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**Experience of Norwegian-Russian cooperation in
the field of education at the
University of Tromsø - Arctic University of Norway
Campus Alta and Kirkenes**

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Abstract. The leader and a developer of the Bachelor of Northern Studies (BNS) present this English language, online, interdisciplinary university course program in social sciences and the humanities. BNS is today part of the multi-campus UiT Arctic University of Norway output of higher education. An overview of BNS is given, noticing its 2010 origin in the University of the Arctic initiative, and the challenges it has faced in recent years when having to move its institutional base several times. The conclusions highlight the importance of personal commitment among BNS teaching staff, of networking, and of stable interests in Russia and elsewhere in the High North to jointly provide domestic and international students with interdisciplinary course programs and social events, building on the Euroarctic tradition of cross-border collaboration and the innovative mind-set it fosters.

Keywords. *Norway, Russia, cross border cooperation, higher education, on-line teaching, international student*

**Опыт норвежско-российского сотрудничества в сфере образования в
Университете Тромсё – Арктическом университете Норвегии
(кампус Альта и Киркенес)**

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Аннотация. Мы являемся лидерами и разработчиками учебной программы «Бакалавр в области изучения Севера» (BNS) – англоязычного, дистанционного, междисциплинарного курса для студентов университетов, изучающих общественные и гуманитарные науки. В настоящее время программа BNS является частью мульти-университетской программы подготовки кадров с высшим образованием в одном из кампусов Университета Тромсё - Арктического университета Норвегии, в Альте-Киркенесе. В статье мы даем краткий обзор программы, которая впервые была апробирована в 2010 году по инициативе сетевого вузовского консорциума, Университета Арктики, и анализируем те трудности, с которыми она столкнулось в последние годы с учетом необходимости менять ее из-за неоднократно меняющихся требований и новых норм обучения. Особо подчеркивается важность персональной роли и ответственности преподавательского состава программы BNS в ходе ее выполнения; системной организации сетевой взаимосвязи со студентами; и совместного поддержания устойчивого интереса как студентов из России и других регионов Крайнего Севера, так и иностранных студентов из других стран к изучению междисциплинарных учебных программ и социально-культурному взаимодействию. Такой фокус основывается на традициях Евро-Арктического межграницного сотрудничества и в то же время на важности инновационного развития северных регионов.

Ключевые слова. *Норвегия, Россия, межграницное сотрудничество, высшее образование, онлайн обучение, иностранные студенты*

The Bachelor of Northern Studies (BNS) started in 2010 on the initiative of Bjørn Sagdahl, who was U-Arctic regional coordinator of bachelor of circumpolar studies at Nordland University college in Bodø, Per Møller and by Peter Haugseth positioned in Alta and Kirkenes. BNS subjects and weekly study modules were developed by the University of the Arctic international partnership. BNS was and is an exponent of the internationalization of higher education and promotes students' mobility as one of its goals [1]. A wide network of partners in Russia was crucial in this. Some of the BNS "Advanced Emphasis" courses were written jointly by Norwegian and Russian BNS teachers. The BNS was internationally open but students came mostly from Russia, with the group next in size from Norway. The first Russian partner to embark on course collaboration was Ukhta State Technical University in the Komi Republic; Murmansk Arctic State University (MASU), Murmansk State Technical University soon followed and became prominent associates with students and teachers directly engaged in the BNS. Many BNS students enlisted at the University of Petrozavodsk and its then Kola branch in Apatity. The BNS network also included Syktyvkar Forest Institute and was extended to the Russian Far East with the Dep. of Northern Studies actively engaged at the North East Federal University in Yakutsk. Travel funding could be raised externally, and guest lectures were held to students of several partners, including at the NEFU's Yakutsk and Mirny branches.

The then University College of Finnmark (HiF) was the organizational base and managed to run the BNS based on MoU's signed on top levels with the

partner universities in Russia and coordinated by their efficient International Offices. This resembled the way the Bachelor of Circumpolar Studies program was run at the then Nordland University College, but its core set of Russian partners was different [10]. The principles of the Bologna Declaration on European standardization of higher education provided the foundation for both programs. HiF managed to enlist all international students including those from Russia at its local enrollment office in Alta. It provided the necessary ICT on-line technology and could appoint interested and qualified teachers among its faculty willing to conduct teaching and on-line tutoring all in English. By 2015 some sixty students had fulfilled a so-called double degree of the BNS and their home university and received their diplomas [4].

Urban Wråkberg left the Barents Institute and joined the BNS team in 2013 while keeping his office in Kirkenes. That same year Tromsø University integrated the University College of Finnmark, which was followed in 2016 by the College of Technology at Narvik and Harstad University College. Right after these great mergers pressure was put on by the top leaders of the new university, named UiT The Arctic University of Norway (UiT AUN), the whole organization was discussed and also the quality of its education programs. In a rapport by the UiT strategic committee of education (SUV) evaluating UiT study programs in 2016, recommended over 10 programs to be closed down [3]. Quite a few was to continue, but not without severe revision. BNS was part of the last group and while the revision was being conducted – the program was put on hold. The revision was partly also to identify were BNS “overlapped” with other UiT course programs, in research and in the administration; the latter took the main hit of this campaign. One of its consequences was dismantling the flexible administrative system of collectively enrolling international BNS students from partner universities. Instead it was expected that all the students from partner universities had to apply to the program by individually signing up to it on the web in the same way as any other international student. The collective system of enrolling the students from partner universities fell apart and thus made the administrative cooperation between UiT and its BNS partner universities on student exchange difficult. BNS was struck by strict demands on certified English language proficiency for all UiT AUN international students. This in effect stopped BNS enrolment of Russian students because proficiency certificates cost money and Russian partner institutions could not demand their students already being enrolled at their university to pay an admission fee for certain courses put into their own university curriculum. By regional political lobbying the BNS program was able to raise funding in Norway from the County Government of Finnmark to subsidy Russian students’ participation in the BNS but the grant (100kNOK) could never be used.

A general challenge to the BNS is the “*idée fixe*”, directed at all university programs in Scandinavia, esp. so in Norway, that the main quality criteria of any course program is its output rate of students, i.e. the percentage of the number of

students leaving their university training in the shortest possible time with a complete degree out of the number initially enrolled. Of course, BNS, like many other course programs, in this regard ranks far behind advanced vocational training programs like those to become medical doctor or dentist, where demands on the qualifications of students enlisted are much higher, and where an easily defined, well-paid job is waiting for each student right after completing his or her degree. This is puzzling news to many external observers and decision makers, but not so for anyone holding any real insights in the university world. A Northern Studies Research Group was formed in 2015 that includes all teachers of the BNS. A useful base funding was allotted initially to further its competence raising work, but it was taken away in 2019 referring to a central need to standardize (in practice set to zero) all basic internal funding for any research group of UiT AUN, while reserving such only for “excellent”, i.e. already externally funded, research groups.

In response to the temporary moratorium on students’ uptake the BNS underwent an external review by two very experienced Swedish and Norwegian experts. After study of many documents and interviews with BNS staff and students, they presented their report in the spring of 2017 [8]. It was critical in certain regards, positive in others; it pointed to the need to give the program a clearer methodological profile while keeping its well-motivated wide scope of interest across the Subarctic. The evaluators appreciated the BNS goal of training students to grasp and respect the many different visions and interests of people living in and making decisions of importance to Subarctic societies. The evaluators likewise approved of BNS handling of indigenous issues, its take on globalization and geo-economics, its comparative study of regional governance, its focus on environmental issues and the continued importance of economic growth and industrial development in the High North. The BNS evaluators argued for better integration of the BNS in the central agenda of our university, not least given that it contributes to several of the goals the UiT AUN puts forth in its official strategy [2].

Few people expected the BNS program to survive the aftermath of the North Norwegian university fusion of 2013. But it did. Despite no specific marketing beside its standard web pages on the UiT AUN Internet platform, the BNS has kept attracting a fair number of students, not from Russia, but from other parts of the world. The program now enlists more Norwegian students; some are from Finland, a few from the other Scandinavian countries, a handful from Australia and Canada; many are from Europe: the Netherlands, Germany, Belorussia, France, while a growing number, also including on-campus students in Alta, is from South-East Asia, esp. China. To recruit students to Campus Alta and get them to complete their BA is a challenge. The on-line section of the program provides the backbone of students, it enlists well esp. now during Covid-19 lock down. This secures the BNS from getting condemned by the AUN university management for low entry of students. The official policy of the Norwe-

gian Ministry of Education and Research, given that it is not consistently applied, is to prescribe a minimum of 20 students for any program run by a Norwegian higher education institution. This criterion was instrumental in shutting down the campus-based Master of International Northern Development at Nord University in Bodø in 2018 [9].

The BNS developers keep adjusting the program to existing and new national and university educational standards. In contrast to most other UiT programs the BNS directly addresses several goals in the UiT strategy as well as such stated in the Arctic strategies of the present and previous Norwegian governments. It is encouraging to notice that a special youth panel appointed by the Norwegian Government to comment on its recent Arctic White Paper underlines the need for regional access to flexible higher education in Northern Norway and points to students' interest for international mobility and for cross-border joint seminars and social events [7; 12].

The conclusions we draw from the BNS turmoil over the last six years include the following. The strategic advice of UiT SUV committee revising BNS followed by the 2017 external evaluation has been met by the leadership of the Dept. of tourism research and northern studies and in particular by the group of responsible BNS teachers and researchers. All were teaming up to answer the questions and suggestions of the UiT SUV and the evaluation committee. The study plan was revised according to the expectations of the new guidelines of NOKUT (The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education) and thus its content and structure reevaluated and improved. The BNS team managed to get representation in UiT AUN faculty boards; first for three years in the Faculty of Sports, Tourism and Social Work in Alta and, after its closure, four more years ending in 2021 in the Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education in Tromsø, under which authority BNS and its home department now belongs. This has improved communication between BNS grassroots and the "level two" of the UiT AUN administration and leadership. BNS staff has promoted the BNS at the meetings we have managed to get with top leaders of UiT AUN; the most recent such meeting took place in Kirkenes on February 18-19, 2021. BNS staff occasionally publishes chronicles arguing in favor of English based on-line course work focusing the High North and of cross-border partnerships in teaching and research with Russian universities [5].

We also successfully embarked as Norwegian partner in Central European borderland studies run, based on major so-called Norway EEA grants, by two institutional associates in Slovakia. Several smaller research projects were conducted and some of the staff was partners in international research projects that also resulted in many publications [see e.g., 6, 11]. The BNS staff is currently updating the program's course structure and contents, while recruiting new faculty after several retirements. Our methodological focus is still on interdisciplinarity and the social construction of all Arctic knowledge (incl. science). We continue to teach on the demography and socio-environmental sustainability of

the High North in line with the wide UN definition of sustainability. Given its present understaffing and lack of travel funds BNS has not been able to re-engage in the process of producing new UArctic course contents of possible relevance to it.

Renewed efforts to apply for external funding to support student's mobility and CBC with Russian and Swedish Universities were successful in 2020 and 2021 with the Norwegian Barents Secretariat and the North-to-North UArctic grant system. This enables BNS to run, what we have called, the Barents Border Realities (BBR) workshops in Kirkenes; the first one in October 2020. This initiative includes physical meetings based on travels, when Covid-19 restrictions allow for it, in combination with virtual cross-border students group work and presentations by Teams. MASU and Petrozavodsk State University are active with students in this and teachers from the National Research University Higher School of Economics and Luleå University of Technology have participated on-line. By this kind of arrangement, we achieve more direct student and teacher CBC interaction. We avoid any complicated double degree routines as well as the demand on students to hold a costly English proficiency certificate. Students participating in BBR workshops can have a diploma or other proof of their participation from the management of the BNS course program. This represents a new format to re-engage in on-line teaching between UiT AUN's BNS program and North West Russian Universities adding the NRU HSE Campus St. Petersburg to the collaboration.

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