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## Time for a Nordic business history initiative?

The current state of Nordic business history is by certain estimates better than ever. Nordic business historians publish extensively in leading international journals and have a strong presence at international business history conferences. Still, in this discussion article we raise a yellow flag of warning for the future of Nordic business history. We argue that the subject field is challenged along three important dimensions: (i) lack of relevant teaching, (ii) continued reliance on commissioned history and (iii) limited recruitment. The article discusses these challenges and seeks to place them in a historical perspective. For each challenge, we develop a set of concrete proposals to address the problems identified. A common theme in our proposed solutions is to intensify Nordic collaboration, particularly through the establishment of common, externally funded Nordic research projects. To create meeting grounds for the development of such projects, *The Scandinavian Society for Economic and Social History* – the formal collaborative body for Nordic economic historians and the owner of *Scandinavian Economic History Review* – should be reinvigorated.

Keywords: business history, teaching, commissioned history, doctoral courses, Nordic co-operation

JEL-codes: N01, N80

### Introduction

There seems to exist a distinct tradition of praising Nordic business history – at least among Nordic business historians. A recent example can be found in a 2015 editorial of *Scandinavian Economic History Review* written by Jari Ojala and Knut Sogner, asserting both how ‘the Nordic countries are among the founding fathers of modern economic history research’ and how Nordic economic and business historians remain ‘globally significant players in their fields.’ As empirical support for this last assertion the two authors emphasised how more than 10 per cent of the papers accepted at the 2015 joint meeting of the Business History Conference and the European Business

History Association (EBHA) in Miami were of Nordic origin (Ojala & Sogner, 2015, p. 213).

Ojala and Sogner's appraisal is certainly not without justification. Nordic business historians have indeed influenced and shaped the international business historical research environment for many decades. And as we shall see in the first part of this paper, the presence of Nordic business historians in the leading international business history journals has been on a clear rise for the last 10 years. In this discussion article, we will nevertheless raise a yellow flag of warning. Twenty years after the first conference of the European Business History Association (EBHA) – held in Gothenburg, Sweden, in 1996 – the question remains whether Nordic business history is set to flourish further, or if it is rather in need of revitalisation in terms of new ideas, approaches and increased collaboration. We believe the latter. The future of business history in the Nordic region is, we argue, challenged along three important dimensions: lack of relevant teaching, the continued reliance on commissioned work, and limited recruitment. After presenting some basic data and reflections on the international impact of Nordic business history along with its academic position within Nordic universities, university colleges and business schools, the main part of the article discusses these challenges and seeks to place them in a historical perspective.

As we shall see, the challenges facing Nordic business history are not necessarily new. Rather, variants of these and similar challenges have troubled business historians for decades. There are obviously also many differences in between the Nordic countries when it comes to the position of business history as well as differences in the challenges facing business historians working at universities and business historians working at business schools. These latter differences exist both

within and between the Nordic countries. While we do recognise these differences, we will focus here on what we regard as a set of common challenges. For each challenge we develop a set of concrete proposals to address the problems identified. The overall purpose of the article is thus to point out some mounting practical challenges for the field of business history in the Nordic region, as well as to make some concrete proposals for how to deal with them. Hence, the paper is not an attempt at yet another historiographical evaluation of Nordic – or international – business history. For such analysis the reader needs to look elsewhere (Especially: Boje, 2005; de Jong, Higgins, & van Driel, 2015; Decker, 2016; Decker, Kipping, & Wadhvani, 2015; Friedman, 2017; Kipping & Üsdiken, 2014; Lindgren, 2003; Lönnborg & Rytönen, 2011; Ojala, 2017; Ojala, Eloranta, Ojala, & Valtonen, 2017; Ojala, Hemminki, & Nevalainen, 2016; Sogner, 1997; Thue, 2014; Wilson, Toms, de Jong, & Buchnea, 2016). Neither does the article concern itself with economic history in its entirety, but limits the discussion to business history.

We consider business history to be a subfield of economic history. It deals with 'the historical evolution of business systems entrepreneurs, firms as well as their interaction with their political, economic and social environment' (Jones & Zeitlin, 2007, p.1). While not suggesting in any way that business history is superior to other forms of economic history, business history has some specific strengths we believe it is important to highlight, defend and promote. These strengths also make business history an important and necessary supplement to the subject fields that have traditionally dominated in business schools as well as in general history departments. Business history provides a unique opportunity to study the complexities of economic decision-making. Business historians study how strategic, organisational, financial, cultural, legal and other considerations, issues that are normally treated as separate

fields of study, interact within firms to produce given outcomes (Ekberg, Lönnborg, & Myrvang, 2014). Hence, it is a subject field uniquely placed to produce complex – and more realistic – understandings of how firms actually operate. We believe this is an undervalued feat both in business schools and within general history departments. Hence, our call here for a Nordic business history initiative is fundamentally driven by a belief in the value of promoting the field of business history and as a means to help consolidate its position within higher education and academic research.

### **Nordic business history – an overview**

As already indicated, there are many reasons to be optimistic about the position of Nordic business history. Although difficult to count, the group of Nordic academics working on business history subjects is fairly large.<sup>1</sup> There is neither no doubt that

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<sup>1</sup> How many business historians are there in the Nordic region? This question is almost impossible to answer precisely. An attempt to measure the number of business historians by counting the number of academic positions formally related to business history is hardly relevant. In the Nordic countries taken together, only around two small handfuls of scholars are formally employed as associate professors, professors or researchers in business history. An alternative approach would be to count the number of authors responsible for the articles published in *Business History* and *Business History Review* as analysed above. Such a count brings us to the exact number of 80. Again, these are not figures on Nordic historians by nationality but on historians affiliated to Nordic institutions. These figures again omit business historians who have published in other international journals, as well as in national history journals, monographs and anthologies. To these one also needs to add the number of doctoral dissertations that have recently been published. A fairly recent overview has shown how in the years 2014–2015, a total of 48 doctoral dissertations were completed in economic history, and the among these the most popular topics are business history, welfare and institutions (Ojala et al., 2016, p. 181). Hence, one may add perhaps yet another 10-15 scholars. Perhaps we are altogether talking about around 150 researchers?

these researchers have played – and continue to play – an important role in the international research environment. After the 1996 EBHA conference in Gothenburg, 6 of the subsequent 20 conferences have been held in one of the Nordic countries – Denmark, Norway, Finland and Sweden.<sup>2</sup> The Nordic presence at the EBHA conferences has also been substantial. Table 1 shows the number of papers presented by Nordic scholars at EBHA since 2008.<sup>3</sup>

As can be seen, although participation has varied quite substantially, overall more than 13 per cent of all papers at EBHA since 2008 have been of Nordic origin. Moreover, participation rates seem to have stabilised well above 10 per cent in recent years.

We have also estimated the number of articles written by scholars at Nordic academic institutions in the two leading business history journals *Business History* and *Business History Review* in the period from 1991 to 2017.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Oslo (2001), Helsinki (2002), Copenhagen (2006), Bergen (2008, 2016), Uppsala (2013) (<http://www.ebha.org/?seite=conferences>, visited on 8.1.2018) Moreover, of the 10 presidents elected to head the organisation since its establishment, 2 have been from the Nordic countries: 2008–2009 Per Boje, University of Southern Denmark; 2011–2013 Harm G. Schroeter, University of Bergen, Norway.

<sup>3</sup> Estimated from printed conference programmes and Ojala & Sogner (2015). The ‘nationality’ of the paper was determined by the institutional affiliation of the (main) author, not the (main) author’s nationality. Hence, a Finnish historian working at a Swedish institution will be counted as a Swedish contributor. A co-authored paper written e.g. by a Norwegian and a Danish author will be counted as Norwegian if the main author is Norwegian.

<sup>4</sup> The figures were gathered from the Web of Science database. For each country, a selection was made of the most relevant academic institutions. This means that the table counts the number of articles written by academics affiliated to Nordic academic institutions and not necessarily articles written by Nordic scholars (since there are a number of non-

**Table 1.** Number of papers at EBHA conferences, 2008–2017

	Norway	Finland	Denmark	Sweden	Combined	All	%
Bergen 2008	15	2	8	9	34	121	28.1
Milan 2009	4	2	8	6	20	286	7.0
Glasgow 2010	5	3	9	7	24	166	14.5
Athens 2011	4	3	-	1	8	91	8.8
Paris 2012	4	8	2	6	20	154	13.0
Uppsala 2013	4	5	5	13	27	128	21.1
Utrecht 2014	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Miami 2015 <sup>5</sup>	4	6	8	8	26	255	10.2
Bergen 2016 <sup>6</sup>	10	10	5	12	37	238	15.5
Vienna 2017	8	5	5	8	26	204	12.7
Total	54	36	48	64	202	1489	13.6

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Nordic scholars working in Nordic academic institutions). The institutions selected were the following: Norway (University of Oslo, University of Bergen, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), BI Norwegian Business School and Norwegian School of Economics (NHH)), Finland (University of Helsinki, Aalto University, University of Jyväskylä, University of Tampere, University of Turku, University of Oulu and University of Eastern Finland), Denmark (Copenhagen University, Copenhagen Business School, University of Southern Denmark, Aarhus University) and Sweden (Lund University, University of Gothenburg, Uppsala University, Stockholm University, Sodertorn University and Umea University). We are grateful to Jari Ojala for all help in gathering and analysing the data.

<sup>5</sup> Joint conference with the Business History Conference.

<sup>6</sup> EBHA 20th congress and First World Congress on Business History.

**Table 2.** Number of articles in *Business History* and *Business History Review*, 1991–2007

	Norway	Finland	Denmark	Sweden	Combined	ALL	%
1991–1999	3	0	2	8	13	281	4.6
2000–2009	8	2	8	5	23	341	6.7
2010–2017	10	8	15	25	58	569	10.2
Total	21	10	25	38	94	1191	7.9

As can be seen from Table 2, the numbers and shares of articles in these journals remained low throughout the 1990s. Apart from a number of articles from Swedish institutions, five of which were published in 1995 alone, only occasional articles were published by scholars affiliated to Nordic academic institutions throughout this period. This situation has changed markedly, especially from 2010 onwards. As can be seen, during the period 2001–2017 ‘Nordic’ scholars wrote more than 10 per cent of all articles in these leading journals. Traditionally, these journals have tended to be quite Anglo-American in their approach and choice of papers, making the substantial Nordic presence quite impressive. On the other hand, the share of Nordic articles in these journals is much lower than the share of Nordic scholars giving papers at EBHA. Hence, either the Nordic papers for some reason do not transform into finished articles, or – the perhaps more probable explanation – Nordic scholars also publish much of their work elsewhere, in international journals such as *Enterprise and Society* and *Management and Organizational History* (none of which are registered in Web of Science), in national journals or in monographs and anthologies.

While the number of active business historians is quite high, and these historians publish quite extensively in international journals, it is also evident that business historians are scattered across a large variety of institutions, including universities, university colleges, business schools and museums. Some specifically defined business history units do exist, like those at the Copenhagen Business School, University of Southern Denmark and BI Norwegian Business School, but large – and small – groups of business historians also operate within a number of universities such as the University of Jyväskylä, the University of Helsinki, Uppsala University, the University of Bergen, the Norwegian School of Economics Bergen and at NTNU in Trondheim. At the same time borders between groups of economic historians, of business historians and of general historians are quite blurred. Some individual historians work within both business and economic history. Finally several business historians have an academic career outside of history. As Jari Eloranta and colleagues noted in a 2010 article, ‘business history is a discipline that has permeated various departments including history, economics, management, sociology, and so on’ (Eloranta et al., 2010, p. 84). This is definitely true for the Nordic countries.

The institutional fragmentation of Nordic business history is at the heart of the challenges we think the field is facing. As the Nordic group of business historians is scattered around in a few large and many small groups, common meeting grounds are few, and co-operation is limited. Let us look more closely at three of the challenges we believe are now facing Nordic business history and why we also think increased Nordic co-operation may be the best remedy the help solve these challenges

## **The need for co-operation on teaching experiences**

The first challenge to be raised concerns teaching, and specifically the weak position of business history within teaching at Nordic business schools and universities.

Following the financial crisis of 2008, numerous voices in both the public and private sector proclaimed the need for better integration of historical insights into the curricula of business schools. A column in *The Economist* noted how:

Business schools are meeting grounds for many disciplines – sociologists rub shoulders with economists and psychologists with historians. For decades economists have stood at the top of the heap and historians near the bottom. But there is surely a case for reversing this hierarchy. Studying business history is likely to give you a good sense of the fragility of human affairs. Studying economics is likely to give an inflated sense of man’s ability to control the present and predict the future.<sup>7</sup>

Despite this and similar calls for more historical approaches, investigating the curricula at major Nordic business schools such as Aalto University Business School (Helsinki), BI Norwegian Business School (Oslo), Copenhagen Business School, Jyväskylä School of Business and Economics, and Stockholm School of Economics shows that there are very few compulsory courses in business history. Instead, business historians typically tend to teach in more general – ‘core’ – business school disciplines such as introductory courses in strategy, marketing, economic integration and research methodology. The historian at business schools has somehow become the jack-of-all-trades but master of none, gaining limited support for the need to teach actual history courses.

Similar challenges are apparent at the universities. Rather than teaching their own subject, most of business historians’ time is spent teaching general history. The

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<sup>7</sup> ‘Clio, the queen of the sciences’, *The Economist* 7.10.2010.

overall challenge seems to be an inability among historians to convince the school management – and perhaps also students – of the actual benefits of making historical insight a central part of the students' knowledge base. The students at business schools may typically ask what a history course would do to enhance their attractiveness in a competitive job market. At the history departments, the future historians will similarly ask why they would need business history in preference to other subfields of history.

This challenge may not be a problem in the short term, but in the longer term business history needs to make a place for itself as a discipline in its own right. The general trend in both universities and business schools in the last few years has been to organise teaching around cohesive bachelor's and master's programmes. While it is probably overambitious to envisage the development of separate bachelor's or master's programmes in business history, historians at least need to do more to make their field of study an attractive and integral part of major bachelor's and master's programmes. Otherwise, the question of justification will haunt Nordic business historians as an omnipresent phantom. We could end up in a situation where the most successful business historians are those researchers who are the least 'business historical', teaching in other disciplines and publishing in the most prestigious international management journals.<sup>8</sup>

It is indeed difficult to introduce new courses in well-established bachelor's and master's programmes, with curricula typically dominated by the recognised

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<sup>8</sup> This challenge also manifests in another way, namely in the danger that business history journals are demoted to low-level management journals rather than continuing as A-level (business) history publications.

disciplines such as micro- and macroeconomics, statistics and organisational analysis. Moreover, in this endeavour historians are pitted against other 'alternative' subjects such as corporate social responsibility, corporate governance and business research methodology. A critical question is, of course, if there is any room at all for compulsory business history courses on the bachelor's and master's programmes of major business schools. The obvious answer today is no, insofar as the discipline has been unable to explain clearly and comprehensively *why* students should take courses in business history. But this situation can be changed.

We therefore recommend that business historians in the Nordic region join forces to ameliorate the educational position of their field. Such co-operation should include three interrelated steps: Firstly, it would be helpful to gain an overview of the existing courses in business history and to share methodological and didactic experiences. This endeavour could build on the work accomplished by the Business School initiative at Harvard Business School in 2012, which included an overview of existing business history courses around the world, including courses at BI Oslo, Copenhagen Business School, Gothenburg University and the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim<sup>9</sup>. The second and related step would be to discuss the *raison d'être* of business historical curricula at the business schools and at the universities. Why should business schools teach business history and what should the major approach be? The abovementioned Business History Initiative pointed out four common approaches to business history courses: (i) traditional, managerial, firm-centred courses; (ii) courses on the history of capitalism; (iii) courses on financial and

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<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.hbs.edu/businesshistory/Documents/00-final-volume-2-report-Oct%2017-2012-with-cover.pdf>

banking history and finally (iv) courses related to innovation and entrepreneurship. The various categories obviously need to relate to different types of *raison d'être*. Our point is that it is important to share experiences in order to develop convincing arguments in support for the development of business history courses. The third and final component of our proposal is thus relevant if – and when – it emerges that business historians in the Nordic region share interests in the abovementioned categories – or in other categories they can agree upon. In that case we suggest that they join forces in the development of teaching material and relevant curricula. Ten years ago – in 2008 – a joint Nordic business historical textbook was published (Fellman, Iversen, Sjögren & Thue, 2008). A possible option would be to explore whether a similar broad business history textbook project should be initiated, or if it would be more appropriate to develop tailored teaching material, for instance, for courses on financial history or maritime history. In any case, shared teaching material should only be developed after in-depth analyses of the existing teaching experiences and discussions about relevant purposes. In this way the position of business history could hopefully be strengthened.

### **Continued reliance on commissioned work**

The second challenge concerns commissioned history. During the post-war decades, historians such as Eli Heckscher, Kristof Gleeman, Francis Sejersted, and Jorma Ahvenainen professionalised commissioned business historical work. They did so by emphasising the importance of critical methodology and archive based work. Already in 1950 Eli Heckscher suggested a research agenda avoiding any normative or theoretical ambitions, focusing instead on the utmost concrete understanding of the individual firm (Heckscher, 1950). Several commissioned works in the following decades responded to this plea, although historians such as Sejersted used their

business histories as a basis for both theoretical (at least some) and (perhaps mostly) normative reflections. In any case, this first generation of Nordic business historians changed commissioned work from frequently uncritical narratives towards in-depth studies based on scholarly methodological traditions (Lie, 2006; Ahvenainen, 1994).

In 1988 the Norwegian business historian Even Lange suggested a further ‘contextualization’ of business history research. The main task – and hence the importance – of business history according to Lange was its role in understanding the broader process of economic development. ‘A broadly defined business history’, he wrote, ‘provides insight to basic economic processes that cannot be grasped by other means’ (Lange, 1988, p. 295). A second generation of Nordic business historians have written and published innumerable monographs. Many of these have explicitly intended to render comprehensible not only the particular company under scrutiny, but to use the company as a prism through which to study the broader processes of economic and, to a lesser extent, social and cultural development trends.

The vast majority of these studies are sound and insightful works in their own right. Looking back at this academic heritage, however, the recurring problem has been the inability to translate the studies into more general insights and to address empirical and theoretical questions beyond the firms under study. Lange’s plea to use business history as a starting point for the study of ‘basic economic processes’ has thus been less successful. We would rather argue – possibly with some exaggeration – that commissioned business history has tended to function more as a source of funding than as a source of contextualized knowledge.

This argument is not new. In 1995 the Norwegian historian Rolv Petter Amdam claimed that the then flourishing field of commissioned business history faced three challenges: ‘the lack of comparative studies, limited attention to

theoretical perspectives and problems with developing a long term, research strategy capable of tying together the different research projects' (Amdam, 1995, p. 40). These problems have persisted. About 10 years after Amdam's concerns were raised, the Swede Håkan Lindgren similarly identified the need to develop a more theoretically grounded approach to business history. Yet few commissioned academic business histories published in the last 15 years have been explicitly theoretical in their approach, or have been developed on a collaborative platform ensuring that the book had an impact beyond its specific findings. Some journal articles have been developed on the basis of these books, but considering the substantial amount of empirical data on which these books rest, the outcome in terms of academic papers reflecting broader historical or theoretical debates remains disappointing.

What can be done? We suggest that Nordic business historians who share the above-mentioned worry discuss how to make commissioned work more theoretically grounded and thus relevant for academic discussion across borders and disciplines. Secondly, Nordic business historians working with business history should meet and discuss how a third generation of commissioned work should look like. The aim should be that academic, commissioned works are embedded in relevant theoretical and analytical concepts. This does not imply that all commissioned work should contain intricate theoretical reflections or seek primarily to develop theoretical arguments – such a goal would probably scare away most potential sources of commissioned funding! However, commissioned work should be stimulated to be more mindful of its conceptual framework, to develop its questions not only from the empirical material but equally importantly from existing theoretical debates, and to have a clear, if not necessarily explicit, analytical strategy. This would make the commissioned work more easily convertible to journal articles. On-going

conversation with other social sciences and the international journal audience should be a given aspect of any business historical endeavour – including commissioned work.

### **The recruitment situation**

The third challenge concerns the lack of recruitment of new researchers. This problem obviously relates to the aforementioned challenges. It is difficult to maintain a stable supply of new researchers when the subject fields itself lacks a secured position in the teaching portfolio. At the same time, while commissioned works may in the short term be an attractive source of funding, such work is not necessarily so attractive as a career path. It is a challenging matter to create tenured positions on the basis of ad hoc book projects. Moreover, with few exceptions, commissioned work rarely translates into doctoral projects. Looking critically at the 48 economic history dissertations completed in 2014–2015, two interesting features emerge. Firstly, the dissertations were very unevenly distributed between the Nordic countries with 29 dissertations in Sweden alone, 11 in Finland, 6 in Norway and only 2 in Denmark. (Ojala & Sogner, 2015). This situation has not changed, as can be seen in the editorial of this issue of SEHR analysing dissertations from 2016. A second point to be observed is how the dissertations represent a very broad range of research themes, reflecting a diffused agenda for business history.

This situation poses a real challenge. It is a striking fact that 20 years after the foundation of EBHA there is still no separate doctoral programme in business history in the Nordic region, nor is there a well-established recruitment source for new young researchers, for instance via a master's programme or even an established selection of business history courses at the universities. The research environments are often not

in direct contact with students capable of – and interested in – proceeding on an academic career in the field.

As a means to handle the recruitment problem we propose a joint Nordic effort along two simultaneous dimensions. The first would be related to the Nordic collaboration proposed above on teaching and commissioned research. These initiatives should involve business historians from both business schools and universities. In this way business school researchers can more easily be brought into contact with young scholars (prospective master's and /or doctoral students) from history departments. The second dimension concerns a plea for the formation of ambitious, externally founded sector-based research projects involving Nordic business historians. By ambitious we mean the formation of joint research programmes with an international scope both in terms of doctoral and postdoc positions and in terms of research questions. Such projects should aim to contribute to the broader international scientific communities.

There are many untapped themes which Nordic research projects could explore. As an early, concrete initiative, we propose the establishment of a Nordic network for maritime historians. Through this network we aim to gather researchers from both business schools and history departments, to define shared research agendas, develop joint research applications and also perhaps to develop pan-Nordic teaching activities.

## **Conclusions**

The health of Nordic business history in terms of international publications and participation in the international research community is probably better than ever. Yet

there is room for improvement and numerous challenges hover across the field. This discussion paper has pointed to three such challenges. A common theme in our suggested solutions has been to intensify Nordic collaboration. Such a collaboration might most effectively be developed through the establishment of common, externally funded research projects; projects which could help the recruitment situation and enhance the theoretical and analytical sophistication of Nordic business history. They could also be a point of departure for the development of co-ordinated teaching activities. A basic premise for the development of these projects, however, is the reinvigoration of old-established meeting grounds for Nordic business historians. Nordic business historians need a place to meet regularly and to start debating and developing research projects. *The Scandinavian Society for Economic and Social history* – the formal collaborative body for Nordic economic historians and the owner of *Scandinavian Economic History Review* – is a sleeping giant. It offers an existing infrastructure in terms of a governing body, by-laws and funding. It should be carefully awakened.

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