ABSTRACT
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Library cooperation at the NOVA University - the Nordic University in Agriculture, Forestry and Veterinary Medicine

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Abstract

The Nordic University in Agriculture, Forestry and Veterinary Medicine –The NOVA University - was established in 1995 to increase the cooperation between the Nordic agricultural universities. The NOVA libraries of the seven institutions and faculties involved wanted to show that they are a very useful partner in launching new ideas. They have the ability to put new emerging IT technology to use. The NOVA libraries have several IT projects like NOVAGate, NOVA Web Course and NOVABA. The NOVA libraries have found the right components for success: IT specialists, librarians and researchers working together multiprofessionally and concept of sharing the workload.

1. NOVA UNIVERSITY

The NOVA University (http://www.nova-university.org/) is an organization established in 1995 to increase the cooperation between the Nordic agricultural universities. Members of NOVA are The Royal Veterinary and Agricultural University, Denmark, Faculty of Agriculture and Forestry, University of Helsinki, Finland, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, University of Helsinki, Finland, Agricultural University of Norway, Norwegian College of Veterinary Medicine, The Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Agricultural College of Hvanneyri, Iceland.

Organization

NOVA is governed by the NOVA rector and the board of the rectors – in Finland the deans of faculties – of the seven institutions and faculties involved. The general purpose of establishing NOVA is through various cooperation projects to increase the range and raise the quality of education and research.

NOVA has joint postgraduate courses and an open postgraduate school and coordinated research programmes building on the strenghts of the individual institutions.

Today NOVA has three steering committees for post graduate education, undergraduate education and cooperation with the Baltic states. The intention is gradually to establish more steering committees and working groups. A NOVA catalogue informs of NOVA committee and working group members and persons taking part in NOVA. From January 1996 NOVAs secretariat is situated in Alnarp, Sweden.

Saving Money

The ideology behind NOVA University is free mobility of students, teachers and researchers. This means that they can choose between Hvanneyri, Copenhagen, Ås, Oslo, Ultuna, Umeå, Skara, Alnarp and Helsinki. NOVA university also wants to have a joint profile and cooperation to advance international cooperation with Baltic countries, developing countries, EU members etc. This means that as a unified team the NOVA University has a stronger position than each of its parts alone. Thus, NOVA University wants to unite its resources in dividing responsibility on subjects which are not broad enough for each country to develop or to maintain its own expertise. This means the division of labor and saving money.

A decentralized organization of NOVA is a university without walls. The activities of NOVA take place

at the institutions taking part in NOVA. NOVA has a bottom up principle and wants to see as many activities as possible based upon an active commitment from students and staff. The Nordic universities finance the costs of cooperation themselves. The main costs are the secretariat and the postgraduate courses. Such costs are shared according to a percentage distribution decided and used by Nordic Council of Ministers.

There are primarily courses in different subject fields for post-graduate students, approximately 10-12 courses per year. 24 NOVABA courses have been arranged in the Baltic countries during 1996-1998.

NOVA undergraduate education is a new target activity. It fulfils the vision of free mobility of students and teachers. At present priority is given to investigate possibilities within short courses and summer courses covering one full semester courses at master level and longer programmes of varying length.

Structural barriers like incomparable study programmes have to be overcome.

A new solution to overcome the structural barriers is in the planning phase. It is synchronized multiform block education. The idea is to teach the main subjects in five-week periodic units or blocks over five years. It also means that a student can take a certain course only in one NOVA university at a certain period of the time. The student has to travel to the university which has that course in the program. There are also so called empty blocks in the system that allow students to choose freely their subject courses. The system is based on three terms, Autumn, Winter and Spring which all start at the same time in every university.

The educational pros and cons of the system will be analyzed this spring. The analysis will concern the costs for the students to travel to different countries, the freedom to choose your subjects and times for them, the gross-benefit of the system, and lastly, the level of ambition and advantages and disadvantages of the system.

2. Organizing Library Services at the NOVA University

The Nordic agricultural libraries have a long tradition of cooperation but the cooperation has got a new more concrete form after the NOVA University was born. The libraries formed their own working group called Information Management. The group consists of the directors of the libraries. The group also functions as a steering group of various joint projects in the NOVA libraries.

The idea of the group was to combine the skills of librarians, researchers and IT professionals of the NOVA University and to work together multiprofessionally. The librarians wanted to unite the skills of the personnels and other resources of the Nordic libraries. The tasks of the information management group are 1) to develop an easy access to Nordic information systems. This means e.g. the NOVAGate – a project which is a subject-based information gateway to Internet resources in the NOVA fields. 2) to coordinate the management of information on research projects, publications and experts at the national and international level. This means e.g. that the agricultural libraries are the focal points of AGRIS input in their countries. *3)* to teach information management skills to Nordic and Baltic students and researchers. This means e.g. a Nordic web-course for information retrieval.

The Three C:s

There are some important themes which are connected to the concept of information society. The most important of them are connectivity, content and competence. Connectivity relates to access to the information for the widest possible community. Content refers to resources of information society. Competence relates to providing skills for the information society. The students and teachers have to have skills to play their role in a learning information society. Libraries are a natural, even a traditional home base for these concepts.

The NOVA libraries have been pioneers in NOVA Universities to teach these new skills. The libraries wanted to show the NOVA University that the libraries are a very useful partner in launching new ideas. The libraries have the ability to put the new emerging IT technology to use. The libraries have a tradition to build new tools to help information retrieval. Internet was a new tool to all but initially only a few could take benefit of it at the time when NOVA University was established, 1995. The NOVA libraries achieved results faster and more easily than the other institutions involved in setting up their NOVA projects. This was possible because the initiatives of the libraries were so concrete and it was easy for them to cooperate across the borders using new IT-technology.

2.1. NOVAGate – the First Example of the IT Activities of NOVA Libraries

The libraries started by developing a multi-lingual, multi-national subject based information gateway to Internet resources in forestry, veterinary medicine, agricultural, food and environmental sciences. This NOVAGate project (http://novagate.nova-university.org) was established in 1996. The service was launched in July 1998. It is based on a web-accessible database, which contains Internet resource descriptions for searching and browsing. Initially the project aims at comprehensive coverage of Nordic resources, but it will expand to include resources from other areas also. The service is selective, not only by subject, but also by quality, i.e. all resources are first checked against a set of quality criteria before inclusion.

Cooperation

The management of the project has rotated between the participating countries. Finland was the first to have the thrill of managing a multinational project. Last year it was Sweden and this year it will be Denmark. An e-mailing list (nig-l@utb32.bibul.slu.se), telephone and occasional meetings have been the main communication channels between the project members. Each country updates a central ROADS database at the library of the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. A webguide (http://honeybee.helsinki.fi/mmhf/gguide.htm) for cataloguing and a list for quality criteria have been set up and they can be searched for free in the Internet. The libraries have divided the tasks which include management of the database, development of the web site, production of a web-based resource description guide, evaluation and marketing of the service, between each others.

Today

The focus has been shifted from service to contents after opening the site. The focus of the development will be to add contents and its quality by evaluating the service and by developing the database housekeeping procedures and the user interface. Also new Nordic and international partners are sought for.

The first more or less intern evaluation of the NOVAGate service was carried out in late 1998 although the database had only 300 references. The questions concerned the user interface and functionality, contents, target groups, personal details or any additional comments. The answering rate was 42%. The response was positive. NOVAGate is a good Nordic initiative. The second evaluation will be carried out when the service is completed.

The concept of working together and sharing the workload is a part of sustainable development in our opinion. The libraries can add resources by working together because each takes the responsibility of the work in turns. To promote the sustainable use of natural resources by the means of teaching and research is also the mission of FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) which will promote Capacity Development in partner countries - a theme which stresses the importance of education.

Communication in the Net

The shared and distant cooperation led the libraries to use net-based communication. It was not always so easy to tell your partner what you actually think of the project under construction because of the language barriers and different cultures. The Finns seem to be more impatient: we seem to know at once how the work should be done. E.g. our Swedish friends want to sit down and discuss it thoroughly and democratically. Working together has been very educating and nice. We had fun too, of course. We have learned by doing and when doing so, we have combined technology and learning.

2.2. NOVA WEB COURSE for Information Retrieval

The free mobility of NOVA students, teachers and researchers is a theme that has been the object of discussions in the libraries lately. What does free mobility mean to the students and teachers.? Do they get similar library services in every country? Do they have equal access to electronic material? Do they have high-quality user education at their disposal when they need it?

One solution to the above questions is the NOVA web-course. The NOVA libraries are developing a NOVA web-course for learning to use the library material. The model of this course comes from Finland. The Helsinki University Agricultural Library has a web-course (http://honeybee.helsinki.fi/mmha/kurssi/) which makes it possible to choose a place and a time for learning. The structure of the course consists of student register, credit register, program for registration for courses/exams and program for allotment of questions. There are seven series of questions on the topics of plant production and agricultural engineering; animal production; forestry; environmental sciences; applied economics; food, household and nutrition sciences and veterinary medicine. Students draw questions for themselves by using the program for the allotment. Answers are sent back to teachers via email. The home-page of the course is common for the different countries and it is linked to homepages of every library. There are own contact persons in each library to give feedback to students. The materials in NOVA web course will be in English.

This kind of a self-study tool makes free moving from country to country easier to NOVA students. They can have access to every country' s resources easily. It also standardizes the library services. The students learn to search information and to use national library systems, cd-rom databases as well as electronic journals in each country. The NOVA web course will be in full use during the year 1999.

2.3. NOVABA – the Cooperation between the Nordic and Baltic Libraries

An other example of the activities of NOVA libraries is the cooperation with the Baltic libraries a.c.a. NOVABA libraries. The Nordic libraries have organized the first training course in 1995 in Finland and afterwards two training courses in using NOVA material and international material in the Internet in the Baltic countries for the staff of libraries and researchers of the universities. For this purpose The NOVA libraries have produced together a leaflet and some training material. The NOVA web course in English will help to enchance the usability of the information at the NOVA universities. The goal is that also the Baltic NOVA libraries will add their own questions and sources to NOVA web course.

The Baltic libraries have benefitted the most of the Nordic model of working together. Accordingly they now have a network of their own. According to an evaluation of NOBABA program 1995-1998 which was carried out in the autumn of 1998 the Baltic libraries seem to be very glad about the NOVABA cooperation. It gave them the first chance (in 1995) to go abroad and learn about the library systems operating in Nordic countries. Training and visits have been useful. The Baltic libraries have Internet connections but further education in new management techniques is needed.

The Information management working group has informed the Baltic libraries that they are welcome as

partners to NOVAGate service and for discussions in the mailing-list. Three Baltic librarians are also invited to the Royal Agricultural and Veterinary Library to a two-week visit in 1999. The Baltic libraries can have their photocopies and interlibrary loans from NOVA libraries free of charge.

2.4 AGRIS

The Nordic agricultural libraries are the focal points in their countries for managing national agricultural bibliographical references to FAO´s centrally managed database AGRIS (International Information System for Agricultural Sciences and Technology). The model of working as a concerted team applies also here. The NOVA libraries are preparing together their contribution to FAO concerning the new decentralized production model of AGRIS. The NOVA libraries will inform FAO about the possibilities of NOVAGate in disseminating information.

FAO emphasized the new role of AGRIS as an information exchange network to provide data and knowledge on sustainable agricultural development which could include the establishment of viable working partnerships to facilitate the exchange of global and local information and know-how in a transnational way. The actors of this new AGRIS network will be given new tools to manage, analyse, process and disseminate information. FAO wants the new AGRIS network to include bibliografic information and non-bibliographic information. The users want to have all kind of agricultural and related information like statistics, information on research projects, administrative data, data on extension and education.

3. The Concept of Success

NOVA library cooperation is real in working together in concrete projects. But the NOVA libraries have their local troubles and local customers, too. When the syncronized multiform block education is a reality and the amount of NOVA students increases the libraries have to find the answers to a common intranet, division of work, sharing of resources, and developing of new services to support the free mobility of NOVA students and teachers. The NOVA courses will comprise about 8-20 per cent of the total 160 study weeks.

I think that the future looks rosy because the NOVA libraries have the right ingredients. They are firstly IT specialists, librarians and researchers working together multiprofessionally and secondly the concept of sharing the workload.

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