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The ties that bind – the roles and mundane practices of networks in constructing Educational Internationalisation in the High North

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ABSTRACT
This article seeks to present an original and distinct contribution to the literature on internationalisation of Higher Education, by focusing on the very mundane processes through which agreement is reached on the nuts and bolts of the enactment of ‘internationalisation’, and the nature of ‘internationalisation’ as an experience, not just for students, about whom there is quite an extensive literature, but for the academics and administrators responsible for bringing it into being. It thus aims to provide an alternative understanding of internationalisation of Higher Education from that most commonly found in macro-level studies, through a focus on how internationalisation is creating a new set of cross-national shared institutional practices.

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Introduction

This article seeks to present an original and distinct contribution to the literature on internationalisation of Higher Education, by focusing on the very mundane processes through which agreement is reached on the nuts and bolts of the enactment of ‘internationalisation’, and the nature of ‘internationalisation’ as an experience, not just for students, about whom there is quite an extensive literature, but for the academics and administrators responsible for bringing it into being. It thus aims to provide an alternative understanding of internationalisation of Higher Education from that most commonly found in macro-level studies, through a focus on how internationalisation is creating a new set of cross-national shared institutional practices.

The network presented here consists of academics and an administrator from eight higher education institutions (HEIs) located in the Barents region. The Norwegian HEI is located in the Northern part of Norway, and the seven others are located in the Northwest of Russia. These eight HEIs work together in managing the Bachelor of Circumpolar Studies (BCS) programme, which is a net-based educational programme that primarily focuses on social science and humanities perspectives on questions and topics pertaining to the Arctic. This educational collaboration was a result of the 1993 establishment of the Barents region as a new multilateral regional cooperative. The intention was to ensure good neighbourly relations, economic and social development and stability (Whitepaper no 7 2011–2012), and was manifested in a formal agreement involving the foreign ministers of six countries. Education would be just one of many fields to be addressed by the regional partnership, thus resulting in the BCS.

Based on international certification criteria, the BCS was developed as an independent programme at the Norwegian HEI and offered to Russian educational institutions in cooperation with the University of the Arctic (UArctic). From the beginning of 2004, the Norwegian academics responsible for coordinating the programme regularly travelled to each Russian institution in order...
to clarify administrative questions and recruit students. Both the need for joint coordination and standardisation and the need to create a mutual understanding for the purpose of the collaboration led to the establishment of an annual meeting between all parties involved in the programme. The first such meeting was held in 2009. The annual meeting constitutes the focal point for this network. Outside of the annual meetings, there is close communication between academic and administrative personnel in order to facilitate student exchange and organise student flow. This flow primarily involves students coming from Russia to Norway, while there are a few students who travel in the opposite direction. Additionally, there is a natural and continual process of pedagogical and research-based work. The flow of such information tends to move in the other direction in the form of relatively one-sided distribution from the Norwegian side of the border to the Russian side. Seen from the outside, this is the core of what the network works with and may be considered the process of internationalisation for which it is responsible.

However, the actual internationalisation consists of uniting that which is not ‘unitable’ and creating a platform for mutual understanding on how these core tasks should best be handled. Internationalisation, in real terms, is in other words about how individuals succeed in their efforts to collaborate on common tasks across borders. This understanding of what internationalisation is about springs from the experiences each individual has in participating in processes where the intentions and goals are unclear, the expectations for participation are different and the participants’ values, understandings and traditions are often in conflict. The network tied to BCS has many such characteristics. One example is that while Norway has implemented the Bologna principles, Russia is at the starting gate for an educational reform process where these principles are to be applied. The Bologna process and its Implications for Russia (Pursiainen and Medvedev 2005). This gives the Norwegian HEI the upper hand within the network, allowing it to define important conditions for how the cooperation should be structured. One such example is that the management systems of the Russian and Norwegian HEIs are quite different. The Norwegian academic in charge has a far more autonomous position than her Russian colleagues, and can make decisions and change previous decisions of her own volition, whereas the Russians need to confer with their superiors and gain permission before they may proceed with the work. A third example is that Russian and Norwegian HEIs belong to pedagogically different traditions from an academic standpoint, which manifests in conflicting opinions on what the most effective methods are and which requirements students should be expected to fulfil. First and foremost, however, the differences between Russians and Norwegians are reflected in the culture. In the major questions that face the network, opinions, beliefs and understandings arise that may appear to be incompatible; norms and values that seem to be contradictory, and artefacts that underline national peculiarities and identities. These are differences that become obvious and challenging, in various ways, when matters engage and have a significant impact on the individual participants in the network.

Despite these differences, the regional and spatial reference emerges as a result of shared visions and interaction, as social phenomena and space are constituted based on social relations (Robertson 2006, 5). Our example will show that inequality is, therefore, to be regarded as historical assumptions that may be difficult and challenging, while the simultaneous conditions for successful internationalisation relate to how one manages to build a community around visions, values and regulatory ideas. Among the shortcomings Robertson (2006) identifies in current approaches by globalisation and education researchers is the absence of research reflecting on the altered terrain and politics of democratic representation as a result of Global Processes. In conjunction with several other internationalisation projects in the Barents region, however, our case is the result not only of political decisions at the highest foreign policy level in both Russia and Norway but also of an ongoing policy called the ‘High North policy’, which is regularly monitored by a wide variety of political and academic experts. The politicians’ intentions are numerous and complementary, where the peacekeeping aspects of internationalisation are as prominent as the economic, social and cultural aspects. On the other hand, even the best intentions depend on the existence of knowledge on how they may be realised; at the very least, they build upon individuals who know the art of muddling through towards
common goals and who, therefore, learn along the way. Here, we come to another of Robertson’s points. She claims that there is no subaltern or alternative knowledge among the conceptual tools we use to understand globalisation. While the spatial and political representative aspects of globalisation and internationalisation are the key elements of this article, we have only hinted at the issues with a few descriptive characteristics. Nevertheless, it is this last point we are most determined to follow up on. In our opinion, alternative knowledge may be found through the study of processes leading to positive and encouraging results, primarily because we can identify some of the skills and ideas required by participants in the process. It is the practice-related studies that may reveal what internationalisation is really all about. It is created through action and implementation at the micro level, rather than through majority decisions in parliaments and boardrooms around the world. This article may reveal how internationalisation is brought into being on the ground. It is given practical substance through action and enactment.

**Methodological approach**

The Barents region constitutes the educational landscape (Forstorp and Mellström 2013) for our network and the source of data collection. It consists of a vast stretch of land where the network’s eight HEIs are spread from the Barents Sea in the northeast to the Norwegian Sea in the northwest. A maximum of 25 people are connected to the network at any given time. Some have looser ties to both tasks and people and are brought in, for example, on questions of exam development, Information and Communication technology (ICT), finances and legal affairs. At most 18 people have participated in the network’s annual meeting. Four people, including administrative personnel, represent the Norwegian HEI and there are up to 14 participants from the Russian side. Participation in the annual meetings varies, however, depending on several conditions; among other things, where the meetings take place, whether the HEIs that have two coordinators actually send both, and whether any changes in the distribution of tasks and responsibilities have occurred at the specific HEI that arranges for the meeting. Throughout the year there is daily contact between the Norwegian and Russian network participants, and it is these people – four Norwegians and eight Russians – who are involved in the continual process that may be referred to as the core of the network. Nevertheless, the annual meetings are the venue for articulating and discussing challenges, addressing questions and formulating the basis, the expectations and the rules of play for the collaboration. The participants from Russia have the role of BCS coordinator for each of their respective HEIs. Some of them hold permanent positions as vice rector at their institutions, while others perform the coordinator responsibilities in addition to other projects and duties, most of which involve teaching positions. At the Norwegian HEI, three of the participants are teachers and senior researchers, while the fourth is a student advisor and administrative employee. There are other collaborative projects within higher education in the Barents region, but this unique network is the only one that uses a contractual annual meeting as the arena for negotiation and strategic development.

The data discussed in this article are based on the notes, minutes, calls, interviews and participant observations from the annual meetings that the network members have institutionalised. The annual meetings were formalised and constituted by the network as a joint institution in 2009, after about 5 years of attempts to create a predictable forum for discussion. The network needed stability and transparency, which would result in identical guidelines for all of the eight HEIs involved in this collaborative project. One of the challenges in collecting and analysing the data for this article is that the author has a leading role in the network in question. The challenge naturally lies in operationalising the distinction between researcher and participant observer. On the other hand, trust between researcher and informant is of crucial significance in gaining access to data and, therefore, the small-scale interaction between the researcher and other members of the network is a defining part of the methodology for this project. The difference between ‘me’ as an observer and ‘me’ as a participant is not distinct. As an observer, I am aware of the need to collect data in some contexts, combined with the need to engage in setting standards for what will happen in the network. I do not argue that greater methodological
sophistication would be more convincing for this presentation, but rather underline that meta-communicative routines are crucial in understanding the practice of this network. As Briggs writes when discussing how to include the underlying norms and values of social interaction into data analyses:

> It is often necessary to permit respondents to ‘wander off the point’ and provide ‘irrelevant’ information at times, that is, to permit a bit more egalitarian distribution of the control over the interaction. (1992, 28)

It is important to note that all communication takes place in the English language during these meetings. The constituents of the network have little or no knowledge of each other’s native language (Norwegian and Russian); therefore words and concepts expressed in English are often discussed in order to be certain that the meaning of the terminology in use appears whether they are expressions of Norwegian or Russian cultural codes. Words and concepts are therefore themselves a source to look for the underlying norm and values. These discussions are not ‘irrelevant information’ (see Briggs quota), this is the point and an important data source where the concept discussions specifies personal and cultural understandings. The underlying meaning of the English words used in the communication promotes this way of learning processes and mutual understanding during the meetings.

The data used in this article are relevant to the given topic of ‘norms and values’ transmitted through both verbal means and visual signs. We are the network and the result of our work depends on mutual understanding and egalitarian distribution of questioning and resolving the differences that crop up in collaborative situations. The subtleties that come to light during interactional situations are the most important data for this article; it is the interactional processes that need to be grounded and built into theories (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Being part of the network provides access to the field and gives me the opportunity to be ‘theoretically sensitive’ (Strauss and Corbin 1990). According to Strauss and Corbin, theoretical sensitivity refers to:

> (…) the attribute of having insight, the ability to give meaning to data, the capacity to understand, and capability to separate the pertinent from that which isn’t. (1990, 42)

I have many years of practical experience within the network, which gives me the ability to look beyond the obvious. Although the information provided ‘me’ through working together with ‘them’ will not be a further topic of methodological discussion in this article, it is nonetheless important to clarify why I will refer to ‘us’ in some cases; that is, because I am part of the network. In other cases, I distance myself and emphasise the ‘other’ based on what I notice as an observer to the processes that occur in the network (Powdermaker 1966). This is the heart of the divided role that I have to master; the persons within the network have become my friends. I have to be involved both to gain access to data and to maintain the relationship with the network. This is how I can understand the realities of ‘our’ culture – the viewpoints that the network shares. I also have to allow for detachment to enable myself to ‘see’ and construct the abstract reality knowing that the social relations within the network also include the rules of macro strategies. The individuals who operate this network, and their practice, will hereafter be referred to as Individual Network Participant Information and Communication Technology (INP).

**Making sense at the micro level**

Internationalisation is normally reflected upon using concepts that refer to macro levels, large structures and extensive processes (Luke 2006). The terms belonging to macro levels tend to refer to markets and policy areas, while rarely addressing what happens in discussions between the people who are practicing the work that results from the internationalisation processes. The terms are, therefore, applicable when denoting and describing systems where participants are not visible. They are, however, insufficient when describing the feelings, attitudes, expectations and ways of thinking that are expressed in meetings between individuals who operate within these systems.

We seek to develop a perspective that highlights the practical work that results from HEI’s internationalisation strategies and to conceptualise central aspects that we find important in understanding the impact of internationalisation at the micro level.
When the HEIs present their international student numbers, it reflects nothing about the processes that are presupposed for the success of the programme. Student numbers say little about what, why and how those students have attended international programmes. The students are seen as manifestations of successful internationalisation and the term thus becomes a ‘constructed process without a subject or agent’ (Robertson 2006, 3). Internationalisation is not a participant in its own right. Much of the internationalisation process itself takes place in the social and interactional processes within the network, where the participants act upon the ideas of internationalisation and find practical and feasible solutions to put internationalisation into practice.

Failure to understand this point is sometimes expressed through dysfunctional decisions made by representatives of the HEIs operating in the network. An example of this is the high turnover of representatives on the Russian side of the border, which reflects their inability to choose positions in the network that best suit them. Another example is the Norwegian institution’s requirements for financial sustainability for all educational cooperation. The basis for annual funding of Norwegian HEIs is partly determined according to the number of students each institution has educated in previous years; the higher the numbers of foreign students who pass exams, the larger the financial support from the government. The direct effect that this national policy has on our collaborative project must be viewed as very positive in that the many Russian students coming to Norway make the project financially sustainable. However, none of these funds are transferred to the very network that operationalises the successful cooperation. These examples show that the institutions measure internationalisation based on results that reflect a production number; the parameter is tied to finances and the total number of students, while the expectations for collaboration are notably overlooked and excluded from the actual recipe for international progress and prosperity. The learning that is generated through processes the network participants set in motion, therefore, is not rooted in the overall structures. In this regard, internationalisation is a learning process at the institutional level.

The personal side of this network currently lies in a vulnerable position – as its practice is hidden in the system, it becomes both invisible and exposed to the HEI’s random selection of individuals. This asymmetry between the network’s practices and the local institutions’ different internationalisation strategies makes the ties that bind (Granovetter 1973) the INPs together into a community extremely vulnerable. The network’s hidden practice points to the fact that the processes of educational cooperation have to be understood as being dependent on the context and that asymmetrical relationships may be traced to different parts of the organisations.

In order to understand how the network uses ‘coping strategies’ (Bærenholdt 2011, 1–3) to interact successfully within this educational landscape, we would like to describe three different aspects of the institutionalisation of the network. The aspects are: (1) success through necessity, (2) success through recognition and (3) success through new rules of play. Before we go into these aspects, we will point to several key characteristics of the network and give an overview of the annual meeting; how it is planned and who attends.

**Crucial characteristics of the network**

The network has emerged as a community driven by trusted relationships and equality despite the fact that the participants come from eight different HEIs across two disparate countries. The annual meeting is held once a year (as the name indicates) but may be held twice a year if the network participants consider it necessary. The annual meeting may thus be regarded as the network’s negotiating room.

Each institution is represented by at least two persons while the hosting institution may have as many as five representatives. The Norwegian institution always brings four or five persons. The average number of persons brought together each year varies from 18 to 20. All the institutions have to send their international programme coordinator and the head of the international office also attends, if possible. This arrangement was established and organised as a regular event for the first time in
Norway in 2009, and has since been held in Russia where the partner institutions have hosted. The meetings may be regarded as a liaison between the partner institutions; they are structured and have thus become an ‘institution’ (March and Olsen 1994). Individual contact is also structured, though more informally; individuals keep in touch regularly by email, by phone and at random venues outside the annual meeting. It is through these people that the daily management of each institution receives information on international activity and ‘output’ in terms of exchange student numbers participating in the collaborative bachelor project. Interactions at meetings are characterised by the network’s individual and friendly relations, while also being tainted by different and often contradictory understandings of local, national and international rules, ideas and assumptions (Argyris and Schön 1974). The meetings are structured with an agenda, minutes and an education programme. The meetings are further formalised and made mutually binding on all partner institutions through written contracts signed by the respective rectors.

The agenda for the meeting is defined by our collaborative bachelor project, which is organised and provided by the Norwegian HEI. As of 2013, cooperation on this programme had already been ongoing for 10 years and, in 2009, the annual meetings were institutionalised and determined through the network. However, the individual knowledge that members have accumulated on each other through these long-term processes underscore the informal aspect of the meetings, and this has set the tone for the annual meetings. The network’s long-standing contact has meant that the meetings may focus on the collaborative work at hand; managing student exchange, managing the social interaction between those involved in the network and finding solutions to the immediate and specific problems that can be solved through a joint effort by the network. The formal procedures of representation, long speeches and presentations have been stripped down to a minimum. The limited time representatives spend together does not allow for discussion of national differences, which often occurs at larger arrangements where both Norway and Russia meet to discuss challenges related to the internationalisation processes. A norm has been established for the annual meetings, including a silent agreement on how to handle inequality; differences in possibilities, understanding of rules and influence at each HEI must be unveiled so that we may find the best possible road to success for our work.

These meetings were established, first and foremost, as a practical and strategic way of gathering key network members responsible for organising the cooperative project. The decision to arrange annual and mutually binding meetings was taken by the participants of the network. At the annual meetings, individuals have to meet face to face. This is the forum where decisions regarding admission rules, mutual obligations, procedures and changes in procedure are adopted and negotiated. It is this consortium that brings the practice of student exchange to life. In addition to organising the annual meetings, these individuals take care of student recruitment, check whether the students’ academic qualifications meet the requirements and coordinate student lists with the Norwegian university where the students end up being enrolled. The Norwegian HEI is responsible for the establishment of the curriculum, which is then distributed to the Russian students by their contact persons. It is the Russian contacts in the network who transcribe the Russian grading system into the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) required by the Norwegian HEI. All of these coordinating functions handled by the network are based on mutual trust between the members. In fact, that trust is a prerequisite for the success of the cooperative work; the Norwegian system does not know the Russian system and has to rely upon the decisions and actions on the Russian side, while the Russian system has to make sure that the system they are now implementing is in accordance with international regulations. The network performs the practical implementation of these ideas and differences.

One of the recurring network discussions may serve as an introduction to the first feature of its institutionalisation, showing how the interpretation of imposed quests is revealed through the expression of norms that become a necessity. Student exchange, and the unequal distribution of students according to nationality, is naturally a recurring topic where the temperature of those engaged in the debate can often rise substantially. Most of the students enrolled in the programme come from
Russia and, despite the fact that Norwegian student numbers have increased over the past three years, there is still a lot to be done before the group of students reflects both nations more equally in terms of numbers. The network recognises the need to pursue a more equal exchange of students, knowing that the internationalisation process is important for all the HEIs involved. Following is a statement from one of my Russian partners:

The restructuring that we’re going through at our HEI’s right now requires that we demonstrate that we are international by numbers of students involved in international programmes, our own established international programmes and, of course, through international networks. It is better for us to send our students to as many HEI’s outside Russia as possible instead of sending them all to you and this programme. I’m in a difficult situation because of this – I feel like I’m failing you if I recommend other institutions’ programmes. I also know that this programme is functioning well and I know that the students are enrolled in a programme that I know is of good quality.

With this statement she expresses many implicit impressions (Douglas 1986), but she is also sharing her own dilemmas and challenges as well as her own expectations and the expectations her institution has for the network. The ideal way to handle this personal dilemma is to share her thoughts with the rest of us in search of the best possible solution.

**Success through necessity**

The first feature that may provide a better understanding of why the network succeeds with practicing internationalisation is reflected by both common ideas and common rules for the practical handling of student exchange. The network has to succeed at the institutional level because that is just what is expected of the network. And the individual members have to succeed at the relational level; they have to interact in accordance with the ideas of the others in order to succeed within the network. They have to meet these expectations from both their HEIs and from themselves; and it is quite obvious that the unprejudiced etiquette that has developed in the network has a critical bearing on how it creates a partnership that works well for the HEIs and for the network. All the HEIs have internationalisation strategies on their agenda and, although differentiations exist, all of these strategies have one thing in common; they need student numbers and multiple international projects to show that they are taking part in the international arena. The network needs these numbers as well, but they also need to understand the various ‘hidden transcripts’ behind the numbers; they have to engage the students in the programme and help them to complete their studies. The discussions that result from such questions reflect how the individual tries to transfer meaning and reason to his/her own reality and local institution. It is such reflection that leads to questions about who we are and why we are doing this work. As an example, at an annual meeting, when I noticed that several of the Russian participants looked a bit confused during a discussion on implementing the online Norwegian courses in the Russian bachelor programmes, I felt very comfortable asking if they knew how we define a bachelor programme in Norway; for example, how many ECTS it involves, how many semesters and so forth.

The response to my question came immediately from a representative of one of the largest cooperating universities:

I do not know exactly the way a bachelor programme is defined. We have to construct programmes lasting for 4 years and the Norwegian programme is three years. Besides, we cannot oppose how you have organized your programme – most of us are just happy that we have this opportunity to get our students interested in international study programmes. And we need to know how we can become more international. I would be happy if we could use some time to discuss the model of a bachelor programme.

The rest of the participants agreed that this was needed and we visualised the structure on a black board. By using this model, it became clear that the Norwegian programme offered 90 ECTS, out of which 60 ECTS were online courses while 30 ECTS were on campus in Norway. The discussion that followed also highlighted the question of elective courses; students must obtain the other 90
ECTS from their home institutions or any other HEI. There is no doubt that all present at the meet-
ing knew this, but one question came up:

Does that mean that Norwegian students or students from other universities in Europe must have 90 ECTS of additional electives as well?

This was confirmed and the discussion on ECTS continued for a long while. One Russian said:

This discussion has been very useful to me, even if I knew that a bachelor programme is constituted of half Norwegian and half Russian credits, I did not know that your programme must have 180 ECTS.

Another Russian said:

How can it be that you did not know? All the transcripts that we send to Norway when our students submit an application for a bachelor diploma have to be translated into ECTS. The traditional Russian study programmes consist of many small courses; the courses do not even have names! And when we count the working hours per course it ends up with 2 ECTS; sometimes it can be up to 5 ECTS, but this is the job that we have to do. A system has been distributed from the authorities that is easy to use I am sure that you have the same system at your institution, if not I can send it to you?

The answer was directed to the first speaker as follows:

Of course, we have the same system as everybody else; we are in the same situation as all HEI’s in Russia, but I have been so busy with my job recruiting new students, digesting information about the international pro-

gramme, and keeping track of who can apply for the diploma and when, scholarships and much more, that I have not had the chance to actually compare this international bachelor programme with our own bachelor programmes.

Such reflections on practical issues have an obvious significance for the network. Through this dis-

cussion, everyone in the network became aware that there are Russian (national) guidelines to be dealt with, and at least two of the HEIs in the network received new and important information on how to translate Russian specialisations into ECTS. The Russian templates were distributed to the institutions after this meeting. But the most important aspect of this example is found in the way the network copes with uncovering what they do not know; that they are able to discover what others do not know (as in my case) and take the opportunity to reflect on questions without creating the impression that anyone in the network is being underestimated or overestimated. The example also demonstrates the network’s ability to question variations on a practical level when it comes to the major differences between the academic systems in Norway and Russia. The reforming processes going on in all Russian HEIs are constantly compared with the Norwegian HEI; and the Norwegian ECTS system has thus become one of the network’s mandatory practical tasks to cope with.

The Norwegian HEI has been practicing the three-cycle structure since 2006, whereas the HEIs in Russia are currently in the middle of a huge restructuring process where their existing systems must be adapted to the Bologna principles of including bachelor’s, master’s and Ph.D. programmes. The staff in Norway have been involved in the country’s educational reforming process from the start since 2003 and, today, the replacement of the previous Norwegian system is hardly mentioned anymore. In 2012, the Norwegian HEI reached a hallmark achievement to mark years of hard work by being accredited with the ‘ECTS’, a label provided by the European Commission. This label may be held up as a sign of internationalisation in more official gather-
ings where internationalisation is discussed, but never at the network’s annual meetings. Here, the focus is on questions of how we can manage to exchange students and understand how the different systems work. This frank communication and mutual understanding has become embodied in norms that help us to master the task together. The network succeeds because the individuals manage on this relational level. They have to ask each other these kinds of ques-
tions and they have to be open-minded in search of the best practice for the network. These imperatives help the network to succeed.
A quote from one of the Russians attending a recent annual meeting illustrates this mutual need (in summing up after the discussion about the reforming processes):

The main thing with this cooperation is that the network enables us to exchange students; we (meaning the Russians) are offered a programme that we can easily add to our own programme. If the individuals in the network had no trust in each other, you in Norway could not have all of these students from us and we would not have any international programme from you. And this network would not exist. I think that it is very important to remember that our Norwegian partners trust us when we send these transcripts. You just do not cheat on this.

This statement also leads us into the next section, where we argue that mutual acknowledgement of each other is an explanation for the success of the network. One of the norms within the network is that everybody has to be honest with each other.

**Success through mutual recognition**

The processes of how network individuals recognise each other and develop respect and trust can be quite tricky to explain without describing the development of the cooperation within the network.

All participants at the annual meetings are bearers of different cultural, institutional and individual beliefs and expectations. The differences we all bring with us to the table must somehow be dealt with in a practical way. Our network relations do not differ from other network constellations when it comes to variations in position, competence and asymmetries among individuals; as for all others, we have to position ourselves when we meet (Gofman 2008; Levin and Trost 2005). The focus of this section will, therefore, be directed at how we fill these positions with reciprocity and respect for each other.

The process prior to an annual meeting begins with a reminder of the date that was decided upon at the previous meeting, which is sent out by the Norwegian HEI. This reminder includes information from the minutes and mutual decisions made at the previous meeting, the name of the hosting institution and a preliminary suggestion for the topic to be presented by the Norwegian delegation. This is done to ensure continuation and coordination of the process. The first call for the upcoming meeting is directed to the rectors and contact persons at the seven HEIs by email. The HEI that will host the meeting then uses the reminder to prepare the agenda for the meeting. They write an invitation letter including a preliminary agenda and invitation to all of the eight HEIs involved in the cooperation. The invitation encourages each institution to discuss the various challenges they have experienced during the past year. Furthermore, each HEI also reports on the number and progress of students enrolled in the programme and updates on programme marketing. The pre-meeting process is driven by the Norwegian institution and cannot be seen as a process that is institutionalised as a joint responsibility of the network. As head of the network, I have to ensure that the meetings take place, knowing that the Norwegian HEI is the only institution with the power to mandate cooperation on this project. The fact that the Norwegian HEI has this power is also reflected in the ownership of the educational programme that the network uses for student exchange. This position of power is the premise for the leadership role in the network. How the network defines and fills this position of authority in relation to other positions in the network, encompassing social reciprocity and respect, can lend some insight into how the individuals manage to recognise one another so well.

All of the Russian INPs have received their education from the Russian educational system, which is currently in a process of reform by implementing the three-cycle system with the Bologna principles. Despite the practical work of implementing this new system, they have no experience from their own educational and work background. They must adhere to the Norwegian INP’s representation of the new system. At the same time, the Russian INP has to relate to the internationalisation strategies at their local HEI, which in turn relates to the international market. Maximova-Mentzoni (2009) describes the transformation of the Russian university and its orientation towards the international market as a ‘desperate move and a needed initiative from the university itself’ (2009, v). The INPs are in a context distinguished by ideas that Maximova-Mentzoni claim have become blurred by
‘new missions, new roles, new establishments and increasingly changing identities’ (2009, 16–17). The INPs do not represent macro structures in the transformation system, but they give important information and knowledge on their new roles, mission and the changing identities through their interpretation of what internationalisation is. At annual meetings, the vice deans of research are present along with one or two contact persons. All institutions (including the Norwegian HEI) welcome the participants with a speech from the rector of the HEI that hosts the meeting. Most often I am invited (as the leader of the network) to meet with the rector at the hosting HEI during the stay.

The different positions comprising the network become apparent during discussions of student admissions. The Norwegian HEI prerequisites for admission of foreign students lead to questions on the different systems. In accordance with the international exchange system, all students from Russia must have one year of study at their home HEI before they may be accepted into the Norwegian system. At a dinner event for the meeting, we were discussing the differences we had perceived between Russian and Norwegian students. My Russian partner said:

I have never understood why we should change the Russian educational system. It is, as everybody says, that the Russian system is not good enough and that we have to adapt to your system. I think that our students learn something that your students do not learn. When you think that they are cheating because it looks like they have copied something from a book, I think that they just know by heart what they have learned. We here in Russia are trained to remember. You can ask anybody that you meet and they know a lot of history and numbers. I am not sure if the average Norwegian student could have answered that accurately without looking it up in a book or finding the answer on intern

There was a lot of joking about the differences between students but also about the differences we had noticed between the individuals of the network.

When the meeting began the next day, the same person referred to the previous night’s discussion and asked if that could be our first point of discussion. All members agreed, which led to a long discussion where all the participants had something to say on the benefits of the Russian educational system as well as the Norwegian system. The differences that we discussed were followed by a discussion on how to find practical solutions to modify our project to include the best parts of both systems. By the end of this meeting, the network had decided that the Norwegian HEI should approve 90 ECTS from the Russian HEIs as long as these transcripts were transformed into ECTS according to the templates from the Russian authorities, approved by the rules of the network and confirmed by the Russian HEIs. The decision was formalised in a paragraph included in the renewed agreements between the institutions at the following annual meeting.

Although the INPs in Russia come from different HEIs and the positions within the network are held by various representatives, from vice dean to regular contact person, the only requirement for the role in the network is knowledge of the English language. Some have attained their positions through prior international experience. In an interview with one of my colleagues, I was told that she had both an international bachelor’s degree and an international master’s degree, but these studies were not approved by her Russian HEI as part of her higher education. And her Russian studies were not included in the degrees that she had received abroad.

She added that she so thoroughly enjoyed working with the entire practical internationalisation that she did not really think about her own international study experience so much:

‘I feel that I am doing something that matters, both to me and to my institution, when I can support the students and help them to see the possibilities through this programme’ she said.

It is quite obvious that this open-hearted and candid communication has become meaningful also because the individuals have found a way to fulfil their own duties in the network. Our mutual expectations are closely related to how we manage to come up with good solutions for common challenges we face with internationalisation. The mutual trust we have managed to establish in the network makes it possible for the individual INPs to face challenges they meet in their own institutions when network decisions are implemented.
Success through new rules of play

Finally, the institutionalisation of the network may be seen through the new rules of play that the individual members have constituted as norms and principles that are valid both for their personal interaction with the others and for the problem solving of common challenges. Anecdotes and observations from the annual meetings are the best data to illustrate this feature of the network’s institutionalisation. It is these individuals who create rules for how we act and how we continue to act. It is at the annual meetings that the various loyalties and expectations are expressed. First and foremost, the new rules of play deal with the establishment of predictability. Through the agreements between the HEIs, predictability has been created at the organisational level. Additionally, the constitution of the annual meeting has become an anticipated event in which institutions have committed themselves to being represented at the meetings. But what is it that the individuals commit to within the network? And how do we deal with the conflicting loyalties and expectations we bear when we meet? As an example, while we were signing a new inter-institutional agreement at an annual meeting, an uncomfortable situation arose. Things had already begun to go awry in the afternoon on the first day of this 2-day meeting in Russia. I had simply not expected that my Russian colleagues would struggle so much in establishing a good working relationship among them. I thought that our mutual decision last year on how to go about the process of renewing agreements had been established. I had mandated commentaries from each institution on the appendix to the agreement and had thought that nobody could possibly have doubts on the significance of the need for such comments. The faculty leaders, teaching staff and administrative personnel on both sides of the border had been corresponding via email and telephone, and some of my Russian contact persons had also addressed me personally just to be sure they had prepared their comments properly. The agreements had a three-year cycle and were up for renewal this year. I had the idea that our appendix, which was specifically prepared for the network, would be of special interest since it was open for comments. The institutional agreements are signed by the rectors and have a standard form, translated into English and Russian. The appendix to this agreement is signed in Norway by the dean and myself, as leader of the network. We brought eight agreements with us, all signed by both the rector and the dean; to make it more formal, I had been asked to sign together with the head of the faculty at the hosting institution in Russia. In Norway, these steps were approved at meetings at both the institutional and faculty levels. This procedure had been agreed upon at the previous year’s meeting. We were now at the annual meeting, where the agreements should be signed, and the management of the process leading up to the final signing of the agreement at the Russian HEIs became somewhat ‘unclear’.

The consultant from Norway went through the changes that were made, which subsequently led to a brainstorming session in which everybody wanted to offer all sorts of ideas conceivable for how the agreements could be changed. The discussion I had been requesting for the past year had suddenly arrived, though somewhat behind schedule! I handed out the signed agreements and reminded my partners that I had been asking for comments regularly for quite some time. My irritation over the chaotic situation had to be addressed, as it was obvious to everyone that I was accusing them of shirking their responsibilities by not having acted (at both the institutional and faculty levels) upon what had clearly been approved at the previous year’s meeting. My behaviour was humorously commented on by one of the Russians:

There you see how we are. We just do not know how to organize ourselves in Russia.

I replied, hoping to keep up with her mood but with harsh remarks nonetheless, focusing on the lack of initiative they had shown in doing their jobs:

You know that this should have been discussed with your principals and you’ve even asked us to bring pre-signed agreements to this meeting. Besides, all the comments you’ve made now have already been incorporated into the appendix. If you had bothered to read through them, you would have seen them.
This situation could easily have spun out of control outside the network. However, the vice rector of research at the hosting HEI spoke up for me in a calm and supportive way, while also managing to honestly express her concerns and criticisms:

You’ve even set up the name of the wrong person to sign the appendix. Here at my institution it is the vice-rector for research that must sign the appendix, not the vice-rector for teaching.

A representative of another, larger institution asked for the floor and added:

This is not a problem for my institution. We thought that as long as the main agreement is signed by the principals, the appendix can be signed by those closest to the tasks we manage. My principal has even helped to determine this idea.

We decided that these internal discussions of who should sign the appendix on the Russian side were up to the local institutions to clarify and that the network would approve whatever the institutions decided. We also agreed that the dean of the Norwegian institution and I, as leader of the network, were the appropriate persons to sign the appendix on the Norwegian side. One person said:

I think that this is important since you in Norway are the ones who know best how we can organize the network and you obviously have the power to get things through your system. As coordinator for my institution I have to tell how important this is because I have no power of suggesting how to organize the internationalisation processes going on at my Institution.

By the end of the afternoon, most of the participants were exhausted by the level of intensity that had taken over the meeting. The purpose of the educational cooperation between Norway and Russia needed clarifying on a national as well as an international level. This is also a good example of how the implementation of such cooperative projects is anything but instrumental, and how substantial and often paradoxical questions must be cleared up by network participants in order to reach common ground. It was as if we had completely lost track of the intended purpose of the appendix in the agreement. When it was first planned three years ago, we had wanted to burst onto the networking stage and move in the direction of a new and revolutionary arena where we could prove that this network manages to institutionalise educational cooperation between Norway and Russia through our actions.

The evening was, as usual, kept for informal socialising and all participants were in an excellent mood. During dinner, we managed to discuss the events of the day in a friendly way and came to a unanimous agreement that we had achieved a new goal for our cooperation; we had organised the process of the institutional agreements, made them accountable through our mutual obligations in the appendix and had managed to take into account the different routines and positions in Norway and Russia.

Most people said that it had been an interesting day and the attitude was that it would all work out for the best:

Since you think we did such a bad job with our home institutions, you might understand now that the system here is not the same as yours. It is also good we still believe in what we are doing, and we still want to keep in contact. I think that we understand the different challenges we have.

One person from a small institution said:

In my opinion, we should learn from the way we work together in this network. We always find a way to manage the challenges we meet. I think that today’s discussions show how different we are. Despite those differences, our friendship and mutual respect means that we are able to unite on procedures and practical solutions that are appropriate and possible to put in place at each individual HEI. Our collaboration should be an example of how to work with and develop internationalisation.

This community has obviously strengthened the educational cooperation between Norway and Russia with large numbers of students and a continuous flow of new students. There is no doubt that the network’s transparent and well-organised exchange cooperation is a success. We have tried to show how they have succeeded through opening up for questions on cultural differences, which naturally...
come up when solutions need to be found. Their ‘action strategies’ (Anderson 1997) keep them together as a community because the individual members have developed acceptable limits of decency to reflect upon their different systems and cultural beliefs. The network would have no meaning if they did not have the ability to understand each other and to accept what needs to be accepted as differences. The social and cultural foundation (Schein 1985) is revealed in the personal contacts characteristic for this practicing network (Hatch 1997, 237), but their behavioural patterns and coping strategies are hard to find in descriptions of internationalisation at the institutional level. Strangely enough, it is precisely these coping strategies that bind the network together and empower their practice of international work.

The institutionalised network

The annual meeting includes representatives from several different HEIs in two different countries. They meet to discuss how they may jointly establish procedures that contribute to the exchange of students between their respective universities. Basically, the meeting is not a network but a positioning of individuals with a few shared intentions. These intentions reflect a mutual dependency; exchange of students requires that each HEI set aside time and resources for this purpose. Additionally, the possibility of success is contingent upon a minimum of cooperation between participants outside of each meeting and over time. When they reach a certain consensus on how to do this, the participants create a system for the distribution and coordination of responsibilities and tasks. This is what Selznick (1957) defines as an organisation – a single, objective system of conscious, concerted activities. Patterns of interaction, and standardised action programmes for how the work must be performed, are developed between the participants. Seen from the outside, this will generally only be perceived as a more or less appropriate instrument that is designed to handle specific tasks.

Seen from within, however, the perceptions of interaction and work tasks are different. The organisation of activities is designed at the annual meetings, but the activities are tested and modified on various occasions, both where participants meet face to face and through electronic communication. The instrumental understanding of the cooperation will fade into the background as layer upon layer of common sense and interpretation encompass the tasks and challenges. At the same time, the community becomes linked to a common purpose and, with the passing of time, the community is also linked to common social and normative justifications.

The content of the tasks is filled with meaning because participants are forced to ask themselves questions about what they are doing, why they are doing it and where they are heading; eventually leading to the existential question of who they jointly are, can be or should be. Such questions are directed as much to each other as they are to the tasks and their employers/principals. In this way, meaningful structures are built where norms and values melt into interaction. Seen from within the organisation, the experience is no longer just a tool for the allocation of tasks and coordination. The experienced organisation changes character and becomes, first and foremost, a network where the participants undertake far more than the simple and rational purpose it was first constituted to meet. Secondly, the individuals immerse themselves into the institutional characteristics – the network establishes an identity (Selznick 1957). The institutional aspects of the network – stability of norms or principles – thus become the most important references that justify the network’s existence. It is these norms that have been developed through interaction between the participants that will define how the practical activities are to be performed and how the practice is to be understood.

I have tried to illustrate these processes by describing three different aspects of the institutionalisation of this network. One refers to the ways in which the interpretation of the network’s imposed tasks determines the norms for how tasks should be coped with. The second aspect indicates how the cooperation within the network fosters respect, trust and recognition between the persons involved. The third aspect illustrates how norms and principles are being constituted as new rules for both interaction and problem solving.
As soon as such structures of meaning, norms and values (Geertz 1973) exist within the network, they provide direction for the individual participants’ work. Each individual will act in line with accepted viewpoints and will be able to more easily defend the choices made by referring to rules and principles that apply within the network’s operation. The learning that results from both succeeding with the work and being corrected by fellow participants or their respective HEIs leads to reduced insecurity and, therefore, to appropriate practice. To what degree the routines and procedures become functional, and the student exchange becomes successful, will thus depend on which institutional characteristics the network develops. In other words, it is not just a question of working towards standards that may provide mutual references for the network participants, but of determining, first and foremost, how these standards will be characterised. The chance for success is, in other words, closely tied to what normative content is laid into terms like reasonable and rational, right and wrong, important and inconsequential, true and desirable.

In the introduction, I pointed out that internationalisation is primarily described at a macro level, which is part of the reason why very little is understood about the ongoing processes at the micro level. In a pointed formulation, one can say that the cooperation that takes place between individuals in order to facilitate student exchange across national borders is a striking example of internationalisation in current practice, and its consequences for changing practices. Through the efforts to unite principles, requirements, needs and objectives that are both compatible and contradictory, possibilities are formulated. Sometimes they appear as unsightly compromises and, other times, as complete solutions. When student exchange manifests itself, it is the concrete impact and the realisation of the objective target of internationalisation. The processes that took place before the realisation of the objective target could have had a different content; the processes could have taken a different direction and led to other solutions with other qualities than it actually did. The outcome reflects what has been deemed necessary, possible, desirable and essential among those who completed the work. The main point in this paper, therefore, could easily have been both trivial and naïve, with a conclusion suggesting that the chance of realising the many good purposes of internationalisation depends on the smooth-functioning cooperation between individuals at the micro level. However, the answer for what is needed to achieve such smooth cooperation is not so obvious. Just as trust and openness require more than promises and invocations, effective practice requires more than talk and lofty goals. Usually, it is easier to say ‘hallelujah’ than it is to implement it.

A brief and final point may be added to this line of reasoning. I have argued that the ties that bind the individuals together in this network have thin threads of formalities and thicker strands of emotional identification. The network is made up of personally bound relationships, where the feeling of belonging for many is stronger than their formal and isolated tasks would indicate.

Among the principals and the leaders inside the various HEIs, there seems to be an inadequately understanding of this fact. Many factors ranging from regime changes at one university, to financial changes at another, to new negotiating terms for a third, as well as competition from HEIs outside the network, are threatening or changing the individual members’ preconditions to support earlier decisions to comply with agreements, maintain relationships and, in some cases, to continue in the network at all. The network is, therefore, both fragile and vulnerable. It would not take much external intervention before the confidence, sense of belonging and openness fade or even disappear completely. Seen from within, the network consists of these three concepts. The purpose, in itself, is only a ‘hallelujah’.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes
1. These countries were Denmark, Russia, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Iceland.
2. UArctic is no physical university, but a network of more than 130 member institutions from all over the world. The mission of the network is to “empower the people of the Circumpolar North by providing unique educational and research opportunities through collaboration with a network of members” (http://www.uarctic.org/ThemeFront.aspx?m=6).

3. The Barents region spans across 1,755,800 square kilometres and has a population of 5.54, 4.5 million of whom live in Russia. The remaining population resides in the northern part of Finland, Sweden and Norway.

References


