. The academic programmes, which all lead to a BCS degree (Bachelor of Circumpolar Studies), have experienced consistent annual growth and, in 2012, the total number of Russian students registered was well over 300. The total number of Norwegian students tied to the BCS programmes, however, is far more modest.

As shown in the map in Figure 9.1, there are large geographical distances between the cooperating HEIs in this network. Although some of the Russian HEIs are located in the same city, there are nonetheless considerable differences between them in relation to size (from 1600 to 20000 students), academic profile, financial foundation, management principles and strategies for internationalization. To explain these differences in greater detail would encompass a broad introduction into a complicated Russian educational system and the comprehensive reforms it is currently undergoing, a topic that would require a chapter of its own. The Norwegian HEI, University of Nordland, is the institution that enrolls the most Russian students in Norway each year, of which 75 per cent apply for the BCS programme.

In practice, the BCS cooperation is run by one coordinator at each of the Russian HEIs, and two from the Norwegian HEI. I hold the position of leader for the network while also occupying a leading role at the University of the Arctic. Aside from the regular and relatively frequent contact we have via the Internet, there is a formal annual meeting involving



Note: Bodø (1 HEI): University of Nordland. Murmansk (3 HEIs): International Institute of Business Education, Murmansk State Humanities University, Murmansk State Technical University. Arkhangelsk (1 HEI): The Northern (Arctic) Federal University. Syktyvkar (2 HEIs): Syktyvkar State University, Komi Republican Academy of State Service and Administration. St Petersburg (1 HEI): State Polar Academy.

Figure 9.1 Location of HEIs participating in educational cooperation

orientation and policy formation, where the hosting responsibilities rotate amongst the HEIs. Since each coordinator often has also at least one assistant join the meeting, there are usually 18 to 20 people present each time. The work of this network is explained in more detail elsewhere (Sundet, 2015).

In order to approach the question of whether this educational cooperation contributes in some way to building a sense of community from a people-to-people perspective, I refer to data that have been collected through a larger research project on institutional collaboration and student exchange between Norway and Russia. Because the educational cooperation referred to also exists in competitive versions tied to other HEIs in Russia and Norway,² these are also included in the research project's database.

In terms of data for this chapter, I draw upon a series of sources. Ten interviews with different HEIs were carried out: three in Murmansk, one in Arkjangelsk, two in Syktyvkar and one in St Petersburg. The three Norwegian institutions included in the data collection are located in each of the three northernmost counties of Norway. Many of the informants are also involved in a number of similar educational cooperation. Seventeen interviews were carried out at Russian HEIs, including four rectors, four vice-rectors and nine BCS coordinators. In addition to these

31 interviews, I draw upon detailed information that I have recorded on the educational cooperation over time, specifically a multitude of conversations with colleagues and key persons at the various HEIs involved in my role as academic director. Having held this position for many years, observations and impressions throughout my tenure form some of the empirical foundation.

REGIONAL ISOMORPHISM OF THE EDUCATIONAL COOPERATION

The basis of current institutional theory is that organizations operating within the same organizational field are characterized by a structural convergence over time. In the context of this chapter, the organizational field consists of HEIs and is both international and complex. In principle, it should not be limited to the Barents Region. The concept refers to the idea that organizations operating within the same functional areas will eventually come to resemble one another; not just in the form of organizational structures and formal procedures but also in the way that they influence each other's norms and perceptions of reality. The organizational field is institutionalized by creating mutual norms, as well as through understandings of problems and perceptions of their own and others' roles through interactive social processes.

This isomorphism – that the organizations adapt to one another and their surroundings through processes that mutually shape and coordinate them – may easily be seen by the educational cooperation as creating a direct and almost exclusive context of speeches, treaties and measures that provide meaning and guidelines for the cooperation in the Barents Region. It is, therefore, important to differentiate between that which is specifically regional and that which is typical for the international development within the organizational field of which the HEIs are a part.

The following explanation uses DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) three mechanisms of isomorphic change as a guide. The first of these mechanisms is 'coercive isomorphism', describing when an organization is pressured into implementing certain solutions or taking on specific duties through a form of persuasion or invitations from the surrounding environment. The methods used in formulating speeches and treaties express clearly, if not quite specifically, what the authorities in both countries expected of their educational institutions in the Barents Region. For the HEIs involved in the educational cooperation, this undoubtedly feels as much like genuine pressure as it does as generous invitations, thus making it seem somewhat mandatory to comply. Additionally, political and economic adaptations are

made that, collectively, represent not only stimuli and tempting possibilities, but also a clear imperative for the HEIs to act.

The second isomorphic mechanism is defined as ‘mimetic processes’ and points to how the organization imitates its surroundings. In the context of this chapter, this refers to other HEIs globally as well as in the Barents Region. Educational and research collaboration across borders is a strong and growing international trend, of which BCS is only a small part. In order to demonstrate that a HEI is both contemporary and ‘fashionable’, it will adopt successful solutions and new ways of acting from the international environment. Such adaptations have a legitimizing effect because they give testament to an institution’s ability to keep up with the trends, and follow in the footsteps of recognized and popular HEIs out in the world, eventually allowing it to be compared to the same institutions it regards so highly.

The third isomorphic mechanism is referred to as ‘normative pressures’, and is particularly connected to how professional norms and academic standards influence the shaping of the HEIs’ strategies to a great degree. The more the individual HEI is involved in the international network, the more it will come to resemble the institutions it cooperates with over time.

Viewed from the perspective of the three isomorphic mechanisms, it is reasonable to conclude that the educational cooperation surrounding the BCS programme is driven by a coherent Russian and Norwegian political will expressed through the desire for a multifunctional Barents Region. It is naturally far from a coincidence that this collaboration has been established at a time when internationalization is one of the core concepts among the leadership at HEIs the world over. It is a necessary prerequisite to waking the interest of those very institutions. Furthermore, it is positive, useful and educational in that it provides free access to experience, solutions and strategies. The Barents Cooperation opens an arena for the HEIs in the region to more easily take part in the internationalization process, identify themselves as internationalists, and comply with professional standards and norms and academic habitus. The isomorphism, in itself, will lead to a structural convergence, thereby suggesting that the educational cooperation comprises a central people-to-people project and an important element in the building of community in the Barents Region.

In reaching such a conclusion, the educational cooperation is viewed as a social and cultural construction in line with the way most buildings are perceived and assessed according to the part that sticks up out of the ground, and less seldom according to the foundations. Therefore, I would like to invite the reader on a tour beneath the surface to delve more deeply into this educational cooperation and look more closely at the seams. In the study of institutions, it is not an unusual phenomenon to overlook

the fact that there are people inside, and that it is the people – not the institutions – who interact with one another.

INSTITUTIONALIZATION: ACTION AND MOTIVE

In many ways, the educational cooperation in the Barents Region may seem like a cumulative process with regionalizing effects. It increases in scope as new relations are established across borders and, eventually, the participants in the network get better acquainted with each other's institutions. This can initially seem like a good foundation for a growing community and, in fact, it is well on the way to being realized. The question is, however: where does the focus of the researcher lie and what may be accomplished, when all is said and done, to hold this most fragile community together? Let me begin with a comparison.

For many years as part of a long life together, an older couple went to monthly concerts at the local symphony hall. Without exception, they dressed up, left early and sat in their regular seats in the half-full concert hall. In her later years, the wife told her husband that these musical experiences had been life-sustaining for her, while at the same time she had basically hated all the small-talk and cultural snobbery that went on during the pauses and in the foyer bar afterwards. The husband had to admit that it was precisely the social aspects of the whole thing – the chit-chat, discussion and laughter – that had got him to join her for the concerts at all. He had never really liked the music.

In our context, this story can serve as a basis for the question on what institutionalization is all about. Does it have to do with the monthly ritual of getting dressed up, going to a concert and drinking a glass of wine, only to return home again afterwards? Or, on the contrary, is it the desire to go, along with the experience of being there, that are the institutionalized characteristics of this couple's monthly routine? The first motivation is of an external nature and points merely to action. The second is of a value-based nature and refers to an inner drive that gets two people to establish a set routine. The third possibility that could emerge from this story is connected to the couple's individual abilities and characteristics: that her ear for classical music and his musicality for small-talk do not necessarily mirror their normative interests and devotions. A fourth element that should be addressed is the strategic side of the situation: she lets him mingle with other people during the interval and at the bar afterwards so that he will be motivated to join her for the concert. He joins her for the concert because it gives him the opportunity to meet other people. A fifth aspect of this example is that two people carry out a set ritual together that, on

the outside, may appear to mean the same for both of them, while each of their value-based reasons and particular affinities to act are quite different. Awareness of this parallelism, like the knowledge that small children play together without really playing with each other, is often lacking in studies on institutionalization. It is these five aspects – the external, the value-based, the distinct, the strategic and the parallel – that I will apply when discussing the regionalizing significance of the educational cooperation.

THE EXTERNAL ASPECT

The collaboration between the Norwegian and Russian HEIs produces exam results and candidates who move on to further studies or work. The BCS courses receive positive evaluations, and satisfied students take hold of their diplomas while expressing gratitude for a wonderful educational experience and talented teachers. The network of key individuals who organize and drive these studies work well together; something that, in practice, constitutes the most important prerequisite for the cooperation and its yield of candidates (Sundet, 2015). In this field, it may metaphorically be regarded as the womb in a long-term pregnancy called internationalization. The Russian HEIs can point to the fact that a large number of their students receive international education and can decorate themselves with academic grades according to the criteria of the Bologna Process. On the other hand, the Norwegian HEIs can point to the fact that they educate a considerable number of foreign students. To a certain degree, the educational cooperation has also resulted in Russian researchers being included in projects initiated by Norwegian members of the BCS network, financed by the Research Council of Norway. In other words, when viewed from the outside, this collaboration seems to symbolize a process of advancement in which interaction between important players and integration of central fields may be interpreted as providing influential effects in a regionalizing process in the Barents Region.

THE VALUE-BASED ASPECT

Once the BCS network began to take shape, and the members became better acquainted, each individual's value-based and normative understandings became more evident and, as often happens when relations become closer, the members began to show more clearly who they are and what their opinions and viewpoints represent. In an educational cooperation, however, the individuals' norms and values are subordinate

to formalized principles, statutes and guidelines for how the collaboration should function. Legitimization of decisions in individual cases is thus achieved by referencing the formal framework for the network, while individual opinions on the same cases may be quite divergent and are only confidentially expressed one-on-one. In some cases where reason and values have not corresponded with the applicable decisions and principles, we have attempted to establish a practice of compliance with what certain individuals consider desirable and necessary rather than following what is prescribed in formalized guidelines.

In many ways, the work within the network appears to be in line with Berreman's (1962) concept of 'back stage and front stage'; that is, with one arena that is hidden from outsiders and another that is open to review by the public. From this perspective, the participants in the network have the ability to discuss amongst themselves to achieve what is both appropriate and correct. Through the working process, values and norms are defined, as Selznick (1957) describes, when institutionalization occurs by enshrining key values in an organization, which are shared and defended by its members over time. It then follows that these values and norms develop a regulatory function for what is desirable and viable within the network. At the same time, they comprise the abstract contracts and loosely defined references that bind the participants together, create a sense of belonging, and give meaning and identity to the individuals as well as the duties for which they are responsible (Sundet, 2015).

On the other hand, many of the external conditions for action are also of a value-based character and primarily reflect political prioritizations that have been made within the framework of cultural, social and economic prerequisites. Where the educational collaboration is concerned, this applies to prioritizations that reflect how the 'powers that be' in the various countries assess the importance of and desire for this type of bilateral development work. The educational level in Russia is considerably higher than that in Norway.³

When compared with the Russian efforts to support domestic education, the international educational collaboration has not been as highly esteemed. However, the educational authorities have recently set a long line of new objectives for this field in relation to, for example, improved language training, increased number of foreign stipends and more joint academic programmes at a higher level with foreign HEIs. At this point in time, though, many of these measures are indefinitely postponed (Kolle, 2014). Our informants refer to the fact that their HEIs do not have specific budgets for internationalization work, and that the lack of resources should be seen as an indication of how critically the authorities evaluate bilateral cooperation. The informants additionally feel that low salaries

among academic staff do not help to encourage extra efforts in areas that fall outside of the core duties. Furthermore, they claim that only a few of the teachers and researchers who use their time on internationalization have idealist or altruistic motives: first and foremost, they have individual objectives and are more concerned with their own careers than they are with supporting a self-sacrificing, 'inter-people' initiative. At the Norwegian HEI involved in this unique cooperation as well, internationalization does not hold any particular value beyond the recognition gained from having numerous foreign HEIs as collaborative partners, large numbers of foreign students, and a multitude of academic articles published in international books and journals. The last benefit, incidentally, does not even involve a need for the researcher to leave their office. The staff connected to BCS is small and, on top of a heavy teaching load, daily communication with Russian colleagues in the network and a considerable number of travel days, they face strict demands for scientific output. When it comes to resources, the staff's salary and a modest sum for running costs comprise the budgeting categories for the educational cooperation. Earnings and finances are the everyday concepts and values, while internationalization is more often only addressed with a few eloquent words at a gala event.

THE DISTINCT ASPECT

In this context, the distinct aspect is not tied to individual persons but to properties of political, social, economic and cultural circumstances, and to characteristics of the individual institutions involved in the collaboration. In all of these areas, the differences between countries can be relatively large. Within the network, it is essential that these differences are not placed in a qualitative parameter but are rather briefly and positively considered as necessary givens. In certain limited fields, hope, aspirations and the occasional concrete suggestion may arise to change the circumstances of a HEI and, as a rule, these have to do with problematic bottlenecks and obstacles to administrative processes.

When the informants are asked about the structural characteristics that they feel are of particular significance to the educational cooperation, they point almost exclusively to factors that make difficult or hinder optimal participation from the Russian side. When they argue that the BCS cooperation functions quite well, it is because the programme recruits a large number of Russian students to the Norwegian HEI. The other side of the coin is that only a modest number of Norwegian youth choose to study at the Russian HEIs. There are many reasons for this, the most important of which is that the Russian educational institutions have a

severe lack of courses available in English in addition to the fact that they have yet to implement the Bologna Process grade structure and European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) system. According to federal legislation, this requires all students, including foreigners, to take exams in certain mandatory courses connected to the Russian programme. Another major point that the informants bring up is the Russian HEIs' lack of autonomy when it comes to shaping and changing their programmes of study. Most academic programmes are planned and developed outside the universities and come as mandates from the Department of Education and Research. Therefore, staff at the universities have little or no opportunity to develop their own programmes. This involves a lack of ability for the individual HEIs to offer flexible and proactive adaptation to innovations and trends in the international education market.

Several of the informants claim that foreign students and their special needs for academic adaptation receive too little attention in Russia. This is also explained by structural characteristics of the Russian system that may additionally rationalize the lack of engagement in international work among academic staff at the HEIs. It has already been mentioned that low salaries and absence of budgetary resources for such work sway academic interest in other directions. Moreover, informants point to the small number of Russian researchers who speak English as a considerable obstacle that continues to stand in the way of participation in international programmes. Last but not least, our informants believe that Russian HEIs lack knowledge and perspectives on international educational and research collaboration. They have little or no experience with this type of bilateral or multilateral work process, and the threshold for taking the initiative oneself or accepting foreign invitations to collaborate on such work is relatively high.

The opposite holds true for the Norwegian HEIs. In the past few years, interest in international educational and research collaboration has risen considerably, and most of these institutions have agreements with cooperating partners worldwide. The numbers of those agreements often more accurately reflect their symbolic significance than the practical significance of the cooperation. In other words, many of the intended agreements with foreign universities do not go beyond the intentional stage and are more often employed as pontifical attributions at the involved HEIs than as a foundation for concrete joint projects.

We could, therefore, ask why the BCS cooperation is not only operative but also productive and successful. On the Russian side of the equation, we have HEIs with generally little experience, relatively limited competence and few incentives to engage in international teamwork. On the Norwegian side, we have HEIs that seem to have somewhat broader competence

and more resources in the field. At the same time, they have numerous other cooperating partners in Western countries that they more closely and structurally relate to in various areas, which would suggest that they are more compatible to collaborate with. It is thus reasonable to assume that the answers for why the BCS programme functions so well should be viewed in the context of the unique circumstances that exist within the Russian–Norwegian educational cooperation.

Among such unique circumstances are the various incentives that have been developed through the macro-political collaboration between Russia and Norway; something I will elaborate on below. As with most forms of institutional bilateral connections, the motivation to participate in the BCS cooperation does not primarily stem from altruistic and compassionate feelings for others, but rather from an assessment of the advantages and possibilities that may be derived from such transactions. The Barents Cooperation and northern region politics have been criticized for being primarily concerned with cooperating on environmental issues, exploitation of natural resources and traditional trade. The critics also point to a lack of knowledge, and the absence of viewpoints on other possible areas of collaboration that could generate comparable benefits within the region (Young and Einarsson, 2004; Bærenholdt, 2007). It was obvious that education was considered a possible field of cooperation from the start. It was unclear, however, exactly which aspects of education the collaboration would focus on. What eventually became evident was that the mutual benefits of an educational cooperation could not simply be adopted. On the contrary, it needed to be developed from the perspective of the one fundamental question for all HEIs involved: not surprisingly, ‘What’s in it for me?’ The answer to this question gives an indication of what constitutes the fundamental driving force of the cooperation.

For the couple who had very different reasons for their monthly visits to the symphony hall – hers being the musical experience, his being the social experience – it does not have to do with the unique aspects of the concerts, meaning the music in itself and the social aspects of being there. First and foremost, it has to do with characteristics of these two people and how they each strategically choose to suffer through the other’s favourite part of the evening in order to get to the part they themselves love. Without bringing too much of the suffering and sacrificial aspects of this example into the reasoning process, it would nonetheless be naive to tone down or underestimate the strategic factors related to the justification for the collaboration between the Russian and Norwegian HEIs. The excitement of success has a tendency to place an attractive veil over the critical eye.

THE STRATEGIC ASPECT

The requirement to earn money is decisive in whether the study programmes at Norwegian HEIs are successful and viable or whether they need to be reshaped or discontinued. At the Norwegian HEI involved in the educational cooperation discussed here, the BCS programme has a high reputation, primarily due to the fact that it generates income. The fact that the programme contributes symbolic capital, in the form of active participation in international education, and is the underlying cause of large externally financed research projects at the institution, is simply seen as a fringe benefit. Here as well, it seems that core activities are limited to the traditional academic disciplines and established professional studies, while studies that are driven in cooperation with foreign institutions are more easily considered as temporary applications.

This short-term perspective stems from an uncertainty tied to several factors surrounding the BCS programme. One such factor is the debate that is currently simmering in Norway on the adoption of study programme fees for foreign students; something that, if accepted, will eliminate the decisive advantage the Norwegian HEIs have in the competition for Russian students. Another factor is that running the programme requires an enormous amount of work in the form of administration, daily Internet communication, and a large number of travel days to exchange necessary information and maintain contact with the network. On top of teaching and research duties, this constitutes a workload that limits the recruitment of academic staff and essentially deters colleagues from getting involved. A third factor is connected to unforeseen changes at the cooperating HEIs that, in turn, change the prerequisites and level of access for students. A fourth and very contemporary factor is international disquiet and crises like the one currently unfolding between Western countries and Russia, in which mutual political and economic sanctions are an important part of the dialogue. Among the responses to the fact that Norway has joined the European Union (EU) sanctioning measures, there is naturally a fear of decreased efforts in the Barents Cooperation, which would have serious consequences for the BCS programme. So far, however, there is little indication that Russia will not hold true to its statements on the significance of the positive development in this region.

Investing heavily in this educational cooperation could, therefore, fall under the African saying that goes something like this: 'Only idiots measure the depth of the river with both legs'. The Norwegian HEI prefers to follow the advice of its own proverb to 'strike while the iron is hot'; that is, as long as the possibility of a profitable collaboration exists, it is only natural to invest. On the other hand, it would be irresponsible to invest

more than an unpredictable future dictates. Taken to the extreme, the practical importance of 'profitable' means that prioritization should fall in the order of financial earnings, potential research projects and symbolic capital above cultural interaction and mutual learning. What the politicians and public speakers express through the open microphone is not in line with what is actually prioritized when it comes down to it. This point, although perhaps taken to an extreme, can also be verified.

From a Russian perspective, it is interesting to enter into collaboration with Norwegian HEIs due to the cost-free element of the study programme and the fact that only part of the programme needs to be completed on campus in Norway. According to my informants, this is a major reason behind the stream of Russian students coming to Norwegian HEIs. Another and important argument offered by the informants is that the educational cooperation puts pressure on the forward movement to implement the Bologna Process since it constitutes the reference point for the BCS grading structure. Equally beneficial, the cooperation also provides a form of training in how Russian HEIs should academically and administratively apply these principles. Studies show that Russia participates half-heartedly in the Bologna Process, among other things, because the educational and research budgets are characterized by the challenging times Russia faces economically (Kolle, 2014). The informants feel that the cooperation with Norwegian institutions has a positive effect on the implementation process, and that it is strategically critical since it strengthens the positions and possibilities of participating Russian HEIs both nationally and internationally.

This goal-oriented adaptation to a regional education market is stimulated through incentive systems. Some of these are of a financial nature, while others reflect political intentions toward bilateral cooperation that encourage HEIs in both countries to come together on student exchange, development of educational programmes and shaping of joint research projects. As previously mentioned, when it comes to financial stimuli, those on the Norwegian side are already connected to the financial model for the running of educational institutions, which has two relevant characteristics in this context. One is that education is also free for foreign students. The other is that close to a quarter of the individual HEIs' budgets are determined according to the number of exams successfully taken each year. This means that it is extremely advantageous for the HEIs to import students and, additionally, to support them in ways that result in the highest number of students passing their exams.

Similar to what occurs in Norway, the Russian financial stimulation of international educational cooperation is directed toward students coming to Russia. In fact, financial support in Russia is primarily used to subsidize

foreign students (up to 15 000) and to provide housing for them in addition to stipends that are in line with those of Russian students (Kolle, 2014). Aside from the fact that the Russian HEIs have another type of financing than in Norway, and that the number of BCS students in Russia is low, the financial aspects of the collaboration are not of particular significance to the Russian institutions. On the contrary, according to the informants, the most important factor for them is to comply with political expectations to strengthen the competitive edge that Russian higher education has in relation to other countries. They also need to position themselves individually in relation to the national competition for students and tactically relate to constant structural changes within the sector.

The understanding that internationalization is a transformation of higher education (Trondal et al., 2001) characterizes the thinking of both countries' educational institutions. Standing on the outside is like taking a seat in the audience instead of playing an active role in the play; and the processes of change and learning with cumulative and competence-building effects increases the lead the participants have on the audience. In the BCS cooperation, financial incentives are far more important for the Norwegians than for the Russians, while the political expectations for what should be accomplished are most critical for all of the HEIs, primarily due to the existential implications. When instincts for self-preservation take hold, these expectations could almost be seen as the institutions' political imperatives. In other words, the BCS educational cooperation should be viewed, first and foremost, as one of many steps in the strategic adjustments of all HEIs involved.

THE PARALLEL ASPECT

The couple at the concert, while sharing a mutual interest, had very divergent motives for it. They did not share in each other's experience other than that of sitting next to each other while they were at the concert. There is a similarity that may be transferred to the cooperating HEIs involved in this study, in that they interact with each other while having relatively different motivations for the cooperation. The natural argument to that idea would be that it is the results that count; in this case, that the education of students through the BCS programme has created a competence that may optimally benefit the entire Barents Region community. The fact that the cooperative partners' motives are different should hold little significance as long as the candidates complete their education and the assessments of both the students and the programme of study are positive. However, my line of questioning is of another nature in that I am asking whether the

educational cooperation, in and of itself, contributes to the building of community in the Barents Region. My observations, together with impressions from the informants, provide the basis for interpreting the interaction between the involved HEIs as a parallelism; that is, a set of simultaneous actions that have intentional consequences in which the benefits for each HEI are far more important than the interaction with other HEIs, and where the interaction, therefore, is primarily a means to an end rather than being the goal itself.

There is, however, the glue that holds the HEIs together; a common link and a critical prerequisite to the successful operation of the educational cooperation – namely, the network of coordinators. In addition to their academic and administrative positions, they have taken on the role of intermediary, interpreter and negotiator. Furthermore, they serve as tailors when the programme of study needs to be adapted to the HEIs' individual shapes and sizes, shoehorns to help it glide more easily into the standard models, and fire extinguishers when internal sparks result in small fires at the participating HEIs. The network is characterized by an inner solidarity that is of both a mechanical and an organic nature (Durkheim, 1893 [1997]). It is mechanical in that the participants should resolve the same issues and work together to lift each other up. On the other hand, it is organic in that one party has abilities and resources, needs and contributions that another party does not. The criteria for dependence are many, and the possibility for success lies in highlighting the mutual benefits of this joint dependence. The individuals in the network meet regularly in the flesh, follow up both small and large issues, and keep in close contact no matter what.

Agreements are entered into, contracts are written, principal questions are discussed and plans are made for the future. It is within this network that the real internationalization takes place; where the metamorphosis from vague intentions to practical implementation demands that each participant be active yet pragmatic, engaged yet realistic, short-sighted yet patient, stubborn yet understanding, goal-oriented yet willing to learn and, most of all, convinced that the network is a workshop for the shaping of ideas on how conflict-ridden and occasionally irresolvable problems should be managed (Sundet, 2015). In this context, internationalization often means uniting those who are incompatible, which happens in a practical way through this network. On the institutional level, there is often a lack of understanding, knowledge and interest for such network processes. Thus, the HEIs can easily be equated with cruise ship passengers or hotel guests in that progress, maintenance, safety on board, facilitation, serving and all other services happen through the network. At the same time, the HEI representatives find themselves at parties with one another having

to position themselves in the same arena without doing much more than giving each other a bit of attention, exchanging a few polite comments if necessary, and showing a modicum of appropriately managed behaviour while still maintaining some distance.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is precisely when the focus is shifted from the individual to the institutional level that the difference between good friends and faceless partners becomes evident. The HEIs represent the formal and impersonal aspects of the cooperative, while the network embodies the informal and personal aspects. As I have shown, the external picture of the HEIs' activities is that the BCS programme is a successful joint project where the educational cooperation functions well. The political values that refer to the people-to-people dimension of the Barents Cooperation treaties, however, are not the primary motivating force for the HEIs to enter into this mutual educational project. On the contrary, it is the unique characteristics of the HEIs and the institutional environments of both countries that make the BCS programme interesting and that make the educational collaboration a relatively limited but nonetheless strategic area of focus for each HEI. Therefore, the question of whether the educational cooperation contributes to the building of community in the Barents Region should be answered with a 'yes' – on condition that we distinguish between the faceless and impersonal partnership between the HEIs, and the collegial and far more close and personal relations between the individuals involved in the social collaborative processes from which the concrete results of BCS emerge.

To a certain degree, it will always be this way as long as institutions are made up of people. After all, when visiting an institution, we sit down with the people, not the organization. Furthermore, without the HEIs, these collaborating individuals would only be seen as private persons with little to represent, little reason to meet and little to offer one other besides themselves. On the other hand, when we talk about establishing a regional community, it is on the individual level that relations grow and ties are developed. However, as long as the work of the BCS network is only loosely tied to the individual HEIs, where it is seen as an unpredictable, volatile and temporary cooperative project with only a marginal connection to the core operation of the HEI, these educational institutions will not be able to develop closer ties.

Based on this simple reasoning, I would like to close by presenting three central points. First of all, while politics seems to be a parade of abstract

symbols, it appears mostly as a sequence of pictures in the head, placed there by debate experts and different types of media (Edelman, 1964). In the politically rhetorical creation of symbols that occurs through the interstate dialogues on educational cooperation in the Barents Region, this people-to-people dimension is not given any specific content other than the idea that it will eventually lead to positive relations on a meso-level, meaning between institutions.

This chapter shows that this requires a connection of cultural translators, social designers and talented practitioners from the HEIs involved. Symbols and politics should be interpreted and placed into local institutional contexts in ways that are acceptable and meaningful for the individual HEIs as well as for the collective of HEIs that participate. This refers to those who are delegated to the network who, when they meet, have the mission of sending white smoke up the chimney before they go home again. Without a well-functioning network, cooperation is not established and, therefore, no sense of community is achieved.

Secondly, the biggest challenge for the participants in the network seems to be that the educational cooperation does not quite get under the skin and into the heart of the HEIs, or to the core, as Selznick (1957) defines the organization's central values. This has many reasons and the explanations vary from one HEI to another, as I have shown. Even though the shaping of the academic programmes is made compatible through the network processes, they are primarily applied only superficially to the institutions' other activities. With few exceptions, internationalization is on the lips of the leadership, but there still seems to be quite a gap between idle talk and practical action. Internationalization cannot be bought over the counter; on the contrary, it has to do with a learning process that each individual HEI has to go through on its own, and a need to prioritize by setting aside sufficient time and resources. This chapter reveals that there are significant differences in this area between institutional and individual levels, in particular among those individuals who engage in internationalization through active participation in the educational network. It also reveals that individual knowledge in this field is rarely institutionalized, which incidentally does not apply specifically to this context but is a general characteristic of learning within organizations.

Thirdly, if a HEI pulls out of the cooperation, it will naturally pull out its delegation as well. The work of the network constitutes a critical element of the building of international bridges, which contributes in a practical way to creating a regional understanding. This further contributes to construction in the Barents Region; construction that will vanish if the educational cooperation disappears, because the educational cooperation would cease to exist if the HEIs no longer see the value in

maintaining it. It is sustained primarily because the HEIs want to build a region, but above all because this collaboration is currently in their own interests.

One could conclude that, while the HEIs integrate to a certain degree, it is the network that drives such integration. In other words, to the degree that the educational cooperation contributes to developing a sense of community in the Barents Region, this does not occur on an institutional level, but first and foremost through fragile networks.

NOTES

1. Other than northwest Russia and northern Norway, northern Sweden and northern Finland are also included in the Barents Region. The Barents Cooperation was formally established at the signing of the Kirkenes Declaration in 1993. In addition to the four countries in the Barents Region, Denmark, Iceland and the European Union also took part in the signing of the Kirkenes Declaration. Representatives from the countries that signed the Kirkenes Declaration are all members of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) which meets every other year at the foreign minister level in the country that has responsibility for chairmanship for the given period. Chairmanship rotates between the four Barents countries. The goal is to promote economic and social development in the Barents Region, thereby contributing to a peaceful development in the northernmost part of Europe. Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Poland, the United Kingdom and the United States of America all have observer status at BEAC meetings. For further information on the Barents Cooperation, see Blakkisrud and Hønneland (2006), Hønneland (2007), Pursiainen (2001), Staalesen (2010) and (former Norwegian foreign minister) Støre (2010a, 2010b), among others.
2. Title of the research project: 'Higher Education in the High North: Regional Restructuring through Educational Exchange and Student Mobility'. The project is financed by the Research Council of Norway. For further information on the project, see https://www.forskningradet.no/prosjektbanken_beta/#/project/220702.
3. In 2011, 53 per cent of the Russian population in the age group of 25 to 64 years had completed an education beyond upper secondary school, while Norway lies closer to the average of 32 per cent for Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (OECD, 2014).

REFERENCES

- Bærenholdt, J.O. (2007), *Coping with Distances. Producing Nordic Atlantic Societies*, Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Berremann, G. (1962), *Behind Many Masks: Ethnography and Impression Management in a Himalayan Village*, Society for Applied Anthropology, Monograph no. 4, Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association.
- Blakkisrud, H. and Hønneland, G. (eds) (2006), *Tackling Space: Federal Politics and the Russian North*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- DiMaggio, P.J. and Powell, W.W. (1983), 'The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields', *American Sociological Review*, **48**, 147–160.

- Durkheim, E. (1893 [1997]), *The Division of Labour in Society*, New York: Free Press.
- Edelman, M. (1964), *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Hønneland, G. (2007), 'Norway and Russia in the Barents Sea: Cooperation and Conflict in Fisheries Management', *Russian Analytical Digest*, 20: 9–11.
- Kolle, H. (2014), *Samarbeid med Russland i høgare utdanning: Foresetnader, utfordringer og muligheter* (Cooperation with Russia in higher education: preconditions, challenges and opportunities), Rapportserie No 04, Oslo: SIU (Norwegian Centre for International Cooperation in Education).
- OECD (2014), 'OECD Economic Survey: Russian Federation', accessed July 2014 at <http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/countries/russian-federation/>.
- Pursiainen, C. (2001), 'Soft Security Problems in Northwest Russia and their Implications for the Outside World: A Framework for Analysis and Action', Helsinki UPI Working Papers No.31.
- Putin, V. (2010), 'Speech and Closing Remarks to Arctic Forum in Moscow', http://icr.arcticportal.org/index.php?option=com_contentandview=articleandid=1746:full-text-of-putins-speech-a-closingremarks-.
- Selznick, P. (1957), *Leadership in Administration*, New York: Harper & Row Publishers.
- Staalesen, A. (2010), 'New Times for Barents Cooperation', in Atle Staalesen (ed.), *Talking Barents: People, Borders and Regional Cooperation*, Kirkenes: Norwegian Barents Secretariat, pp.9–24.
- Støre, J.G. (2010a), "'Most is North" The High North and the Way Ahead – an International Perspective', Lecture at the University of Tromsø, 29 April, http://www.regjeringen.no/en/dep/ud/Whats-new/Speeches-andarticles/speeches_foreign/2010/Most-is-north.html?id=602113.
- Støre, J.G. (2010b), Norway and Russia. Taking Northern Knowledge to the Next Level', Northern Arctic Federal University (NArFU), Arkhangelsk, 17 September, http://www.regjeringen.no/en/dep/ud/Whats-new/Speeches-and-articles/speeches_foreign/2010/northern_knowledge_next_level.html?id=614593.
- Sundet, M. (2015), 'The Ties That Bind – the Roles and Mundane Practices of Networks in Constructing Educational Internationalization in the High North', *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, DOI: 10.1080/14767724.2015.1095074.
- Trondal, J., Stensaker, B., Gornitzka, A. and Maassen, P. (2001), *Internasjonalisering av høyere utdanning. Trender og utfordringer* (Internationalisation of higher education. Trends and challenges), Skriftserie nr. 28, Oslo: NIFU (Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and Education).
- White Paper (2011–2012), *Report no. 7 to the Storting. The High North*, Oslo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- Young, O.R. and Einarsson, N. (2004), 'Introduction: Human Development in the Arctic', in N. Einarsson, J.N. Larsen, A. Nilsson and O.R. Young (eds), *Arctic Human Development Report*, Akureyri: Stefansson Arctic Institute, pp. 15–41.