

# Baltic Science Network.

Connecting Through Science

## Challenges and barriers to research cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region

Danish Agency for Science  
and Higher Education

## Further details on the publication

Name of the project	Baltic Science Network
Affiliation of the project	Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme funded project
Title of the publication	Working paper on Challenges and Barriers to Research Cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region
Affiliation to the Project Work Package	Work Package 3 – Activity 3.1
Date of the publication	March 2017
Author of the publication	Josephine Them Parnas
Institutional affiliation of the author	Danish Agency for Science and Higher Education (Ministry of Higher Education and Science)

## Project in brief

**Baltic Science Network** (BSN) serves as a forum for higher education, science and research cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region (BSR).

BSN is a policy network gathering relevant transnational, national and regional policy actors from the BSR countries. The Network is a springboard for targeted multilateral activities in the frame of research and innovation excellence, mobility of scientists and expanded participation. These joint activities are modelled with an overall aim to ensure that the BSR remains a hub of cutting-edge scientific solutions with the capacity to exploit the region's full innovation and scientific potential. The activities are modelled as examples of best practice which form basis of the policy recommendations drafted by the Network.

The platform is tailored to provide advice on how to enhance a macro-regional dimension in higher education, science and research cooperation. Recommendations jointly formulated by the Network members address the European, national and regional policy-making levels.

BSN is a flagship of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region under the Policy Area Education, Research and Employability, as well as one of two cornerstones of the Science, Research and Innovation Agenda of the Council of the Baltic Sea States.



### **Baltic Science Network – output 3.1: Working paper on challenges and barriers to research cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region**

The present working paper outlines relevant challenges, barriers, and possible solutions to improved research cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region (BSR). The paper is based on a series of Baltic Science Network (BSN) workshops/surveys conducted in 2016 and 2017– and serves as output delivery for BSN activity 3.1.

The above mentioned workshops were conducted using a two stage approach: First, between October 2016 and January 2017, each BSN partner country conducted a national workshop or made a survey about challenges, barriers, and possible solutions for improved research cooperation in the BSR. Relevant national stakeholders, i.e. universities, research institutions, operators of research infrastructures, funding agencies, BSR experts and policy makers, were invited to participate. Secondly, results were presented by BSN partners and further discussed at a transnational workshop with stakeholders from across the BSR, hosted by the Danish Agency for Science and Higher Education in Copenhagen on 18 January 2017.

This working paper consists of:

- *A thematic overview of challenges/barriers to research cooperation in the BSR as identified via national workshops/surveys*
- *9 key challenges/barriers, possible solutions and suggestions for BSN-actions as selected by participants at the transnational workshop (listed in random order)*
- *Annex: BSN project partners' summary of results of national workshops/surveys*

The purpose of the working paper is to serve as input and inspiration for subsequent BSN activities and possible BSN policy recommendations to decision makers on how to improve transnational research cooperation.

This working paper is based on input from stakeholders and BSN partners and does not necessarily reflect the views of all participating Member States and organisations.

\*\*\*

## Thematic overview of challenges/barriers to research cooperation in the BSR:

Administrative issues	Instruments and funding	Where to start?	Strategic approach
Support for regional cooperation is subject to heavy administrative requirements	Insufficient national co-funding for BSR-projects (e.g. ERA-nets and BONUS)	Too many entry points and too many programme manuals vis-à-vis financing of regional projects	Lack of strategic coordination across existing regional initiatives
Uneven balance between compliance efforts and added value in terms of funds	Lack of smaller grants for smaller BSR projects	Lack of knowledge and overview about existing regional research projects	Failure to publicly demonstrate/communicate the added value of BSR cooperation
Interreg requirements - different for each overlapping formation – and heavier than e.g. Horizon 2020 requirements	Poor quality of application and project reviews – and lack of gearing towards cross-discipline projects	Difficulties in finding a research partner on the right level - a preference to select already known partners	Regional cooperation often depends on a few, key persons; lack of institutional memory
National programmes are easier to comprehend and comply with than EU and Interreg programmes	Interreg requirements for self-financing are too high for real added value (esp. for SMEs)	Regional cooperation is linked to cultural traditions and positive/negative myths - and depends on mutual trust	Lack of political commitment to follow through with concrete regional initiatives/funding
Bureaucracy vs. common sense and flexibility	Differences in conceptualization and measurement of research impact	English is a common language - but is it good enough for in-depth exchanges?	Different levels of excellence; Cooperation for the sake of cooperation is not a sufficient incentive

**9 key challenges/barriers, possible solutions, and BSN actions:**

<b>Challenge#1</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The purpose of research cooperation is to achieve excellent results or solve concrete problems – not cooperation or capacity building for its own sake.</li> <li>- Also, parts of the region’s research institutions suffer from a reputation of low levels of excellence – some times in spite of data demonstrating high impact results of BSR cooperation (“small but excellent” research groups).</li> </ul>
Solution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “Myth buster” initiatives and matchmaking.</li> <li>- Making sure BSR-challenges are brought up in a wider, European context – to ensure EU solutions that also benefit the BSR as such.</li> </ul>
BSN action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identify and promote real life cases of excellent/high impact research cooperation projects across the BSR.</li> <li>- Identify and promote research clusters in the BSR with relevant facilities and smart specialisation strategies.</li> <li>- Develop BSR-specific ranking of universities or individual faculties.</li> <li>- Advise the European Commission to take note of BSN activities and work methods in the pursuit of realizing the European Research Area.</li> </ul>

<b>Challenge#2</b>	Lack of knowledge about and overview of existing, successful research BSR cooperation projects.
Solution	Mapping and dissemination of information about concrete projects and researchers.
BSN action	Create and publish of existing / best practice examples of BSR research projects.

<b>Challenge#3</b>	The landscape of potential funding opportunities is too crowded and confused – leading to “where to start?” paralysis.
Solution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mapping of existing programmes and instruments.</li> <li>- Avoid adding new programmes and instruments that may compete with and/or duplicate other programmes.</li> </ul>
BSN action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Evaluate existing maps/guides of/to BSR specific funding possibilities and produce such a map if relevant.</li> <li>- Produce detailed map of opportunities for selected research areas.</li> </ul>

<b>Challenge#4</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The high level of administrative burdens and lack of flexibility in general when it comes to application for funding and compliance with reporting requirements.</li> <li>- A particular emphasis on the EU Interreg programmes established to ensure better regional cohesion but often not applied by researchers due to extremely cumbersome requirements, high co-financing rates and long reimbursement processes.</li> </ul>
Solution	Simplification and reduction of administrative requirements - with a particular emphasis on the various Interreg programmes.
BSN actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Highlight best practice examples of funding programmes with less heavy administrative requirements (e.g. Horizon 2020/ERC, LIFE, and the European Space Agency).</li> <li>- Propose ways of simplifying Interreg requirements with a particular focus on aligning the Interreg programmes that are applicable across the BSR.</li> <li>- Propose quantitative base line measurement of costs of compliance and administrative processes for various types of funding schemes – and then set a clear reduction target and implement a process to reach this target.</li> <li>- Highlight that complicated procedures can lead to more mistakes (best practice: University of Copenhagen).</li> </ul>

<b>Challenge#5</b>	Insufficient local support for researchers to deal with administrative issues (from projects' cradle to grave).
Solution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learning from best practice examples of optimal administrative support.</li> <li>- Strengthening funding programmes' capacity and availability to provide more support for administrative issues.</li> <li>- Making sure administrative staff in relation to funding programmes has the mandate to approve procedures and allow for alternative solutions/flexibility when and if needed.</li> </ul>
BSN action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Exchange best practices of administrative staff, National Contact Points (NCP) etc.</li> <li>- Advise the European Commission to propose NCP-initiatives to help widen participation.</li> </ul>

<b>Challenge#6</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- BSR cooperation often depends on a few key individuals with long experience, personal networks and personal commitment, which makes BSR cooperation as such more vulnerable than e.g. EU cooperation.</li> <li>- The historically bound traditions of BSR cooperation as an important goal in its own right may be diluted with time.</li> <li>- Expanding networks is a bottom-up process and cannot be achieved top-down.</li> </ul>
--------------------	---

Solution	Increase BSR mobility and promotion of BSR research clusters and results –for established researchers, students and national decision makers.
BSN action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Organise events/conferences/workshops/field trips that bring people together across the BSR – both area specific and transdisciplinary.</li> <li>- Mobilise Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) for seed money for and the hosting of events, field trips etc.</li> <li>- Exchange information about local mobility schemes etc.</li> <li>- Advise national decision makers to focus and spend re-sources on improving BSR research cooperation.</li> </ul>

<b>Challenge#7</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of institutional memory and political commitment to follow through with concrete initiatives and sufficient funding to enhance the levels of BSR research cooperation.</li> <li>- Developing a common, strategic comprehension of added value of BSR research cooperation – as the basis for prioritising resources and ensuring political commitment.</li> </ul>
Solution	Highlight areas of added value and shared agendas in relation to e.g. use of specific research infrastructures, combating climate change, preventing Baltic Sea pollution, regional security etc.
BSN action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Formulate a common BSR research agenda 2030, aligned with the UN 2030 goals, that reflects current and future challenges specific to the BSR.</li> <li>- Evaluate and identify the right target groups to make sure that planned BSN output/recommendations are targeted to the right stakeholders/decision makers.</li> <li>- Advising various relevant fora to integrate the BSR perspective when planning new programme periods or other research initiatives.</li> <li>- Make sure all national governments are represented in BSN.</li> </ul>

<b>Challenge#8</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Insufficient national research funding in general.</li> <li>- In particular, lack of smaller, easy grants for smaller BSR projects.</li> </ul>
Solution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Increased, national research funding to support participation in BSR projects.</li> <li>- Supplying smaller, easy grants targeting BSR research cooperation (or highlighting existing possibilities).</li> </ul>
BSN action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Demonstrate to national governments how national and regional research funding can serve as a stepping stone for international funding and collaboration.</li> <li>- BSR research conferences for BSR countries to present best</li> </ul>

	<p>practice examples of impact/outcome of national research schemes.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Work through the CBSS to raise awareness among science ministers for increasing national funding to support BSR cooperation.</li> </ul>
--	---

<b>Challenge#9</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Existing structures/programmes such as NordForsk and BONUS cover only part of the BSR or only selected research topics.</li> <li>- Building on/extending BONUS, which is a unique, tested and successful platform for concrete research cooperation in the BSR.</li> </ul>
<b>Solution</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Expanding existing structures to cover more of the BSR and/or more research areas.</li> <li>- Continuing and refining BONUS.</li> </ul>
<b>BSN action</b>	Continue working with NordForsk and BONUS to explore options for further support of research cooperation in the BSR.