Nordregio

Higher education beyond major urban areas in the Nordics

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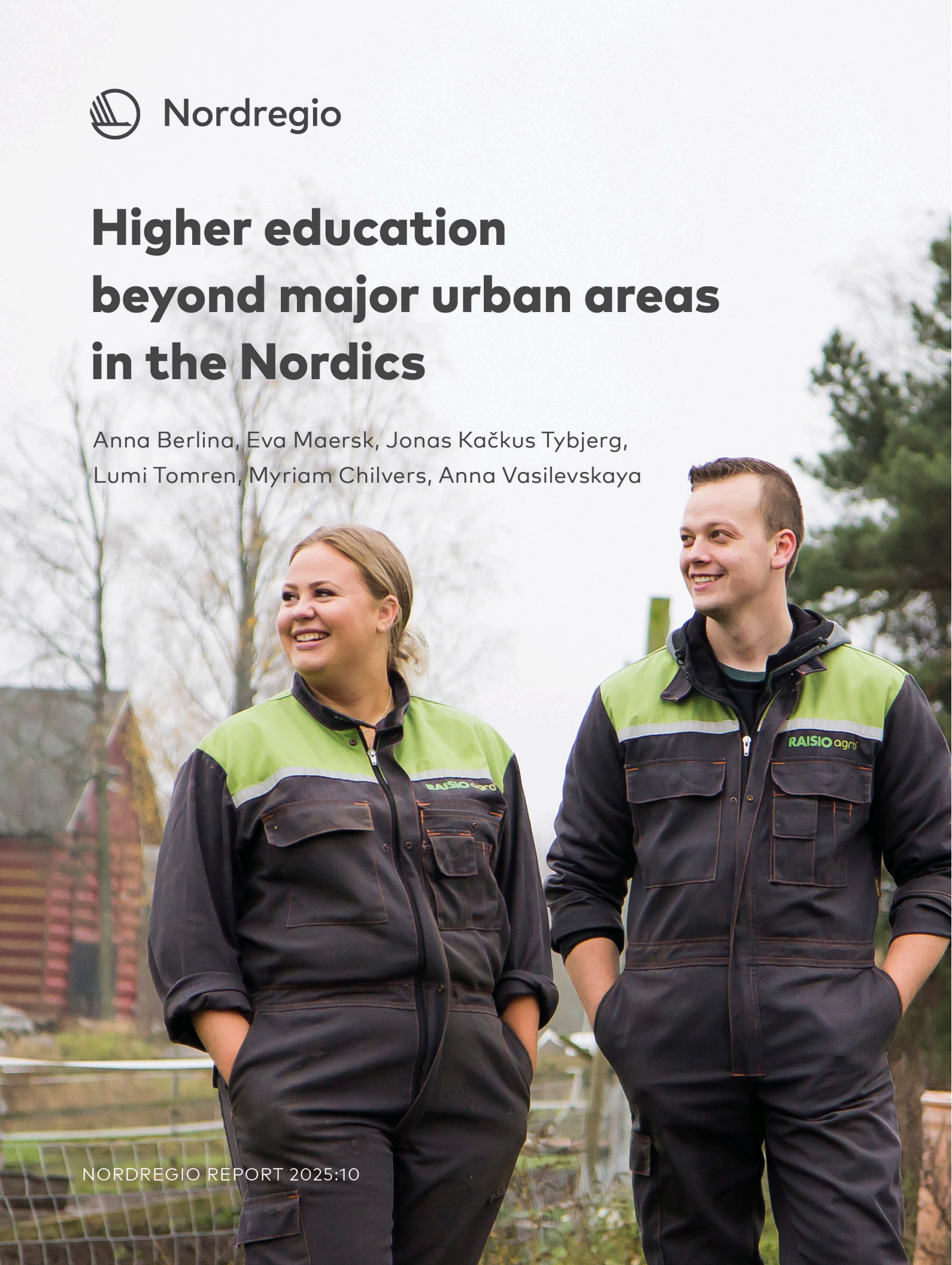


NORDREGIO REPORT 2025:10

Table of Contents

1. Introduction **3**

1.1 Exploring higher education outside major cities in the Nordics 5

2. Higher education policies in the Nordic Region – a spatial perspective **9**

2.1 Denmark 10

2.2 Finland 11

2.3 Åland Islands 12

2.4 Iceland 12

2.5 Norway 13

2.6 Sweden 14

3. Six Nordic case studies **16**

3.1 The University and Study Centre of Holbæk, Denmark 17

3.2 Åland University of Applied Sciences, Finland 27

3.3 Campus Jakobstad, Finland 34

3.4 University of Akureyri, Iceland 39

3.5 Campus Nesna, Nord University, Norway 47

3.6 Campus Sundsvall, Mid Sweden University, Sweden 55

4. Key findings and learnings **61**

4.1 The six Nordic case studies: Cross-case insights 61

4.2 Key enablers and challenges: When do peripheral educational institutions succeed and what stands in their way? 66

4.3 Nordic learnings 70

References **72**

About this publication **79**

This publication is also available online in a web-accessible version at: pub.nordregio.org/r-2025-10-higher-education-beyond-major-urban-areas-in-the-nordics

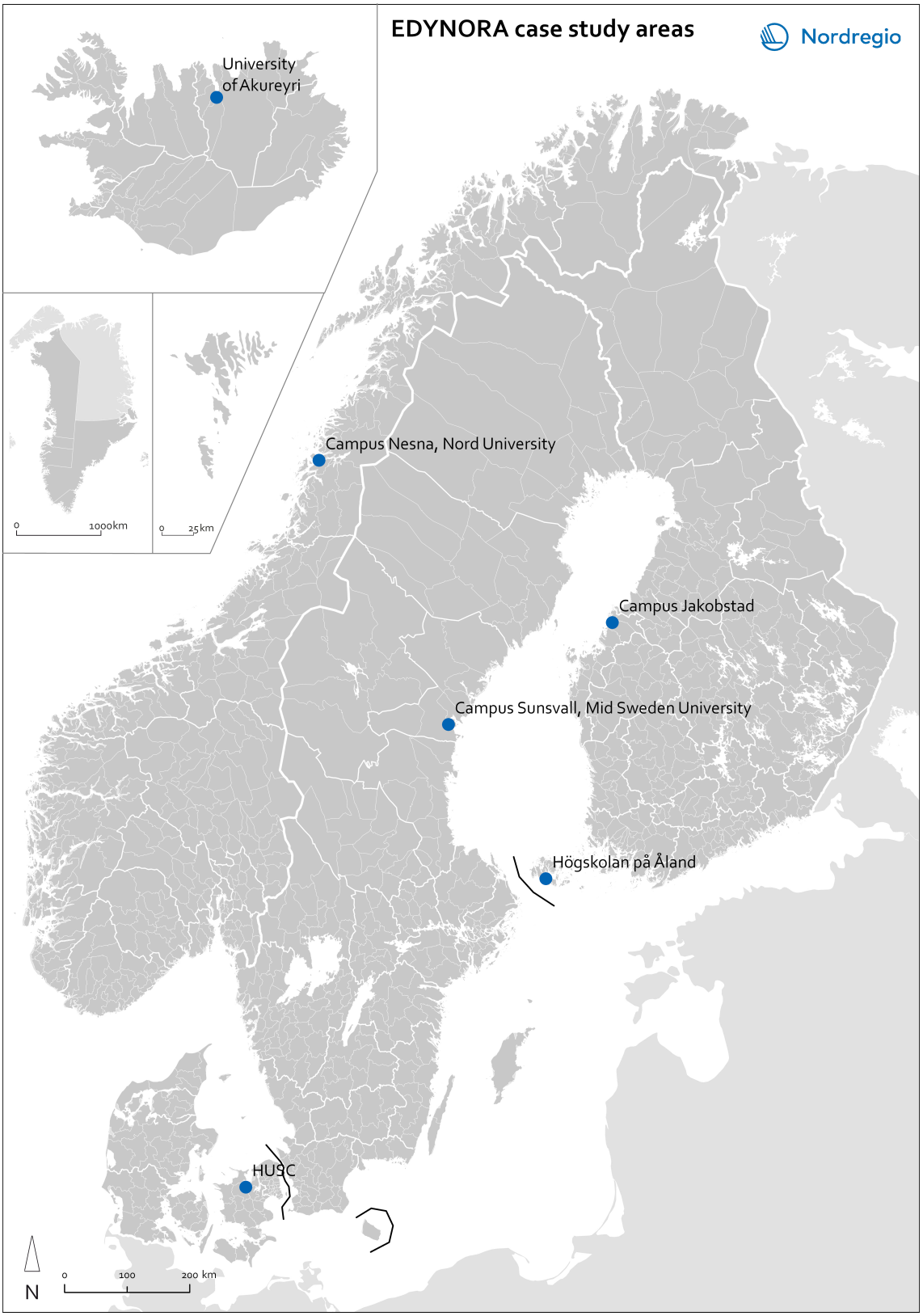
1. Introduction

The Nordic countries are widely recognised for their accessible and inclusive higher education systems, which are considered important drivers of innovation, equity and competitiveness in the knowledge economy.

While metropolitan and well-established traditional universities often benefit from strong institutional capacity, stable student numbers and robust research infrastructure, higher education institutions in regional centres and smaller towns operate under different conditions. These institutions are increasingly initiated, shaped by – and must respond to – complex structural pressures, such as rural population decline, regional disparities and growing demand for skilled labour. They are also affected more broadly by neoliberal policy reforms, which emphasise institutional consolidation, scale, efficiency and centralisation (Thiem, 2009).

The emergence and development of higher education institutions outside major urban areas represent a strategic, local response to the structural challenges and policy reforms. These institutions seek to strengthen territorial and social cohesion by improving access to education and supporting regional labour market needs. Moreover, they are increasingly positioned not only as education providers, but are also intended to be engines of regional development, supporting upskilling, public-private collaboration and the retention of young people in rural areas. While research indicates the potential of these institutions to meet such objectives, their actual impact remains to be fully assessed and confirmed (Mærsk et al., 2023; Rodríguez-Pose & Wang, 2025; Rossi & Goglio, 2020).

This report is an output of the EDYNORA project, funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers. It explores the role of higher education institutions located outside major cities in supporting local and regional development, with a particular focus on their impact on labour markets, youth attraction and retention and the overall attractiveness of the given area. Drawing on empirical material from six case studies across the Nordic countries (Map 1), the study aims to identify key lessons to guide policymakers and practitioners in establishing and developing appealing learning environments in small towns and rural areas across the Nordic Region.



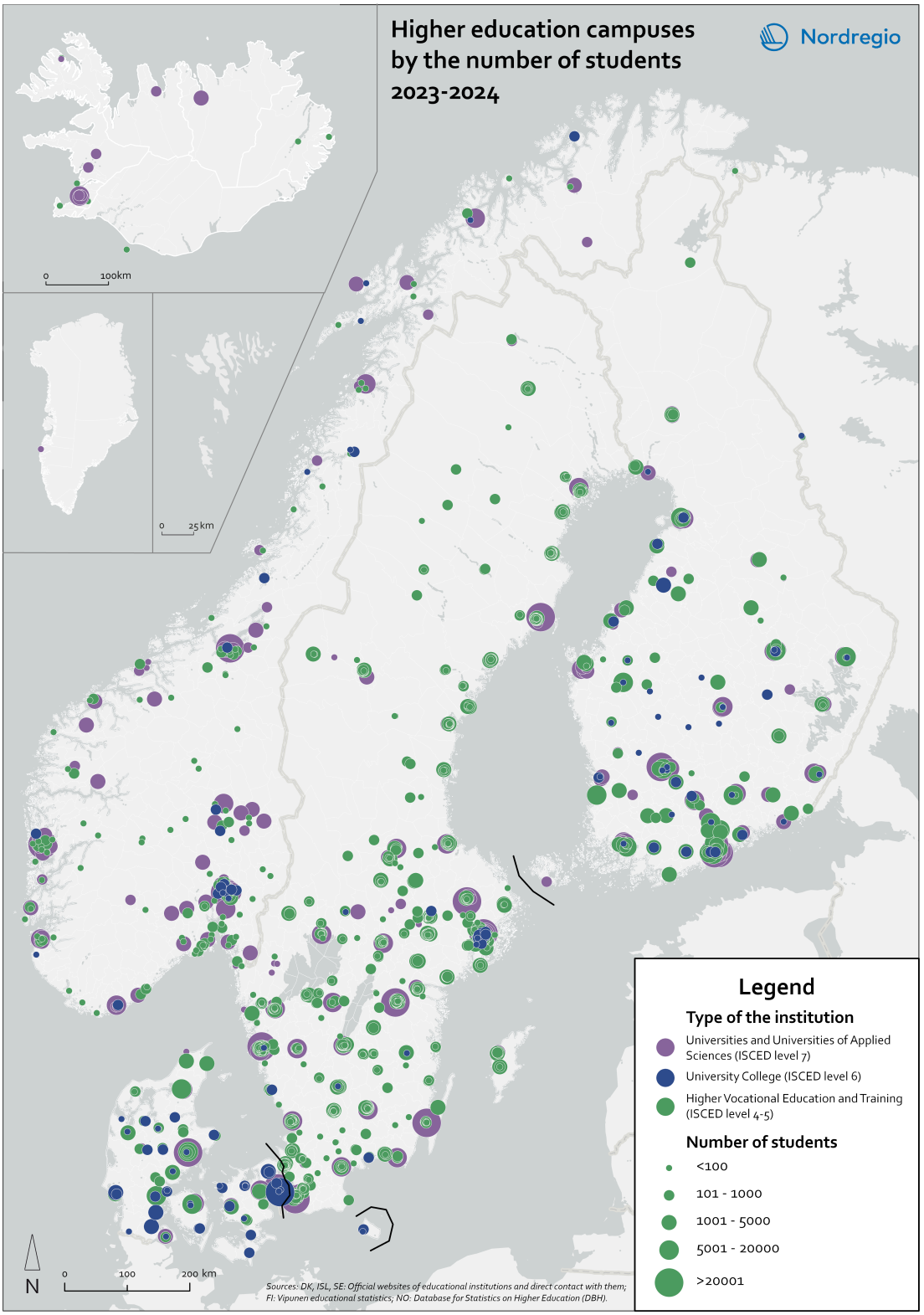
Map 1. The EDYNORA case study areas.
Cartographer: Maria Bobrinskaya

1.1 Exploring higher education outside major cities in the Nordics

There is no established term for higher education institutions outside major urban areas that is both acknowledged in academic literature and applicable across national contexts. This is partly due to the fact that concepts like institutional size and remoteness are relative — what is considered 'large' or 'central' in Denmark or Iceland may be seen as 'mid-sized' and 'peripheral' in Sweden. In this project we use the term 'peripheral educational institutions' (PHEIs) as an umbrella term encompassing the diverse array of higher education institutions and campuses situated in smaller cities and rural areas across the Nordics. This term is intended for analytical convenience, rather than as a proposal for a new academic concept.

In addition to the six case studies of PHEIs across the Nordic countries, this study draws on data collected through the **EDYNORA Higher Education and VET Portal**. The portal provides a visual and analytical overview of the diversity of campuses and independent institutions across the Nordic countries. It offers information on each campus' or institution's location (within municipal boundaries), the fields of education offered, and – where available – the number of students and year of establishment. Data are presented across different institutional types, classified according to the highest level of education provided at a given campus or institution (in the case of single-campus institutions).

The data for the portal were sourced primarily from institutional websites (e.g., "About Us" pages and annual reports), as well as statistical databases (the Vipunen database in Finland and the Database for Statistics on Higher Education (DBH) in Norway.
Based on the data collected, it is evident that the Nordic Region is home to a diverse and decentralised network of higher education institutions, spanning a variety of geographic locations and institutional types (see Map 2). The geographic distribution of higher educational institutions is especially evident in northern Norway and Denmark, with the compact geography of the latter further facilitating regional access.



Map 2. Locations of higher education institutions and campuses by the number of students in the Nordic countries. Each dot on the map represents a single institution or campus, with separate dots shown for each campus in the case of multi-campus institutions.
Sources: DK, ISL, SE: Official websites of educational institutions and direct contact with them; FI: Vipunen educational statistics; NO: Database for Statistics on Higher Education (DBH).
Cartographer: Anna Vasilevskaya

While the largest campuses, typically located in metropolitan areas, can host over 50.000 students (e.g., Gothenburg), the student populations at PHEIs are often significantly smaller with some campuses enrolling fewer than 100 students. However, some universities, despite their geographic remoteness, host significant student populations – for example, Tromsø in Norway with approximately 11,000 students, and Umeå in Sweden with around 32,000. This may be attributed to several factors, including the strength of academic programmes offered, the relatively large catchment areas in northern regions, and the generally less competitive admission processes compared to universities in major urban centres in southern parts of the countries. Across all Nordic countries, approximately 29% of institutions (and their campuses) have fewer than 100 students, while only 1% have above 20,000 students (Table 1).

Student numbers at a campus or institution	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden	All Nordic
<100	27	40	16	119	251	453
101-1,000	45	72	5	75	563	760
1,001-5,000	21	72	3	38	120	254
5,001-20,000	10	33	1	10	18	72
>20,001	3	3	0	3	8	17

Table 1. Distribution of higher education institutions in the Nordic countries by student population size. This table presents the number campuses or institutions in each Nordic country, grouped by student population size categories. It includes universities, universities of applied sciences, professional colleges, and higher VET.

The most common fields of education across all institutional types in the Nordic region are engineering and manufacturing; health and welfare; and business, administration and law. Country-specific variations in these distributions are shown in Table 2.

Top	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden	All Nordic
1	Education	Health and welfare	Arts and humanities	Health and welfare	Engineering, manufacturing and construction	Engineering, manufacturing and construction
2	Engineering, manufacturing and construction	Business, administration and law	Engineering, manufacturing and construction	Business, administration and law	Health and welfare	Health and welfare
3	Health and welfare	Arts and humanities	Business, administration and law	Education	Business, administration and law	Business, administration and law

Table 2. The most common fields of education across universities, universities of applied sciences, professional colleges, and higher VET combined. For multi-campus institutions, each campus is counted separately. Fields of education are based on the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED-F 2013) codes.

Photo: Magnus Liam Karlsson/imagebank.sweden.se

2. Higher education policies in the Nordic Region – a spatial perspective

Between 1960 and 1990, Nordic welfare states strategically expanded higher education into non-metropolitan areas. From the 1950s to the 1970s, existing universities extended their reach through branch campuses. In addition, entirely new institutions were established to improve regional access to education (Hedin, 2009). Over time, higher education institutions evolved from their traditional focus on teaching and research to become key players in regional development, innovation systems and global knowledge exchange, responding to evolving economic demands (Ahola et al., 2014; Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000; Lindqvist et al., 2012).

In tandem with that shift, neoliberal reforms transformed Nordic universities into more market-oriented models, emphasising competition, efficiency and alignment with business needs (Holmén & Ringarp, 2023). These changes increased institutional autonomy over curricula and admissions (Benner & Holmqvist, 2023), introduced performance-based funding tied to measurable outcomes, prioritised employability and fostered more flexible and collaborative governance structures (Fägerlind & Strömqvist, 2004).

Several decades after the strategic expansion of higher education into non-metropolitan regions, the question remains: is this goal still relevant today. And, if so, what are the parameters of success and are the strategic tools being implemented efficiently to achieve it? This chapter explores the higher education

policy landscape in the Nordic countries, with a particular focus on how current national strategies incorporate a geographic or spatial dimension. It highlights key priorities and goals, examining whether and how these policies aim to support the distribution of educational opportunities beyond major urban areas.

2.1 Denmark

Since 2021, the Danish parliament has pursued a policy of decentralising higher education institutions, relocating and downsizing study places in the four largest cities to offer improved learning opportunities for young people, regardless of where in Denmark they grew up (Uddannelses- og Forskningsministeriet, 2021). Through this initiative, Denmark aims to offer the same possibilities to study in small cities as there are in the four largest cities – Copenhagen, Århus, Odense and Ålborg. This change is being made amid concerns that an unequal distribution of education institutions hinders young people in rural areas from accessing higher education, thereby contributing to imbalances in the labour market dynamics (European Commission, 2021; Indenrigs- og Boligministeriet, 2021).

In addition, Denmark's strategy places greater focus on the largest higher education programmes that train graduates for the welfare sector, such as teachers, nurses, pedagogues and social workers (Indenrigs- og Boligministeriet, 2021). One of the priorities is to create favourable conditions for recruitment of qualified welfare staff throughout Denmark. The strategy aims for 60% of the enrolment spots in the four major welfare programmes nationwide to be located outside of the four largest Danish cities by 2030 (European Commission, 2021; Indenrigs- og Boligministeriet, 2021). The initial plan involved creating 1,000 new educational spots in these fields outside the largest cities and relocating another 1,000 spots to more rural areas. The policy was later adjusted to remove the specific targets for new spots and the relocation requirement, allowing institutions to determine independently where to offer programmes within their area of geographical coverage (Uddannelses- og Forskningsministeriet, 2023).

The decentralisation efforts aim to encompass all types of higher education – university higher education, art schools, professional programmes, vocational schools and maritime educational programmes (Uddannelses- og Forskningsministeriet, 2021). The requirements are accompanied by economic incentives in the form of financial and investment support for educational institutions. Finally, the Danish government recently presented a planned education

reform that introduces a new type of education for young people: the business and vocational upper secondary school (abbreviation in Danish: epx) is intended to combine both theoretical and practical skills and allow for a more decentralised and broader selection of higher education options, including opportunities later in life (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2024).

2.2 Finland

In 2017, Finland introduced its "Vision for Higher Education and Research in 2030", focusing on expanding higher education attainment, strengthening universities' global and ethical roles and supporting innovation through inclusive systems (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2017). The vision was co-developed with institutions, students and stakeholders.

Between 2006 and 2018, Finland reduced the number of universities by six to improve the efficiency of public service provision and enhance global competitiveness through larger institutions (OECD, 2022). At the same time, Finland committed itself to improving access to higher education by ensuring the presence of at least one institution in every county. This apparent tension between consolidation and accessibility was resolved by establishing a nationwide network of satellite campuses, university centres and universities of applied sciences (OECD, 2022).

To further address higher education accessibility, Finland drew up an Accessibility Plan in 2021, which now forms part of the Government Programme. Embedding greater geographical and inclusive accessibility within the University Act, it requires higher education institutions to develop their own accessibility plans (Kosunen, 2021). The analysis under the Accessibility Plan highlights the role of universities of applied sciences in improving access across all regions (Kosunen, 2021).

According to the OECD (2022), variation can be observed between regions and municipalities regarding vocational training and higher education more broadly. Greater efforts are needed to identify labour market needs and to align vocational education accordingly. Opportunities to pursue vocational training should be strengthened. Remote learning forms part of the solution and represents a larger strategy but cannot be the only tool (Kosunen, 2021; OECD, 2022).

2.3 Åland Islands

Åland Islands is an autonomous self-governing region of Finland, situated in the Baltic Sea between Sweden and Finland. Its only higher education institution, Åland University of Applied Sciences (Högskolan på Åland), is located in its capital, Mariehamn. As per the Act on the Autonomy of Åland, the region has legislative powers in several areas, including education, allowing it to regulate Högskolan på Åland independently (Åland Parliament, 1991). Accordingly, although Åland is officially part of Finland, in practice it is not legally bound by Finnish education laws (Högskolan på Åland, n.d.-b).

Higher education in Åland Islands is also financed by the regional government of Åland (Ålands landskapsregering, 2024). The allocated resources, performance, business structure and reporting are coordinated through education agreements concluded with the regional government every four years. Unlike in mainland Finland, where Finnish and Swedish are the official languages, the primary languages of instruction at Högskolan på Åland are Swedish and English, as specified in the University of Applied Sciences Act for Åland (Ålands landskapsregering, 2024).

Åland's autonomy extends to its educational strategy, granting Högskolan på Åland significant influence over broader education policies in the region. For instance, the university's strategy addresses issues such as accessibility, including campus access and the availability of a digital learning material database (Högskolan på Åland, 2022).

2.4 Iceland

The Iceland Education Policy 2030 was published in 2020, outlining the country's education strategy for development of the education system over the next decade (Mennta- og barnamálaráðuneytið, 2022; Ministry of Education and Children's Affairs, 2020). The strategy, which is divided into three action plans,[1] describes five pillars aimed at ensuring high-quality lifelong education (Stjórnarráð Íslands, n.d.).

1. The action plans are divided into three time periods – 2021-2024, 2024-2027 and 2027-2030 (to be published).

The first pillar reflects the commitment to equity, strengthening vocational education and training while bridging the rural-urban divide (Ministry of Education and Children's Affairs, 2020). The education policy focuses, among other things, on ensuring education throughout Iceland by improving the availability of education outside urban centres through improved transport and technology, alongside the development of vocational and technical training (Ministry of Education and Children's Affairs, 2020). The guiding principle of this focus area is that people's educational opportunities should not be determined by their place of residence. Due to vast distances, remote teaching has been used as a strategy to ensure equal access to higher education for those living outside of Reykjavik or Akureyri. Remote learning has also enabled older students to pursue their studies alongside their work or other responsibilities (Jóhannesson et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the education policy does not set out concrete strategies and steps to address the rural-urban divide in education.

The remaining pillars of the Iceland Education Policy 2030 focus on improving teaching, addressing future skill needs, promoting student well-being and ensuring a high-quality education system. For instance, the third pillar aims to strengthen Vocational Education and Training (VET) in response to increasing labour market mismatches. However, an OECD report notes that Iceland only acknowledges low awareness of VET, but does not present a systematic approach to identifying skill shortages (Iceland Education Policy 2030 and Its Implementation, 2021).

2.5 Norway

The 2015 structural reform in Norway introduced significant changes to the higher education sector, including institutional mergers and greater institutional autonomy, with the aim of improving quality and efficiency (European Commission, 2016; Vukasovic, 2022).

Since taking office in 2021, the current government has emphasised decentralised education, flexible learning and local access to study opportunities. The government's cooperation platform, the Hurdal Platform, outlines plans to strengthen regional presence by setting clearer national requirements for universities and colleges (The Prime Minister's Office, 2021). The goal is to strengthen decentralised provision and meet regional competence needs. It also proposes launching a reform to promote decentralised education, including the establishment of local education centres, primarily owned by counties or developed in cooperation with existing institutions (Hystad, 2024c).

This commitment is reinforced in *White Paper Meld. St. 27 (2022-2023)*, which calls for flexible, decentralised education to improve access to skills and meet labour demands across regions (Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, 2023).

To support these objectives, the government aims to change and simplify the funding system for universities and colleges, enabling institutions to fulfil their broad societal mission better, align with government priorities and enhance overall quality. The government has allocated NOK 460 million to qualification and apprenticeship efforts. Through the Social Contract for More Apprenticeships, collaboration between social partners, county authorities and national agencies aims to boost local apprenticeship opportunities (Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, 2023).

In 2023, NOK 200 million was allocated to two programmes supporting locally delivered and flexible education (Hystad, 2023):

1. Programme for Flexible and Decentralised Education (NOK 150 million): Open to vocational colleges, universities and university colleges. Targeted projects with in-person, decentralised delivery in priority fields like professional education, technology and the green transition.
2. Application-Based Scheme for Study Centres (NOK 50 million): Open to study centres and similar institutions operating independently or in partnership. Required co-funding from local actors to promote shared ownership and expand access through study centres (The Ministry of Education and Research, 2023a).

Likewise in 2023, the government proposed transferring the authority to close campuses from university boards to the state, partly in response to the controversial closure of the Nesna campus in 2019, as discussed in section 4.5 (The Ministry of Education and Research, 2023b). The proposal argues that campus closures have broad social and economic implications and should therefore be subject to political accountability. However, the reform has faced strong opposition for undermining institutional autonomy and trust-based governance (Larsen & Arnesen, 2023).

2.6 Sweden

Sweden implemented a major higher education reform as early as 1977, leading to the establishment of 12 new university colleges across the country to counter education-related outmigration. However, due to the transition period, the distribution of students did not change until 1987 (Andersson et al., 2004). This

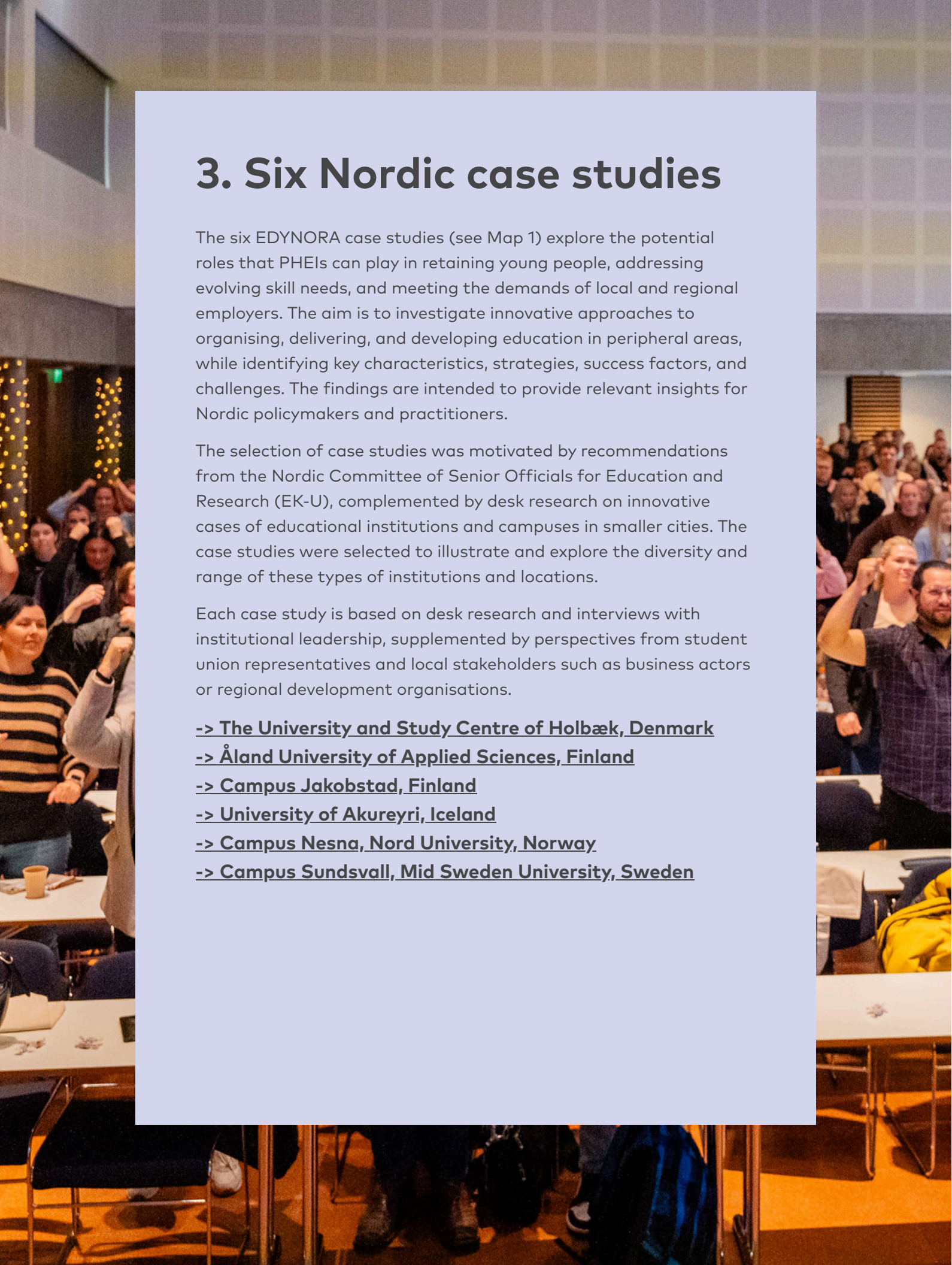
reform was followed by population growth in the municipalities where it was introduced. Additionally, it contributed to an increase in rural higher education attainment, including among individuals whose parents do not have an academic background (Bergh et al., 2024).

Differences between old and newly established institutions were significant, with the latter receiving significantly less funding for research (Haley, 2020). Recently, the Swedish authorities called for an increase in online and hybrid education to counteract outmigration further. Despite a rise in the numbers of online students, the difference is still not significant as the number of digital programmes available remains limited. It appears that students continue to move to urban centres to pursue their higher education (Haley, 2020).

The government's STEM strategy aims to strengthen STEM education and increase the share of students enrolled in science and technology programmes to 25% by 2035. While it acknowledges the national need for STEM competence, the strategy primarily focuses on social and demographic diversity – such as gender and socioeconomic background – and does not directly address geographic or spatial disparities (Regeringskansliet, 2025).

Since its launch in 2009, higher vocational education (*yrkeshögskolan*) has undergone significant expansion. According to SOU (2023) *'The Inquiry on the Future of Higher Vocational Education'*, the number of available study places has doubled, and the range of programmes and formats has broadened. While the geographical spread of higher vocational education has increased, the report notes ongoing challenges related to programme location—especially for capital-intensive fields and under system changes like extended approval timelines. Longer decision-making periods may concentrate programmes in metropolitan areas, benefiting a few large providers and reducing regional distribution. Likewise, stricter entry criteria could reduce the diversity of providers and, consequently, the regional spread.

The report emphasizes that programme approvals should remain guided by labour market needs, not geography. However, it highlights the potential of shared educational environments—such as collaborations with universities or learning centres—to enable cost-sharing, broaden regional access, and support training for essential societal roles, particularly those currently offered at only one location in the country (SOU, 2023).



3. Six Nordic case studies

The six EDYNORA case studies (see Map 1) explore the potential roles that PHEIs can play in retaining young people, addressing evolving skill needs, and meeting the demands of local and regional employers. The aim is to investigate innovative approaches to organising, delivering, and developing education in peripheral areas, while identifying key characteristics, strategies, success factors, and challenges. The findings are intended to provide relevant insights for Nordic policymakers and practitioners.

The selection of case studies was motivated by recommendations from the Nordic Committee of Senior Officials for Education and Research (EK-U), complemented by desk research on innovative cases of educational institutions and campuses in smaller cities. The case studies were selected to illustrate and explore the diversity and range of these types of institutions and locations.

Each case study is based on desk research and interviews with institutional leadership, supplemented by perspectives from student union representatives and local stakeholders such as business actors or regional development organisations.

-> The University and Study Centre of Holbæk, Denmark
-> Åland University of Applied Sciences, Finland
-> Campus Jakobstad, Finland
-> University of Akureyri, Iceland
-> Campus Nesna, Nord University, Norway
-> Campus Sundsvall, Mid Sweden University, Sweden

Photo: Students at Holbæk Uddannelses- og Studiecenter. Source: HUSC, Emil Erichsen

3.1 The University and Study Centre of Holbæk, Denmark

Holbæk Municipality and the Zealand region

Holbæk is located in northwest Zealand, with a population of approximately 30,000 people in the city itself and 70,000 residents in the wider municipality. The population of the Zealand region as a whole is approximately 830,000. Together with Roskilde, Næstved, Greve Strand, Køge, Slagelse and Ringsted, Holbæk serves as an urban centre for the surrounding areas. Its economy is driven by several key sectors, with the construction industry being particularly strong. A significant share of the local workforce is employed in this sector, reflecting a broader trend across Zealand, where construction and related trades have seen substantial growth but also face challenges, such as a shrinking workforce and difficulties in attracting new employees. Furthermore, the region is home to a variety of service-based industries, such as retail and hospitality. The public healthcare sector, in particular Holbæk Hospital, is one of the key employers in the region. While HUSC is focusing on consolidating its current courses, it is also working to develop the institution and the municipality as a whole. The strategic goals for HUSC are (Holbæk Kommune, n.d.):

"More opportunities for higher education in Holbæk"
"More local students in higher education"
"Broader access to education"

HUSC: a new municipal model for higher education

> *"As a municipality, we've gone from being an educational stakeholder of interest to being an educational actor and provider."*
>
> (Interview 1)

In 2016, HUSC was established as a fixed-term development project in Holbæk Municipality. National educational reforms and institutional mergers had left the municipality without any higher education providers, prompting the launch of the HUSC project as a local political response. The HUSC project sought to explore municipal models of educational provision in order to retain students within the municipality and to promote regional development through the local presence of higher education. The municipality additionally found that, despite the absence of educational providers in the region, more than 800 residents in the municipality were enrolled in higher education in other municipalities. Based on these data and insights into admissions patterns, a plan was developed to offer higher education at facilities within the municipality and the city of Holbæk.

This led to the opening of HUSC in 2017 in a former state school building, as a space for hybrid students to study. In 2018, the first programmes, designed for local nursing students in collaboration with Absalon University College, were delivered in the same facilities. In 2019, Zealand Academy joined HUSC, and the centre was relocated to the newly renovated buildings of an old military barracks, where it remains today. In 2023, a programme for pedagogy students was introduced at HUSC. The location was strategically chosen to be accessible to students from the surrounding regions, with facilities tailored to both in-person and hybrid learning.

Educational programmes responding to local labour market needs

Nursing and pedagogy programmes are offered by Absalon University College and are closely linked to the local labour market, including Holbæk Hospital, local schools and other public institutions. A financial management programme is offered by Zealand Academy. HUSC acts as a bridge between these two institutions and the regional labour market, facilitating practical training and internship opportunities for students with local companies and public institutions. HUSC aims to attract programmes in teacher training, construction management and computer science (*Datamatiker*) in the near future.

A distinctive organisational set-up for provision of higher education

HUSC operates with financial support from Holbæk Municipality, which owns the facilities and leases them to educational partners like Absalon University College and Zealand Academy - which, as higher education institutions, are state-funded. This unique set-up positions HUSC as Denmark's first municipal centre to host multiple higher education institutions under one roof, with the municipality acting as a partner in the provision of higher education. No private funding is allocated to HUSC, but private and local companies occasionally sponsor the student NGO.

HUSC has a "steering group" composed of four members, all of whom are leaders from various municipal departments, including education and the labour market.

Flexible and accessible learning space for a diverse student life

HUSC serves as a study space and community meeting place for locals pursuing education nearby or commuting to institutions outside Holbæk. It aims to foster a sense of community among students from different programmes and locations through facilities such as study rooms, group workspaces and 24-hour study access, which seems to be particularly attractive to students needing educational resources at their convenience, often not during standard daytime hours. This flexibility makes HUSC a valuable asset for those balancing studies with work or family commitments.

The HUSC Forum: a platform for engaging local stakeholders and the community

While HUSC is administered as a municipal department, it has established the HUSC Forum, originally called *Uddannelsesråd*, a form of collaborative network and advisory board that drives HUSC's mission to expand educational opportunities in Holbæk, align programmes with local needs and contribute to the community's economic and social development. By maintaining a structure that emphasises partnership and community engagement, including inviting local stakeholders to the network meetings, HUSC aims to remain adaptable to both local and regional educational needs.

Students

> *"We don't claim to be a student city like Copenhagen, but we emphasise that you can enrol in a course in Holbæk. It's not for everybody, but it's very attractive to some!"*
>
> (Interview 1)

Since its establishment, HUSC has recorded 200 graduates in higher education, with 400 students currently enrolled. There was an increase in student uptake from 2018 to 2023, although the number of vacant places began to rise again in 2023. HUSC anticipates that the enrolment numbers will stagnate due to a decline in the attractiveness of welfare programmes at a national level, as well as a demographic downturn in the size of younger cohorts.

The student body primarily consists of individuals from the local areas or nearby areas, who are drawn by the opportunity to study close to home. The majority come from Holbæk, Odsherred and Kalundborg and a few from the nearby municipalities of Greve or Høje Taastrup. The students come from diverse backgrounds, representing a mix of ages, educational goals and life circumstances. The student body is highly diverse and includes recent secondary school graduates, young parents and older adults returning to education or seeking new opportunities (*sporskiftere*).

Students choose programmes at HUSC primarily due to familiarity and proximity. According to the HUSC management (Interview 1), the students they attract would likely have sought education in adjacent municipalities with smaller educational campuses or institutions. HUSC's strategy is to avoid competing with Copenhagen or other popular university cities and instead focus on education for students who actively want to stay in their local area.

Good practice: methods for student engagement

HUSC adopts a multifaceted approach to student engagement, blending structured initiatives with innovative, hands-on strategies to create a supportive and inclusive environment that meets the needs of its diverse students. Several stakeholders cite establishing a student community and student ambience/atmosphere as one of the most significant challenges at a newly established campus like HUSC. Several initiatives have been implemented since HUSC was established. The key takeaway has been that the organisation behind HUSC needs to play an active part in facilitating student engagement and the study environment.

Photo: Students at Holbæk Uddannelses- og Studiecenter. Source: HUSC

Initiatives

One of HUSC's primary objectives is to bridge the gap between different educational programmes within the campus. Collaborative events are organised to encourage interaction between cohorts and foster a sense of belonging beyond individual programmes. Examples include themed social events, such as carnival parties and bingo nights organised by different semester groups. The aim is to establish traditions to help create shared experiences while giving students ownership of the campus culture. However, top-down initiatives have proven difficult to implement. While some students participate in traditional social events, HUSC reports that it is difficult to implement initiatives successfully and fulfil students' needs without consulting them first. To effectively reach and engage students, HUSC employs unconventional communication methods tailored to their preferences. While traditional channels like information screens are available, it was revealed that bathroom posters were the most important and effective tool for sharing information about social and student events.

Employing student environment facilitators

Facilitating direct interaction with students and honest feedback is challenging. Two staff members, serving as student environment facilitators, frequently meet students in casual settings, such as the campus lounge, to gather feedback and understand their needs. These conversations are supplemented by organised events, such as open lunch discussions, including free food for the students.

"Yes, it's very hands-on. There hadn't really been a dedicated café or common area before, so they used to meet in classrooms, which wasn't very inspiring. Now, with the student lounge, we've seen new students getting involved and they often share suggestions. In the café area, there are signup sheets and rules on how they can use the space [...]"

(Interview 3)

Collaborations with local stakeholders

HUSC has established a range of structures to facilitate collaboration with a broad variety of local and regional actors, both public and private.

Programme-specific partnership networks

Each educational programme is supported by a stakeholder network relevant to its field, such as nursing. These networks primarily consist of local or regional stakeholders but also include representatives from the educational institutions and professional interest groups. They hold meetings a couple of times a year to discuss the content of programmes and developments on the labour market, share ideas and build collaborations.

Educational Advisory Board (*Uddannelsesråd)*

This is a municipality-organised network of advisors at the municipal level, including policymakers, local business actors and educational representatives from primary level through to higher education. Its role is to inform the municipality about current developments and local needs. For example, the idea to introduce a financial management programme emerged from discussions within this board.

Student Association "Godt Studieliv Holbæk" (NGO for students)

HUSC has supported the establishment of a student NGO called "Godt Studieliv Holbæk", which focuses on creating a vibrant student life and events. The NGO is open to both current students and alumni from all educational programmes.

Career and Education Days (*Karrieredage* and *Udddannelsesdage)*

Together with partners such as Zealand Academy and Absalon University College, HUSC participates in educational events at local, regional and national levels. Typically, HUSC focuses on the local level. Its students are invited to participate in "Career and Education Days", where they have the chance to network and learn about the local, regional and national labour markets.

Challenges and how HUSC has addressed them

Political support for innovation through "trial and error"

According to the management of HUSC, it functions as a "MVP" (Interview 1) (a concept that stems from LEAN and project management terminology and stands for "minimum viable product"). It serves as a functional prototype in Holbæk Municipality for testing and experimenting with new and hybrid forms of education and organisational models. HUSC explicitly aims to explore and implement hybrid approaches in the development of new educational programmes and delivery formats. The case study interviews revealed widespread recognition of HUSC as a model of "design thinking", with the flexibility to adapt to future challenges and opportunities. The intention was not to create a perfect model from the beginning, but rather to test out solutions and "build the plane as we are flying it" through various tests and prototyping, such as of student recruitment strategies and educational formats (Interview 1).

Personal relations and networks

HUSC was initiated by and continues to rely heavily on strong personal and professional relations between actors and stakeholders in Holbæk and the region Zealand. The idea for HUSC began to take shape several years before its formal establishment, having originated in informal conversations among members of the local community. It seems that personal relations and individuals with a key knowledge of the local community were pivotal in HUSC's success.

> ***"Our role [as a local business network] is typically as a link between businesses and youth. For them [the municipality and the HUSC project], it seemed like a difficult task, but for me it was relatively easy. I know our companies and who would be interested in participating. So, I called a few of them and arranged an evening where they could meet the young people over pizza and soft drinks."***
>
> *(Interview 2)*

Clarifying organisational roles

One of the key challenges for HUSC has been striking the right balance in its collaboration with educational institutions. In a smaller institution like HUSC, which is closely connected with many different stakeholders, the distribution of responsibilities and privileges can lead to conflicts due to the unclear structure – a structure which is usually being developed and changes rapidly in the initial years.

> *"It's in our unique structure and interlinkedness that we find both the dirt and the gold."*
>
> (Interview 1)

Targeting the "right" students and prioritising their needs

HUSC places a strong focus on recruiting local students, who might otherwise leave for nearby municipalities. It targets students from diverse backgrounds, which means that they have very different needs. Making student spaces available around the clock has been one of the key strategies that have paid off for HUSC.

> *"If they come to us with questions about housing, internships or other issues, we can guide them to the right resources. Sometimes it's just about helping them navigate the building and pointing them in the right direction, especially when they're new and unsure where to go."*
>
> *(Interview 3)*

Key learnings and way forward

Finding HUSC's identity and role in the local community

> *"I'm not sure people know what HUSC does or who we are, but I'm pretty sure that they know that there is a nursing programme in Holbæk."*
>
> (Interview 1)

One of the challenges for HUSC lies in its "messy identity and brand". As a non-educational organisation providing education, it can be difficult to clearly position HUSC within the broader educational landscape. This has made it challenging to "put HUSC on the radar" (Interview 1). Local students and their networks are not always aware of the opportunities offered in the local area, a challenge which HUSC aims to counter in collaboration with other actors (public schools and educational providers).

Thinking innovatively within tight and shifting policy frameworks

While HUSC notes that the distinctive structure of the smaller campus and organisation has high innovative potential, it also encounters challenges due to rigid policy frameworks. Many higher education policies are designed with larger institutions and campuses in mind, resulting in a "one-size-fits-all" approach that often overlooks the specific needs and opportunities of smaller models/sites like HUSC. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, most educational institutions were forced to stop in-person lectures, but HUSC had a sufficiently small student body to continue on-site lectures safely. However, it was not allowed to, because it was subject to the same rules as larger universities.

> ***"We sometimes need to remind others [stakeholders and collaborators] that we're unique and have specific needs. That doesn't always align with standard structures. But, in the end, we make things work to ensure we have the best environment for more people to pursue education."***

While HUSC has been providing higher education for just seven years, the policy framework and economic foundations for providing education have changed several times. This creates an unstable economic baseline, making future planning and innovation highly challenging.

HUSC additionaly reports difficulties in attracting teachers and staff. Being a small campus, vibrant research environments are difficult to sustain and the quality of teaching is difficult to uphold. Additionally, support services like a campus library and canteen are challenging to maintain, as the small scale makes it hard to achieve cost efficiency and benefit from discounts and economies of scale. Given the low number of students, student-driven events and engagement need ongoing support and help with outreach in order to become sustainable. HUSC aims to support the environment by clustering educational programmes across the institutions and using the campus for a wide range of student- and youth-related activities. However, this requires cross-institutional initiatives to achieve smooth and effective running.

Maintaining "sustainable" student numbers in the future

Despite its growth, HUSC faces the challenge of maintaining enrolment in programmes where demand fluctuates from year to year, such as nursing, finance and pedagogy.

While HUSC often experiences a surge in initial interest when a new programme is launched, the interest declines rapidly in subsequent years. One interviewee

describes this as a kind of "reverse ketchup effect", where programmes attract a wide and diverse pool of applicants in the first two years – often from various age groups, backgrounds and regions. However, this highly motivated student group is rapidly exhausted. This tendency creates uncertainty when predicting student numbers and can lead to overly optimistic projections for a programme and future demand.

While the programmes offered by HUSC are beneficial for the local community and labour market, HUSC is challenged to maintain them due to restrictions on maintaining programmes with low enrolment, as dictated by the economic frameworks governing educational provision. Thus, being a smaller institution with a limited enrolment base, HUSC is highly vulnerable to fluctuations in uptake and changing policy frameworks, which demand a continuous effort to innovate both the institution and its educational models.

Photo: Mariehamn. Source: The Government of Åland, n.d.

3.2 Åland University of Applied Sciences, Finland

The centre of education in Åland

Åland is a Swedish-speaking autonomous region of Finland, situated in the Baltic Sea between Finland and Sweden. As of 2024, the Åland islands have a population of 30,541, with 11,888 living in the capital, Mariehamn (Nordic Cooperation; Statistics Finland). Åland's economy is fuelled by shipping and export businesses. The largest businesses are ferry companies, banks and manufacturing industries (such as high-tech plastics, carpentry, IT and fish processing). However, most businesses are small, with the service sector catering to incoming visitors (Ålands landskapsregering, n.d.). In addition, the agricultural sector is dispersed, with small farms providing local produce for Åland and elsewhere.

Högskolan på Åland, located in Mariehamn, traces its roots to a sea navigation training school established in 1854. The institution in its current form was founded in 2003 through the merger of Åland Vocational School and Åland University of Applied Sciences, bringing them together into a single organisation (Högskolan på Åland, n.d.-a). It has 60 employees and roughly 600 students, who can choose between nine educational programmes. Åland focuses UAS on providing degree-oriented education leading to a bachelor's or master's degree. In 2023, the first master's programme opened for applications and in 2024, the first distance learning programme was introduced (Högskolan på Åland, n.d.-a).

A university close to home serving local students

Despite its Åland's small population, Högskolan på Åland provides local students with the opportunity to study without having to relocate to mainland Finland or abroad (Interview 4). Ensuring access to higher education in Åland is seen as a crucial strategy for retaining young people, who can help to foster local development.

Nevertheless, demographic challenges and youth outmigration have made it increasingly important to attract students from mainland Finland and abroad. Högskolan på Åland attracts an older student body compared to other universities of applied sciences in Finland, with an average age of 30 years. This is partly because many students have prior work experience or education and are looking to change their career focus (Interview 3).

The university's uniqueness and importance

Högskolan på Åland is organised differently from the other higher education institutions in Finland. The Self-Governing Act of Åland grants the islands the right to self-govern areas of social life, including education (Högskolan på Åland, n.d.-a). Since the institution is under the jurisdiction of the local government of Åland and is not governed by Finland's national education system, it has the flexibility to tailor its educational programmes to local needs in collaboration with local industries (Interview 4). The institution's funding is provided directly by the local government through a negotiated agreement, which determines the financial framework for the next four years (Interview 3).

Nevertheless, the structural relationship between Högskolan på Åland and the local government is set to change. Both parties agree on the need for the institution to leave local authority control and transition into an autonomous entity (Interview 3). This separation could potentially allow Högskolan på Åland greater flexibility and openness to innovative ideas (Interview 1).

Åland's unique position is also reflected in the collective agreement for its teaching staff, which differs from the agreement in mainland Finland. There, the agreement offers higher salaries in less popular fields, typically those that are male-dominated, often leading to a gender imbalance. Åland's agreement ensures equal salaries across all study fields to avoid such disparities. However, it comes at a cost, making positions in less popular fields less attractive (Interview 3). This has made it harder to recruit staff for certain programmes at Högskolan på Åland. However, a new agreement from 2022 incorporates a comprehensive work schedule that allocates specific time for research and project implementation (Interview 4; Ålands

landskapsregering, 2023). Although this change has allowed the institution to produce more relevant research, it also posed new challenges during adjustment to these changes.

Connections to the labour market

As the region's only higher education institution, Högskolan på Åland plays a crucial role in ensuring Åland has a sufficient supply of educated professionals to contribute to local and regional development. Its key approach is to align its education and activities as closely as possible with the local community and business needs (Interview 4). Trends show that it is increasingly difficult to attract people from other regions, making it crucial to stay relevant to the local community and monitor changes on the labour market (Interview 3).

> ***"We're the only higher education institution in Åland and you could say that it gives us a certain strength because we have a special purpose [...] we have a big opportunity and a big responsibility. And that makes our position special."***
>
> (Interview 3)

By engaging the business community, the university aims to adapt its programmes to the needs of the labour market on an ongoing basis (Interview 1). The University's Sector and Higher Education Council (Högskolans bransch- och fortbildningsråd) ensures programme relevance by involving business sector representatives for each field of study (Interview 1). Representatives meet several times per semester to discuss the needs of Åland's industries in relation to the institution's programmes and provide feedback (Interview 3).

Most programmes at the institution require practical training, often through project-based courses that engage with the labour market. When companies approach Högskolan på Åland with specific tasks, students are assigned projects, typically lasting an entire semester. These practical courses sometimes lead to either employment or an internship, making it an effective strategy for introducing students to potential employers (Interview 2). Problem-based learning is also fostered through collaboration with local industries and EU-funded projects, such as Innovation Lab and Business Lab (Interview 4). These initiatives connect students, local businesses and the public sector while fostering innovation and business opportunities in Åland (Interview 3).

According to the student council representative, not all programmes have such strong ties with local industries. In fact, student retention after graduation poses a challenge due to limited career opportunities in Åland. While programmes such as

hospitality management, nursing and IT host dedicated events to connect students with local companies and help students find relevant jobs after graduation, fields like engineering lack such events due to limited job opportunities on the island (Interview 2). Strong collaborations with healthcare organisations, especially within the nursing programme, also help students secure jobs (Interview 4).

Due to the limited number of local internship opportunities and high competition, many students opt to do their internships on mainland Finland or in Sweden. Businesses emphasise that there are more internship applications than available places for students (Interview 1).

While the institution offers upskilling courses, there is potential to promote them more proactively (Interview 1). Strengthening this initiative could provide Högskolan på Åland and local businesses with professionals who have broader and more specialised skillsets, without the need to take a full degree programme. This could enrich the local labour market and make the institution a more attractive place to study.

Högskolan på Åland remains dedicated to running programmes related to local industries and the economy, such as sea captain training for exports and hospitality management for tourism (Interview 3). Nevertheless, a declining interest in these programmes poses a challenge. Restoring the appeal of these fields is therefore a priority. If interest does not recover, these programmes may be discontinued in the future despite their continued relevance to local industries (Interview 4).

Strategies for student retention and attraction

Åland is facing outmigration among young people. To improve student retention and their integration into the local labour market, Högskolan på Åland prioritises predominantly campus-based education, deliberately limiting the development of fully digital courses to ensure students are well integrated into the local economy (Interview 3).

Although on-site studies remain a priority, two online programmes have been introduced to attract Swedish-speaking students from mainland Finland and Sweden (Interview 4). The distance programmes include three in-person meetings to facilitate networking between the students and local businesses, to connect the students with the local community and to enhance employment prospects (Interview 4).

The institution is also developing programmes involving flexible learning solutions, allowing students to attend campus two days a week and study independently the remainder of the time (Interview 3). This model provides greater flexibility and ensures students are connected to the community in Åland, while accommodating diverse learning and private needs. Such a solution is particularly beneficial for older students with varying family and work commitments.

> *"We've considered it [offering several distance programmes] but I think there's a fine line, since our presence in Åland has a particular purpose. So, providing only online programmes, without people having any connection to Åland [...] I don't think that's in Åland's general interest in the long term."*
>
> (Interview 3)

As a further strategy to attract students, Högskolan på Åland launched a master's programme in English, drawing a larger international cohort. To support this, businesses encourage studying in Åland by highlighting potential future employment opportunities in local companies within the region, despite competition for such positions remaining high (Interview 1).

Being small is a double-edged sword

The small size of both the local economy and the educational institution brings with it a mix of opportunities and challenges. Like many small educational institutions, the university faces difficulties in attracting and retaining students throughout their studies (Interview 4). For instance, a significant challenge lies in ensuring students complete their studies, as they oftentimes leave midway after finding employment (Interview 3). The small size also means that the selection of courses beyond the standard curriculum is limited, requiring students to enrol in online courses if they wish to pursue additional subjects. Moreover, Högskolan på Åland offers only limited student accommodation, with just one dedicated building (Interview 2). However, the availability of suitable housing has not been identified as a significant challenge so far.

Nevertheless, students tend to cite the small size of the university as a strength. It plays a positive role in attracting students. They value the close relations with their teachers and staff, as this contributes to a more flexible learning environment, which is not necessarily the case in larger institutions (Interview 4).

> *"It's a fairly small university [...] If you have questions for the teachers, they know you on a first-name basis. You can just knock on their door and they'll help you."*
>
> (Interview 2)

The student council has a close relationship with the university's management. Meetings are held once per semester to discuss relevant developments and students' perspectives on how Högskolan på Åland should improve.

Rebuilding Åland's maritime identity

Åland's identity as a maritime hub, frequently attracting people to study and work in the maritime sector, seems to be waning. As one student explains, Åland's niche and unique character is gradually fading, with its distinctive identity overshadowed by increasing diversity (Interview 2). A significant departure from Åland's maritime tradition came when the local government, which had financed the training vessel MS Michael Sars, decided to cease funding and urged the institution to sell its ship due to high operating costs. Despite significant opposition in the local community, the intention remains to sell the ship in the future.

Photo: MS Michael Sars. Source: Bengt Oberger, Wikipedia, 2018.

> ***"I mean, you can still study to become a sea captain. But you can also do that in Åbo [Turku], which is a bigger city. So, the thing is, why would you choose to go to a small place to study when you can go to a bigger city and study the same thing? [...] The ship was the big thing [that set us apart]."***
>
> (Interview 2)

On the other hand, the islands still maintain a relatively strong maritime sector. While Åland has expanded to include a broader range of industries, it remains uncertain whether the future will see a renewed focus on strengthening the maritime sector (Interview 3).

Key learnings and way forward

Högskolan på Åland plays an important role in the labour market and Åland society in a broader sense. As the only higher education institution in the region, it serves as a stepping stone for local young people, offering education that is tailored to the needs of local businesses.

While traditionally focusing on maritime studies and rooted in the local community, the institution is now expanding its curriculum, introducing flexible study options to attract a broader range of students and addressing unique needs. The small scale of both the institution and the labour market presents unique opportunities and challenges. Close connections with teaching staff and local businesses offer advantages, but the limited size of the labour market restricts opportunities in some professions.

Maintaining a strong maritime focus while responding to industry demands likewise remains a challenge, especially given the declining interest in the maritime programme. Although Högskolan på Åland is already independent of the Finnish education model, it plans a further transition from being under local authority control to the status of an autonomous institution, which is expected to increase flexibility and spur innovation. Nevertheless, the results remain to be seen. Promoting more upskilling courses could be a strategic response to meet the evolving needs of the labour market better and address individual learners' needs to improve their skillsets.

The institution is striving to be recognised as a provider of high-quality education to attract future students. In this effort, flexible and hybrid educational models, along with programmes taught in English, play a crucial role.

Photo: Students at Campus Allegro, Finland. Source: centria.fi

3.3 Campus Jakobstad, Finland

About Jakobstad and the Ostrobothnia region

Jakobstad (Pietarsaari in Finnish) is a predominantly Swedish-speaking town with a population of around 19,500 residents (2024). It is located in western Finland, in the Ostrobothnia region, which consists of 14 municipalities. The regional centre is the city of Vaasa and the region is divided into three subregions: the Jakobstad region, the Vaasa region and Southern Ostrobothnia.

The Jakobstad subregion comprises five municipalities and has a diverse industrial base, including the plastics, metal, composites and paper industries (Jakobstadsregionen, 2025). The business environment predominantly consists of small and micro enterprises, with over 8,000 businesses, 80% of which have fewer than 20 employees (Interview 2). Jakobstad is home to Alhomen Industrial Park, which brings together eight industrial and 53 service companies and is recognised as a cluster for wood processing, the metal industry and shipbuilding in particular (AIP, 2025).

The food industry, accounting for 25% of industrial employment in the Jakobstad region in 2024, presents significant development potential, alongside emerging sectors such as hydrogen infrastructure and electricity grid expansion (Interview 2). The population of the region is steadily growing, driven by international labour migration from Eastern Europe, Vietnam, Poland and Ukraine. However, skilled labour shortages persist due to rapid industrial growth in the region. Despite national strategies aimed at attracting highly educated professionals, local recruitment remains focused on manufacturing. There is continuous demand for professionals with vocational and university degrees, particularly in the fields of engineering, economics and sales (Interview 2).

Campus Jakobstad: a hub for Swedish-language arts and culture education

Campus Jakobstad (also known as Campus Allegro) traces its origins to the 1980s, when music education was first introduced in the town. The campus expanded in 2012 with relocation of the arts programme from Nykarleby, followed by the transfer of the performing arts pedagogy programme from Vaasa in 2017. Further growth took place in 2019 and 2021 with the introduction of business administration programmes, designed to meet the needs of the regional labour market (Interview 1).

Today, Campus Jakobstad brings together several educational institutions. Novia University of Applied Sciences accounts for the largest share of students (approximately 400), offering bachelor's programmes in music, music and performing arts pedagogy, visual arts, photography and business administration, as well as master's programmes in design and in culture and arts. Novia is Finland's largest Swedish-speaking university of applied sciences, with campuses in Vaasa, Turku, Raseborg and Jakobstad (Novia, 2023).

Photo: Campus Allegro. Source: Centria.fi

In addition to Novia, the campus hosts Centria University of Applied Sciences, which provides bachelor's programmes in business administration and engineering. In early 2025, a new industrial management engineering programme was launched, taught in English. The programme was developed in collaboration with local businesses and combines expertise in technology and business (Centria, 2025). Centria has eight research, development and innovation (RDI) teams, several of which work closely with the Alholmen Industrial Park and other regional industries

(Centria, n.d.-b). In the past years, Centria has expanded its research and development team in Jakobstad, including projects in areas such as robotics and automation (Interview 2).

Another key institution at Campus Jakobstad is the Vocational Academy of Ostrobothnia (Yrkesakademin i Österbotten), which offers vocational cultural programmes. The Wava Institute is also located on the campus, providing music, visual arts, dance and theatre education for all ages (Campus Allegro, 2025).

These institutions collectively contribute to a vibrant and diverse campus atmosphere, with over 550 higher education students enriching the educational environment.

Education at Campus Jakobstad is predominantly full-time and on-site, particularly for practical and artistic disciplines, where hands-on interaction is crucial. However, business and design programmes follow a flexible, blended learning model tailored to working professionals.

Impacts on the community and labour market

> *"A region that has chosen the "best place in the world" brand naturally needs culture – for building identity, community and cultural life. Social resilience is also crucial in today's uncertain world."*
>
> (Interview 2)

Campus Jakobstad significantly enriches the local cultural landscape through concerts, exhibitions, performances and vernissages. This cultural vitality plays a crucial role in fostering community identity and resilience, while also enhancing the town's attractiveness.

As the sole provider of higher arts education in Swedish in Finland, Campus Jakobstad focuses on meeting national educational needs, rather than serving the local labour market. This distinguishes it from other regional institutions that primarily serve local labour markets.

Although Novia has established strong collaborations with local industries – particularly in the technology and industrial sectors – connections for arts and culture students are weaker, with limited local internship and employment opportunities available. For instance, the nearest Swedish-language professional theatre is located 100 km away, limiting prospects for performing arts graduates seeking opportunities close to home. Fields such as graphic design and interior architecture present more local opportunities, as well as Centria's programmes. Nevertheless, many arts graduates find themselves relocating to other regions of Finland or moving abroad to advance their careers.

Despite the challenges, efforts to strengthen ties between the creative industries and the business sector are underway. This is exemplified by the introduction of a new master's programme in circular design and sustainability launched in 2022.

Student composition and campus life

Students at Campus Jakobstad come both from local areas and various parts of Finland, particularly from regions that are Swedish-speaking or bilingual. Unlike Vaasa, which is renowned for its strong engineering programmes and industrial connections, Jakobstad appeals to students interested in arts and culture programmes offered in Swedish. For these students, the appeal lies primarily in the programme itself rather than the geographic location or connections to the local labour market (Interviews 1 and 3).

Jakobstad's small size and supportive environment is valued for fostering focused study and creative work, with campus facilities, entertainment and recreational opportunities all easily accessible. Students often refer to the campus as a "bubble", which fosters a tight-knit community and encourages active engagement in campus activities (Interview 3). This welcoming atmosphere extends to the teaching and management staff, who actively encourage student involvement and provide opportunities for students to influence and shape the development of the campus:

> ***"I would even say that, compared to many other campuses, students in Jakobstad have some of the best opportunities to influence the development of the campus and the school...The teaching and management staff take an alternative approach, likely because most of them share a background in the artistic fields, even those in administrative roles"***
>
> (Interview 3)

Key learnings and way forward

While the small scale of the institution and the region is seen by some students as appealing, it also presents several challenges. These include difficulties in attracting and retaining talent, as well as a limited academic community, which restricts networking opportunities and course diversity. To address these challenges, Novia is stepping up efforts to recruit international students and expand its

English-language programmes, aiming to strengthen international connections and meet regional labour market needs. As of 2023, international students accounted for 15% of the student body, a figure that is expected to grow in alignment with the Novia 2030 strategy. Centria has also responded to this challenge by launching Talent Boost initiatives, aimed at enhancing international knowledge and RDI activities in the Ostrobothnia region, developed in close collaboration with regional stakeholders (Centria, n.d.-a).

The regional business landscape, largely made up of small enterprises, would benefit from stronger research partnerships. However, due to their small size, it is often difficult for such businesses to initiate and prioritise such collaborations. Strengthening ties between Centria, Novia and other national and European research institutions specialising in fields such as food sciences, metals, paper, plastics, composites, abrasives, construction and real estate would not only support the further development of the campus but also significantly boost the regional economy (Interview 2).

Moreover, enhancing Novia's technical offerings at Campus Jakobstad – such as in robotics and automation – could help balance Vaasa's pull and prominence in engineering and better meet the needs of local industries (Interview 2). The campus already fosters a dynamic environment through collaboration among several educational institutions, providing a strong foundation for further innovation and partnerships. This model – involving multiple institutions collaborating within a single campus – offers a promising approach for smaller localities and institutions, enabling cost sharing and enhancing the campus's attractiveness to both students and staff.

There is potential to further explore the integration of creative industries with business sectors, building on initiatives like the circular design programme. This approach could strengthen the connection between creative arts education and local export-oriented industries, fostering innovation and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Overall, there is growing recognition of the need for educational programmes to be better aligned with future labour market demands, based on thorough analysis of evolving skill requirements across all levels of education, including vocational training. However, even when these needs are well understood, the process of updating licences and approvals to create new study programmes – and determining the languages in which they can be offered – remains slow and cumbersome, often further delayed by bureaucratic obstacles (Interview 2). Without significantly accelerating these processes, education systems will continue to lag behind the demands of the labour market.

Photo: The UNAK campus in Akureyri Town. Source: UNAK website

3.4 University of Akureyri, Iceland

UNAK – a young, remote university with an impressive growth record.

> *"Teaching was conducted in two rooms in the sports arena in Akureyri."*
> (UNAK website)

The University of Akureyri is located in the north of Iceland, in the country's second largest city. From small beginnings in 1987 with just 31 students in two faculties, it now boasts nine faculties, 2,800 students and 180 teaching staff (Figure 2). Today, UNAK offers a wide range of undergraduate and graduate programmes across three schools. These programmes span various disciplines, including social sciences, media studies, nursing, occupational therapy, teacher training, biotechnology, law, police science, modern studies, psychology, fishery studies, computer science and business administration. Graduate programmes are also available in teaching, psychology, health sciences, social sciences, business administration and resource studies. Notably, UNAK became a fully comprehensive university in 2017 when it gained the authority to offer doctoral studies, marking a significant milestone in its development. A university representative proudly reflected on this achievement, stating,

> *"We have already graduated five PhD students, which for us is a huge success."*

The university has also defined the ambitious goal of providing a flexible educational model tailored to the regional diversity of Iceland. As a UNAK representative noted in an interview,

> ***"UNAK has specialised in blended and distance learning, meaning all our programmes are available both on site and through distance learning. Students can choose either option and our teachers must be able to deliver education in both formats."***
>
> (Interview 1)

To ensure the success of this flexible learning approach, UNAK invests heavily in supporting its faculty. Teachers receive extensive resources and training, including assistance with online platforms, hybrid curriculum design and innovative teaching methods.

This commitment to flexible education enables UNAK to serve students across Iceland, including those in remote areas, while maintaining its focus on quality and accessibility.

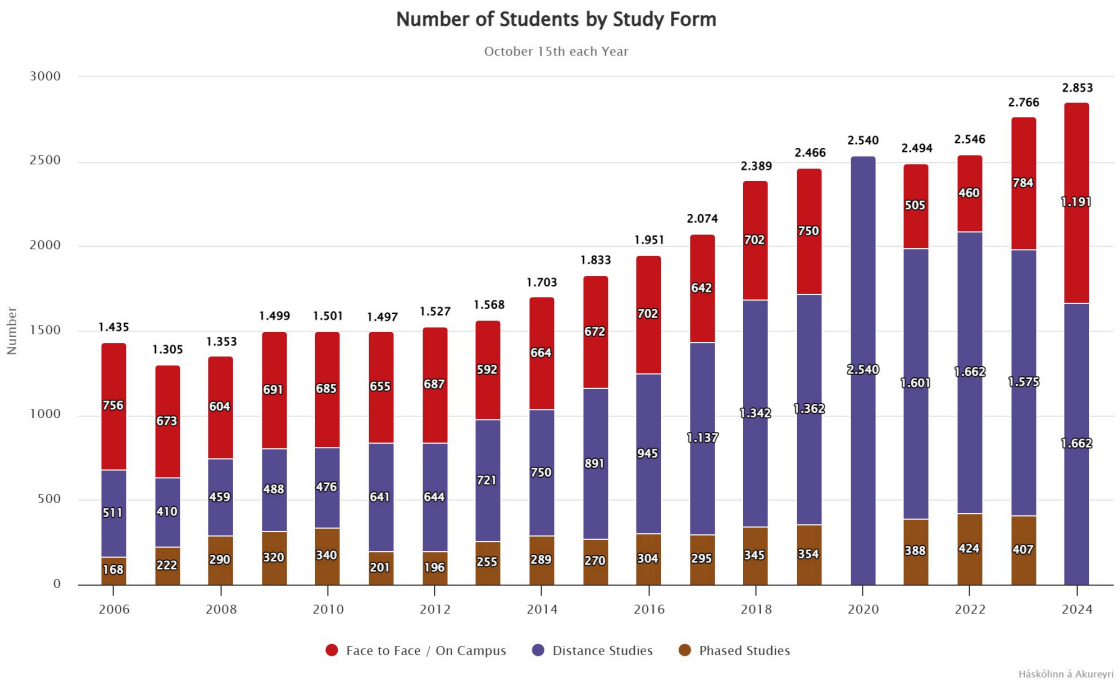


Figure 1. Number of students at UNAK by study form. Source: UNAK website.

A local university with an international perspective ...

> *"Contributing to the growth and prosperity of Icelandic society in an international environment"*
>
> (Strategy of the University of Akureyri 2018-2023)

Broadly speaking, it may be fair to say that the university sees itself within a national and indeed international context rather than as a "local" university. In its strategy document for the years 2018-2023, the university outlines its priorities:

> *"The University of Akureyri is one of the primary educational and research establishments in the country and is an active and respected participant in the Icelandic and international academic community", along with "working with industry on innovation and strengthening of entrepreneurial thinking in the community".*

... serving local communities across the country

> *"From the start, and still today, our focus has been on educating specialised workers for communities outside the capital area, in fields such as business administration, nursing and teaching. These programmes have helped ensure that small communities have access to qualified professionals without requiring them to relocate."*
>
> (Interview 1)

UNAK can be described as an educational facility serving all small communities across Iceland. Its approach emphasises understanding and addressing the needs of all small communities, rather than concentrating solely on the specific requirements of Akureyri. This has implications in many areas of university administration, particularly in the selection of programmes. The focus has been on the needs of small communities in general rather than the specific needs of the district in which the university is situated – though, of course, those needs may be very similar.

A key element of UNAK's strategy is the establishment of learning centres across Iceland, enabling students to follow the university's online courses while staying in their local communities. These centres not only provide access to education but also serve as meeting places for local employers, further integrating education with local development. By allowing students in remote areas to earn professional qualifications that are in demand locally, UNAK enables them to remain in their communities, reducing the need to relocate for educational purposes.

UNAK's distance learning opportunities are available to individuals of all ages (Figure 3). This flexibility allows adults to develop skills within their current professions or even retrain in a new field. An interviewee remarked on the success of this aspect of UNAK's work, stating,

> ***"I believe the University of Akureyri has contributed significantly to increasing the proportion of higher-educated individuals in smaller communities. People don't have to move away anymore."***
>
> (Interview 1)

This approach opens up education to a broader range of people, helping meet the diverse needs of Iceland's smaller communities.

Integration with the local labour market and community

To explore the relationship between UNAK and the local municipalities within its region, we spoke with the Association of Municipalities in Northeast Iceland, the region where Akureyri is located. The interviewee emphasised the role that UNAK has played in the region – from an early stage, it recognised the importance of offering education remotely, which has been a game changer for people in rural areas. UNAK's initiative has not only benefited Akuryeri and the surrounding region but has also opened up opportunities for students all over the country (Interview2).

While the interviewee acknowledged that UNAK has sometimes felt "like an island of its own in the town", this dynamic is starting to shift. Local municipalities were invited to participate in the discussions that shaped UNAK's new strategic plan and they are now contributing in various ways to the infrastructure development needed to support this plan. The interviewee cited the computer science degree programme as an example of a successful initiative developed partly in response to pressure from the local business community. The interviewee emphasised the potential for further growth, particularly by expanding applied engineering courses to better meet the region's technical job demands. The strong relationship between the university and local businesses is evident, as local companies frequently turn to the association when seeking to hire students.

The student union representative further explained that UNAK's relationship with local businesses and industries is mutually beneficial. Local companies in the Akureyri area often contact the student union to advertise job opportunities and training placements, which are then forwarded to relevant academic committees in fields such as psychology or nursing. While most of these opportunities come from the local area, the interviewee noted that openings are also available across Iceland. This local engagement helps students gain practical experience and secure employment, strengthening the ties between UNAK and the communities it serves (Interview 3).

The university's offer is clearly attractive but to whom?

> ***"Interestingly, about 35% of our students are based in the capital area."***
>
> (Interview 1)

Representatives from both UNAK and the Association of Municipalities in Northeast Iceland were optimistic about the university's appeal to potential students. They noted that student numbers are steadily increasing, driven by the offering of relevant courses with clear job prospects. However, despite this growth, the student population has a notable gender imbalance. Women constitute around 70% of the student body, particularly in programmes like teaching and nursing. This imbalance presents a challenge for UNAK as it strives to attract more male students and diversify participation across all programmes.

Perhaps most significantly, from the perspective of the EDYNORA project, around 35% of UNAK students come from the capital area. This means that while UNAK provides crucial educational opportunities for rural and remote communities, it is also serving urban needs. This dual focus on both local and national demand may explain the university's success. UNAK is able to offer high-quality, accessible education to young people wherever they are, playing a crucial role in supplying the country with much-needed labour for essential services like healthcare and education.

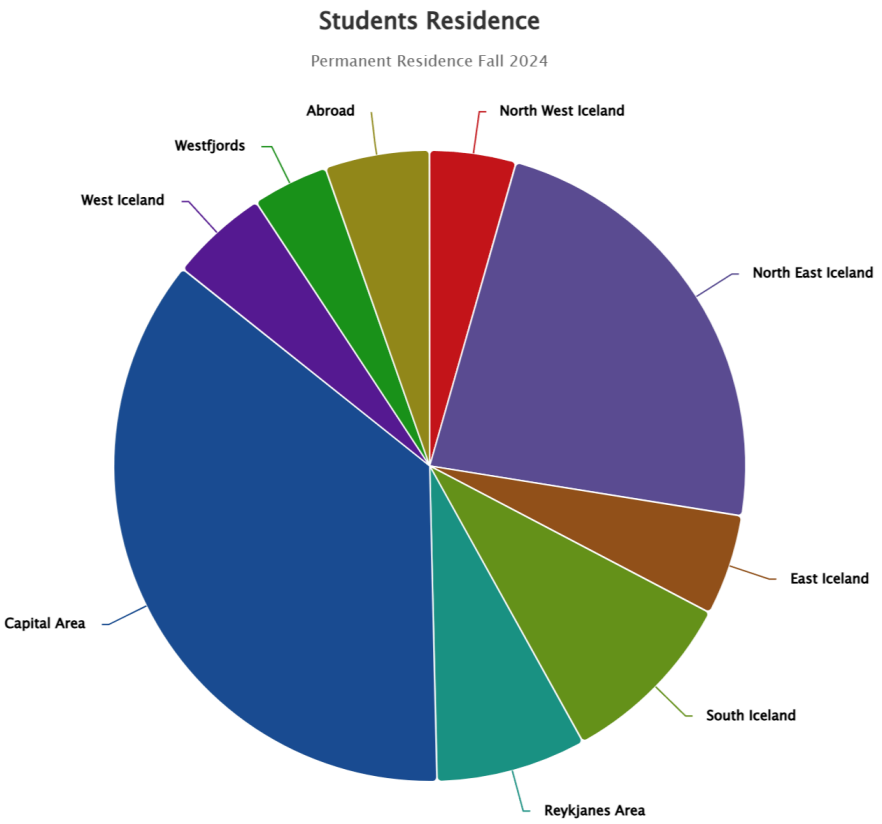


Figure 2. Student residence, fall 2023. Source: UNAK website.

Keeping on-campus students in mind

With a new rector starting in autumn 2024, there is shared curiosity among all interviewees about the direction the UNAK will take in the coming years. For students living and studying in Akureyri, there is a strong desire for increased resources and a focus on enhancing campus life, as well as attracting more students to move to the city. The UNAK student union plays a central role in addressing these challenges and shaping campus life, particularly in the context of the flexible learning model.

A student union representative highlighted several key areas where the union's vision aligns with ongoing challenges (Interview 3):

Campus engagement and administration	Housing shortages	Balancing flexible learning with campus life
Despite the university's shift towards online and hybrid instruction, certain administrative tasks still require physical presence on campus. The decreasing number of students residing in Akureyri has made it difficult to achieve full representation and participation in these activities. The student union continues to advocate for better solutions to this issue.	As the student population grows, housing availability in Akureyri, especially for those moving to the city, has become increasingly limited. While the university provides some student housing, demand often exceeds supply, particularly during peak periods. New student housing, however, has been designed, with construction scheduled to start in two years.	The flexible learning model offers significant benefits, such as allowing students to study from remote areas, but it also poses challenges in terms of maintaining a vibrant campus community. The student union is working to improve student engagement by organising more on-campus events and ensuring that remote students remain connected to the broader university community.

These areas of focus reflect the complexities of managing a university with both local and national reach, where balancing flexibility with community engagement is key to UNAK's future success.

Key learnings and way forward

The University of Akureyri (UNAK) provides a convincing example of how educational institutions can adapt to regional challenges, such as population decline and the need for a skilled workforce. Through its hybrid learning model, UNAK enables students in both urban and remote areas to pursue professional qualifications without needing to relocate. This flexibility supports rural

communities by cultivating a skilled workforce and helping to stabilise populations. As such, UNAK serves as a model for how educational hubs can foster not only local but also national development.

However, while UNAK excels at ensuring students do not need to relocate to urban centres to acquire professional qualifications, its nationwide reach makes it difficult to establish strong ties with local businesses and municipalities in any one specific region. This balancing act between providing flexible, countrywide education and fostering local partnerships presents a unique challenge for the institution as it navigates its role in regional development.

Looking ahead, UNAK is well-positioned to further expand its influence, both regionally and throughout Iceland. However, for sustainable growth, certain challenges will need to be addressed. For instance, it will be crucial to enhance engagement with distance learners to reduce feelings of isolation. At the same time, expanding the university's programme offerings – particularly in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) fields in closer coordination with local businesses – will help meet the evolving demands of the local labour market. Balancing these flexible learning models with the vibrancy of on-campus life remains a priority as the student population becomes increasingly diverse. Financial sustainability also presents a concern since government funding has been slow to catch up with UNAK's growing student body.

When considering the role of education in retaining young people in rural areas, perspectives on youth retention can differ. A representative from the Association of municipalities in Northeast Iceland reflected on this issue, stating,

> ***"We have a regional plan that prioritises youth retention through education and culture. But we also recognise the value in young people leaving to gain experience and new perspectives, as long as they return to settle in the region afterwards."***

This clearly raises the question of how exactly to encourage their return – however, that challenge lies beyond the scope of this project.

Photo: Students sitting on the stairs. Source: Limbo Hu / unsplash.com

3.5 Campus Nesna, Nord University, Norway

About Nesna Municipality

Nesna is a small municipality in Northern Norway's Helgeland region, spanning 183 km² and home to around 1,800 residents (SSB, 2024). It includes the town of Nesna and the islands Hugla, Handnesøya and Tomma (Thorsnæs & Engerengen, 2024). Key sectors include agriculture, fishing, education and public administration. Primary industries, led by agriculture, account for 12.7% of local jobs. While traditional fishing has declined, small-scale operations continue, alongside aquaculture facilities – most notably a land-based fish farm on Tomma. Industrial activity – including construction, energy and water services – makes up about 15% of employment. Key industries include mechanical workshops, quarrying and boatbuilding. Tourism is also growing, with visitors drawn to Nesna's landscapes, islands and wildlife. Together, these sectors reflect a dynamic community rooted in regional heritage.

Campus Nesna's resilience and revival: navigating challenges and change

The campus in Nesna is the second oldest educational institution in Northern Norway. Established in 1918 as Nesna Teacher Training College (Nesna Lærerskole), it has long played a vital role in training teachers for the region and supporting the local community. The primary motivation for its establishment was to address the difficulty of recruiting teachers to rural areas – a challenge that remains relevant today.

In 1994, the institution became a state university college (Høgskolen i Nesna) following a national higher education reform. The campus flourished, hosting over 1,000 students and offering a broad range of programmes, including IT, nursing, musicology and natural sciences. In 2016, another merger brought Høgskolen i Nesna together with Høgskolen i Nord-Trøndelag (HiNT) and Universitetet i Nordland (UiN) to form Nord University. The aim was to strengthen higher education in the north through a multi-campus model. Nine campuses, including Nesna, were consolidated, creating a network stretching nearly 900 km. However, the merger led to a sharp reduction in Nesna's academic offerings and activity.

In 2019, Nord University announced the closure of its Nesna and Sandnessjøen campuses, citing financial and strategic concerns (Nord Universitet, 2019). The decision triggered strong opposition, particularly from the grassroots initiative People's Movement for Higher Education in Helgeland (Folkeaksjonen), which quickly grew to over 20,000 members and brought national attention to the issue during the 2021 election. In response to public pressure, the Labour-Centre Party (Ap-Sp) government made reestablishing Campus Nesna a priority. By autumn 2022, the campus had reopened under Nord University, offering primary and preschool teacher training and short pedagogy courses. As one staff member stated: "Without the political opposition, we probably wouldn't exist today." (Interview 3).

The Nesna case also led to a policy change: universities must now seek approval from the Ministry of Education to close campuses. While controversial, this shift affirmed the government's commitment to protecting rural higher education (Larsen & Arnesen, 2023).

Today, the campus hosts around 200 students in on-campus programmes and another 100 enrolled in fully online studies.

Grounds for change: the development project at Nesna

In 2022, following the reopening of Campus Nesna, the Ministry of Education and Research commissioned Nord University to undertake a two-year development project ("Utviklingsprosjekt Nesna") (Bjellånes et al., 2023). The project aimed to identify opportunities and propose concrete measures to strengthen the appeal of Campus Nesna, in collaboration with stakeholders at local, regional and national levels. Furthermore, the project sought to pave the way for university education in smaller communities through a decentralised model. To manage the broad scope, the project was organised into four sub-projects:

1. **Future study programmes and academic environment**: This sub-project focused on identifying and proposing new study programmes to attract students both nationally and internationally. Drawing on existing strengths of the campus and needs and opportunities on the local labour market, a total of 18 programmes were suggested. Among the proposals were new

study programmes in sectors such as aquaculture and tourism, including a master's degree in rural management in English, the establishment of a summer school and the introduction of higher vocational education pathways.

2. **Student and staff recruitment**: The aim was to develop strategies to enhance student and professional recruitment to Nesna. This included marketing Nesna as a sustainable and community-oriented study location, as well as collaborating with local and regional stakeholders to enhance the appeal of the campus.

3. **Welfare services and local infrastructure**: This sub-project assessed necessary measures to improve welfare services and infrastructure for students and staff at Nesna. Proposals included developing student housing, recreational facilities and improved transport infrastructure.

4. **Organisational Model**: This sub-project analysed various models for organising operations at Nesna with the goal of ensuring sustainable management over time. Recommendations included fostering close collaboration with Nordland Vocational College and other educational institutions to strengthen the academic offerings.

The project concluded in May 2023 with the submission of its final report (Bjellånes et al., 2023). Initial progress includes plans to introduce courses in aquaculture, counselling and after-school pedagogy by 2025, each worth 15 credits. However, larger initiatives like new bachelor's and master's programmes are yet to materialise as further development is contingent upon support and funding commitments from the state. To date, no political decision has been made on the matter, making the impact of the development project uncertain.

The government has been criticised for not fulfilling its commitment to establish a national centre for decentralised and regionally focused education and research at Nesna (Hystad, 2024a, 2024b). While it is important to note that this initiative was not included in the mandate, the situation highlights the political challenges that small institutions like Nesna face, often leaving them vulnerable to shifts in policy priorities and resource constraints.

Photo: Students. Source: Unsplash.com

The evolution of Nesna's education model

The programmes at Nesna are assembly-based, supported by online learning and practice placements. The week-long assemblies are held at Nesna three or four times per semester, helping to strengthen social ties between the students. Between assemblies, online support and seminars are provided, along with opportunities for independent work. The campus was an early adopter of online and assembly-based education, which it began developing in the early 2000s. The "Helgeland model" combined online teaching with practice-oriented collaboration at local study centres. Students met in groups at the local centres and participated in online teaching together. Today, the model is more flexible with the use of platforms like Teams and Zoom and teaching is often asynchronous, meaning students work more individually, using resources such as quizzes and digital learning modules.

The assembly-based approach has both strengths and weaknesses. The main strength is that it gives individuals who might not otherwise have access to education the opportunity to study. Indeed, several of the students are adults with commitments such as families and jobs, living in areas outside of Nesna, many of whom would have to travel significant distances to reach educational institutions. Moreover, the education model allows students to remain in their local communities, contributing to their economic and social vitality during their studies, supporting one of the overarching goals of rural policy in Norway.

"There is a strength in this type of educational model. Students can live at home, work alongside their studies and it's cheaper than living in student housing. This makes higher education accessible to more people and those who might not study otherwise"

(Interview 3)

The assembly-based model does, however, reduce activity on campus – and, consequently, community engagement in Nesna. Moreover, the social ties between students are, predictably, not as strong as when programmes are campus-based. As a representative from campus noted:

"In the past, we had vibrant student activities, including concerts and theatres, which are no longer feasible. The session-based model also affects services like the cafeteria and reduces long-term community engagement."

(Interview 2)

While the campus administration and staff are making efforts to increase student numbers, the centralised model of Nord University presents challenges. Funding is managed by Nord University, which distributes its budgets among its five faculties. Given the financial strain, internal discussions regarding how the funds should be allocated can arise, which may create tension between campuses. Moreover, according to the interviewees, it is not the campuses that control their own study portfolios, but rather Nord University's five faculties. As the larger campuses (Bodø and Levanger) host the main facilities, the faculties tend to prioritise these locations over the smaller campuses.

A unique model for teacher training in Nesna – a pilot project to address rural needs

Campus Nesna is closely aligned with the needs of the region's educational sector, as demonstrated by the upcoming launch of a unique primary school teacher training programme in autumn 2025. The programme, called *Grunnskolelærerutdanning 1-10*, will be the only programme in Norway that qualifies teachers to instruct across all primary and lower secondary levels (years 1-10) and provides competence in up to five subjects, unlike current programmes, which split between years 1–7 and 5–10 and offer narrower subject qualifications. This broader competency addresses the specific needs of rural, often smaller

schools and has been approved by the Ministry of Education with a guaranteed student intake for 2025–2027. This programme responds to regional demands for teachers with broader subject knowledge and the flexibility to teach across year levels. Moreover, Nesna's faculty has also developed two courses in multi-grade pedagogy available nationwide. These initiatives have sparked interest well beyond Nord University's primary regions of Nordland and Trøndelag.

In addition to the new teacher programme, significant efforts have also been made to develop research focusing on rural education in Nesna. In 2024, five doctoral candidates started their research on this topic and a research group titled *Research in Rural Educational Landscapes* has been established. This group, in collaboration with other research teams at Nesna, aims to drive a broader research initiative, strengthening the campus's academic standing.

Community impact and the benefits of a small campus

The compact size of the campus facilitates strong relationships and connections between staff and students, with short distances facilitating interactions and feedback on course structure. The benefits of a small community are also evident in the ability to attract and retain staff. Teaching positions at Nesna are sought after, drawing both international and Norwegian applicants. For those relocating to Nesna from abroad, the size of the local community offers easier integration and affordable housing. Moreover, the campus administration also offers active relocation support.

> ***"It's about being close and providing support that larger universities might not offer. For example, we assist with practical matters, such as establishment loans, language support and collaboration with NAV for new employees. This proximity makes it easier to attract and retain skilled professionals."***
>
> (Interview 3)

With its over 100-year presence, Campus Nesna also has a strong impact on the local community, shaping the town's identity and providing resources. Faculty and students actively participate in local cultural and recreational activities, such as choirs and sports, enriching the town's social fabric. Furthermore, facilities including the sports hall, swimming pool and theatre can be rented. The campus also collaborates with local schools and kindergartens to provide practical training opportunities for students, which not only fulfils educational objectives but also supports staffing needs in these institutions. This integration ensures the campus remains a central part of community life rather than being separate from it.

Key learnings and way forward

Campus Nesna has encountered significant challenges in maintaining and developing its operations, particularly following its merger with Nord University in 2016. The loss of autonomy coupled with centrally managed budgets and resources, has clearly had a big impact on the campus. Related to the financial constraints is a lack of political will, which has hindered Nesna's ability to implement innovative programmes and expand its existing offerings. Indeed, the recommendations made through the ambitious development project lack funding, preventing their realisation.

Broader societal trends also pose challenges for the campus, particularly the declining interest in teaching careers. Across Norway, applications to teacher training programmes have fallen, reflecting a nationwide struggle to attract young people to the profession. This trend exacerbates recruitment difficulties at Nesna, where the campus primarily focuses on teacher training. The shrinking applicant pool has made it increasingly challenging to sustain programme offerings and ensure a steady pipeline of qualified teachers to the region. While the campus strives to align its teacher training programmes with the specific needs of rural areas, such as the new pilot programme for teacher training, broader societal disinterest in the teaching profession remains a significant hurdle.

The success of Campus Nesna is grounded in its ability to balance innovation, community engagement and responsiveness to regional needs. A crucial enabler has been its alignment with government policies favouring decentralised education. The campus benefitted from a landmark regulatory change in 2021. This policy safeguarded Nesna's existence and underscored the government's commitment to accessible higher education in rural areas. The campus's reopening also showcases the significant influence of grassroots advocacy, particularly by the People's Movement for Higher Education in Helgeland. This collaboration between the community and policymakers exemplifies the powerful impact of collective action in sustaining educational institutions.

To reverse declining trends, the introduction of new programmes, the reinforcement of local collaborations and the enhancement of the student experience are being explored. As one of the representatives from the municipality noted, diversification is key to increasing student numbers in the long term:

> ***"Reducing the reliance on teacher training programmes and developing fields like aquaculture is essential for sustainable growth."***
>
> (Interview 3)

Leadership and local partnerships have been equally vital. Campus administrators have proactively engaged with industries and municipalities to tailor educational offerings – such as aquaculture and multi-grade pedagogy – that directly address workforce needs. These collaborations have not only enhanced the campus's appeal but also strengthened its integration into the community. Additionally, the campus's small size facilitates personalised student experiences, fostering close ties between students, faculty and the town itself. Proactive recruitment and relocation support for staff has further enabled the campus to attract talent despite challenges posed by limited resources and centralised decision-making. Together, these factors highlight the importance of strong leadership, community alignment and adaptability in realising Campus Nesna's long-term success.

Photo: Campus Sundsvall. Source: Mittuniversitetet, n.d., Source: MIUN website

3.6 Campus Sundsvall, Mid Sweden University, Sweden

Sundsvall – a hub of regional industry

Located in central Sweden on the eastern coast, Sundsvall is surrounded by mountains and lies along the coast of the Baltic Sea. As of 2022, Sundsvall municipality had a population of 99,361 residents, with an average age of 42.8 (Sundsvalls kommun, 2022). In Sundsvall, both traditional industries and digital sectors are prominent. Sundsvall has maintained a major forest industry since the 20th century and continues to be a crucial industrial and manufacturing hub in Sweden (Visit Sweden, 2021). It is one of the key pulp and paper-producing regions in Northern Europe and also features some engineering and aluminium plants (Britannica, n.d.). Sundsvall has a strong ICT sector, with innovation and digitalisation supporting national and local industries (Interview 1). Lastly, Sundsvall has a well-developed public sector and is home to several national public agencies (Interview 2). Nevertheless, since the region is facing a declining labour force, a broad range of skills is needed for further development of the region (Interview 1). To address these issues, Västernorrland region's Regional Development Strategy (*Den regionala utvecklingsstrategin*) places a strong emphasis on attracting and retaining people (Region Västernorrland, 2024).

About Campus Sundsvall

Established in 1993, Mid Sweden University has two main campuses, in Östersund and Sundsvall, serving around 24,890 students in total (2023). Of these, 6,000 students attend the university physically and are evenly distributed between the two campuses. The university employs over 1,200 staff members, with 700 based in Sundsvall (Mid Sweden University, n.d.).

The origins of the Sundsvall campus date back to 1842, when a sea navigation school was founded near Sundsvall (Gunmo, 2003). The educational institution first applied for full university status in 1997, partially achieving it in 2001 for natural sciences and in 2005 for the entire Mid Sweden University (Gunmo, 2003). The establishment of the Sundsvall campus was driven by demand from businesses and the public sector for a more vocationally oriented higher education institution. As a result, the University of Sundsvall/Härnösand (HS/H) was created, with Sundsvall serving as the main campus, focusing primarily on technical education (Gunmo, 2003). In 2013, the university board decided to transfer all activities from the Härnösand campus to Sundsvall by 2016 (Mid Sweden University, 2013).

Mid Sweden University offers diverse programmes in fields including computer science, engineering, media, applied sciences, languages, social sciences and humanities. The Sundsvall campus specialises in technical and natural sciences at bachelor's, master's and postgraduate levels (Mid Sweden University, n.d.). This is complemented by extensive online courses that attract both local and international students (Email correspondence, University, 2024).

Photo: Students. Source: Moa Karlberg / norden.org

Striking a balance between on-site and distance learning

Currently, around 60% of the education at Sundsvall is delivered online, with the remainder taught physically on campus (Interview 2). Remote learning offers numerous benefits, including broader outreach for the university and a steady flow of funds. However, following the 2025 budget and discussions with the national government and local authorities, the university has shifted its strategy to expand on-site programmes and strengthening marketing activities to attract international students. This is anticipated to boost on-campus student presence without leading to a reduction in the number of students studying online.

> ***"We have more students online and that's something we want to [change]. We want to have more students on campus."***
>
> (Interview 2)

The university will attempt to attract 900 on-campus students across both locations(Interview 3)**.** The student union supports this shift, citing challenges in engaging online students. The business community also welcomes this initiative, anticipating it will draw more potential workers to the region (Interview 3; Interview 1)**.**

Public authorities and the campus are discussing ways to create a more attractive environment in the city for young people to stay in. One key aspect that motivates students to relocate is the guaranteed housing that the students receive when moving to Sundsvall (Interview 3). Nevertheless, attracting students to the region is an ongoing challenge.

Who makes up the student body and what is campus life like?

The Sundsvall campus primarily attracts younger students from the local area and across Sweden, often enrolling soon after secondary school. The distance learning alternative also draws international students, who may not currently reside in Sweden (Email correspondence, University, 2024).

One interviewee explained that while some might choose Östersund for its beautiful scenery, Sundsvall appeals to individuals due to its education and job opportunities.

"A lot of people from outside the region come to Östersund because they like the mountains and they like skiing and that has a big impact on Östersund. Here in Sundsvall, it's not about the scenery – it's about the education that we provide and the possibilities we offer to get to know the institutions who hire people."

(Interview 2)

Regarding daily life on the campus, a student interviewee described the atmosphere as modern, personal and welcoming (Interview 3).

"University buildings are typically large and imposing, designed to be impressive. But here they are small and cosy, almost like a village. The campus feels very welcoming, with short distances between buildings [...] Everything is newly renovated, giving it a fresh and clean feel, with a strong focus on indoor greenery."

(Interview 3)

The university is actively engaged with the local student union, which represents students from each programme, not only on the university board and in various departments but also nationally through the Association of Student Unions in Sweden (Interview 3)**.** Strong support from the university provides the Union with financial and administrative resources, enabling collaboration on various projects (Interview 3).

The campus encourages student involvement in shaping a more appealing space for current and future students. For instance, one design programme gave students the opportunity to plan improvements to the campus area and implement more green spaces instead of car parks (Interview 2).

Seamless links to the labour market and regional impact

The Sundsvall campus collaborates closely with local actors. The campus is vital for regional development, providing the young workforce that is essential for the region's growth. Additionally, the university serves as a research hub for surrounding institutions requiring specialised field analysis. Such synergies have developed through close collaboration between the university and local stakeholders, including businesses, public actors, networks, hospitals and government agencies (Interview 2). Notable successes include lifelong learning

initiatives and upskilling courses, particularly in electronic equipment (Interview 1). Since 2014, Sundsvall Municipality and the university have partnered on 70-80 joint projects, addressing student engagement, research, education and regional growth (Focus group interview).

Furthermore, the campus supports regional development and drives innovation by facilitating connections between students, researchers and industries through innovation clusters like Bron Innovation, the local Chamber of Commerce and Samling Näringsliv (Interview 1; Email correspondence, University, 2024).

> ***"Our collaboration with the university is extremely strong and sufficient [...] I think we have a strong mutual commitment to work and achieve things together."***
>
> (Interview 1)

The process of building connections between students and industry begins early in the education process, such as through job fairs, study trips to local companies, internship opportunities and a range of support programmes (Interview 2). One initiative specifically supports female ICT students by providing mentorship and networking opportunities (Interview 1).

However, interviewees point out that these efforts are not consistent across all programmes. High-demand fields like engineering and economics benefit from greater engagement and employer ties, while fields such as teaching and nursing have less interaction with local labour market representatives. A more structured and comprehensive system is needed to build connections across all programmes to ensure all students, regardless of their field of study, have access to consistent support measures that strengthen their relationships with the labour market (Interview 3).

Nevertheless, the university in Sundsvall has a formal agreement with the local and regional authorities responsible for healthcare. Through this, the campus establishes contacts with the local hospital, which can help, for example, nursing and psychology students, to find jobs or sponsorship for their scientific research at the university.

Key learnings and way forward

Despite efforts to increase the on-campus presence in the coming years, uncertainty persists about the long-term ability of the campus and city to attract and retain students. This is shaped by multiple factors, including the appeal of the programmes offered, the attractiveness of the location and local job opportunities. Like other regional campuses across the Nordic Region, the Sundsvall campus faces challenges in attracting and retaining top-performing students and staff, particularly those with specialised expertise who are willing to relocate (Interview 2; Interview 1).

The rapid pace of global trends, such as digitalisation and the evolving nature of jobs and skills, is placing increasing pressure on educational institutions to adapt and align their programmes with the emerging demands. The local business community has expressed concerns that current educational programmes may not sufficiently address these developments, highlighting the need for the deeper integration of AI into the curriculum and teaching practices (Interview 1).

Successfully adapting to labour market changes and addressing these new demands often requires reallocation of resources – which may involve scaling down or discontinuing other programmes, despite them still being relevant. This presents a challenge, slowing down the university's ability to respond swiftly and effectively to emerging labour market trends (Interview 1, 2024). Moreover, competition for national research funding against more established universities adds further pressure (Focus group interview).

Strengthening international research and teaching, expanding partnerships and attracting EU funding and innovation investments are seen as key to future success. Such efforts are viewed as crucial for fostering innovation, enhancing competitiveness, supporting regional growth and talent retention, as well as enhancing the quality and appeal of education for students (Interview 2; Interview1).

Mid Sweden University has established strong connections between students and potential employers through various support measures. The university's active involvement in local business and IT clusters has reinforced its active role in regional affairs, attracted research support and aligned its goals with regional needs. Expanding these practices across all study programmes and formats, both remote and on-site, could offer opportunities for further development (Interview 1).

Photo source: novia.fi

4. Key findings and learnings

The six PHEIs examined in the EDYNORA project illustrate a range of strategies for delivering higher education in smaller towns and rural regions across the Nordic countries. While each case reflects its unique national and institutional context, several commonalities – and differences – emerge in how education is organised and delivered. These are discussed in the following section. The cross-case synthesis is followed by a summary of key insights into the conditions that enable – or hinder – the success of PHEIs, concluding with lessons for both policymakers and practitioners.

4.1 The six Nordic case studies: Cross-case insights

This cross-case synthesis identifies key patterns and differences across the institutions, focusing on institutional origins and development, organisational models, modes of delivery, stakeholder collaboration and alignment with regional labour markets.

Emergence and institutional development: complex interplay between national direction and local efforts.

Among the six cases, the dates of establishment vary considerably. Nesna, for instance, dates back over a century, whereas others, such as HUSC, are relatively recent establishments (see Table 3). Like many other higher education institutions, their development has been significantly shaped by national policies of centralisation and decentralisation, as well as shifting political priorities. These

dynamics have led to institutional mergers and changes in status over time. Simultaneously, local actors have played a crucial role in shaping these institutions. For example, HUSC was established at the initiative of local authorities, while Nesna's reopening stands out as an inspiring example of a grassroots movement successfully challenging a national policy decision.

Organisational models of PHEIs: three distinct approaches.

The cases explored exhibit diverse organisational forms, which can be broadly categorised into three main types: multi-institution campuses, campus branches of a larger centralised university and stand-alone regional institutions.

HUSC and Campus Jakobstad are examples of multi-institution campuses that illustrate innovative collaboration models, particularly well-suited to small-town contexts. HUSC, Denmark's first municipally administered multi-institution campus, hosts programmes from two institutions within city-owned facilities. Campus Jakobstad similarly accommodates multiple institutions and disciplines – from music and fine arts to engineering. Unlike HUSC, it is supported by participating educational institutions rather than municipal authorities, but it nonetheless represents a strong model of collaborative and resource-efficient campus organisation.

Sundsvall Campus and Campus Nesna function as regional branches of larger institutions – Mid Sweden University and Nord University respectively. While Nesna maintains a strong local identity and develops tailored initiatives, such as a unique teacher training pilot, key strategic decisions remain centralised under Nord University. Finally, Högskolan på Åland and the University of Akureyri (UNAK) are stand-alone regional institutions, governed locally and operating with greater functional and strategic autonomy.

Education delivery: expansion of hybrid and flexible models alongside a regained focus on on-site learning.

The EDYNORA case studies reveal a variety of education delivery modes, ranging from bachelor's to master's degrees (such as at Högskolan på Åland, UNAK and Mid Sweden University) and, in some cases, doctoral studies (UNAK). Most institutions have embraced hybrid and flexible models, shaped by the needs of specific programmes and enabled by digital technologies. UNAK stands out as a pioneer in flexible learning, offering all programmes in hybrid or distance formats, with 75% of students studying remotely. Significant investments in staff training, digital tools and curriculum design aim to ensure high quality, while an established network of learning centres across the whole country is designed to support access to education in local communities and foster ties with local employers. Nesna's "assembly-based" model blends week-long in-person sessions with online and local

group learning. HUSC serves as a flexible 24/7 study hub, offering full and hybrid programmes, as well as facilities for remote learners from other institutions. Högskolan på Åland remains primarily on-site but is gradually incorporating hybrid and flexible solutions. In contrast, while over 60% of teaching at Sundsvall campus is currently online, the university is shifting its focus towards expanding on-campus education to attract students and strengthen regional development.

Collaboration at the core of the organisational model of education delivery.

Across all six cases, strong collaboration with public authorities, industry and local stakeholders is a defining feature. These partnerships help ensure that education remains locally relevant, responsive to changing needs and grounded in a strong sense of shared ownership among regional actors. HUSC stands out for its municipal leadership, with the local government acting not only as a funder but also as an educational co-provider. Other institutions also exemplify collaborative governance, often through advisory boards or formalised partnerships that integrate internal processes – such as strategic development – with active engagement by external stakeholders.

For example, Åland's Sector and Higher Education Council and HUSC's *Uddannelsesråd* serve as important platforms for engaging with the business sector, ensuring that educational programmes remain responsive to regional priorities. UNAK partners with the Association of Municipalities in Northeast Iceland on programme development, while Sundsvall Campus has launched over 70 joint projects in collaboration with the municipality and works closely with business networks like Bron Innovation and Samling Näringsliv.

Students also play a key role, including through NGOs and unions that foster vibrant campus life and community engagement. A notable example of civic involvement is the reopening of the Nesna campus, driven by the grassroots People's Movement for Higher Education in Helgeland, which mobilised over 20,000 supporters. Such efforts highlight the vital role of PHEIs in their communities and the importance of locally rooted collaboration in delivering responsive and relevant education to the evolving needs of both students and local employers.

Promoting regional development and vitality: strong focus across all the cases.

Common to all the cases is the strong connection between PHEIs and regional vitality. Both internal and external stakeholders consistently emphasise the critical role of these institutions in supporting local and regional development. PHEIs are often established with the explicit goal of promoting regional growth. Their activities reflect this mission – from addressing labour market needs and fostering

a qualified workforce to mitigating outmigration and contributing to sustainable economic and social development. In the case of UNAK, this focus extends beyond its immediate region, reflecting a broader commitment to fostering regional development across Iceland. Some of the cases explored, such as HUSC, place particular emphasis on social inclusion, seeking to reduce social inequalities by expanding access to education for individuals who might not have pursued higher education without a local option, or for those unable or unwilling to relocate to urban centres.

High motivation for labour market integration.

A core motivation common to many cases is the alignment of education with local and regional labour market needs. This commitment is evident not only in their strategic plans and institutional visions, but also in practice – through participation in regional networks, industry representation on governing boards and the design of academic programmes aligned with local and regional workforce demands, particularly in health, welfare, education, business and technology.

In particular, HUSC, Åland and Sundsvall maintain strong, institutionalised collaboration with labour market actors. HUSC co-designs programmes like nursing, pedagogy and finance in close partnership with local employers and political stakeholders. Åland develops programmes in direct collaboration with local industries, such as shipping, manufacturing and hospitality. Sundsvall demonstrates high integration in ICT and engineering, although links to teaching and nursing are weaker. UNAK and Jakobstad adopt more differentiated approaches. UNAK, serving a national student base, is less tied to a specific regional labour market. Jakobstad exhibits strong industry links in business and engineering (via Centria) but limited opportunities in the arts (via Novia), due to weaker local demand.

Case	Nordic rural-urban typology (based on the predominant population type)	Year of establishment	Organisational model and key features	Education delivery format	Labour market collaboration
HUSC (Holbæk municipality), Denmark	Rural area close to urban area	2019	Operated by the municipality with leased facilities; hosts programmes from multiple HEIs; the municipality acts as co-provider; strong local labour market alignment	Highly hybrid, 24/7 access	Direct partnerships with local employers; active role of the municipality as intermediary
Högskolan på Åland, the Åland Islands, Finland	Local centre in rural area	2003 (current form)	Funded and managed by the autonomous Åland government; close integration with local businesses; seeking independence	Mostly on-site (some hybrid options)	Mandatory internships, business-led councils and project-based learning
Campus Jakobstad (Novia UAS, Centria UAS), Finland	Inner urban area	2004 (as co-located campus)	Co-located campus; hosts several institutions including Novia, Centria and vocational schools; focused on arts and business	Mostly on-site (Novia), hybrid (Centria)	Centria has strong ties to industry; arts programmes are less integrated with the local economy
UNAK, Akureyri, Iceland	Inner urban area	1987	Public university with full hybrid delivery model (*Sveigjanlegt nám*); supported by learning centres across Iceland	All programmes offered both remotely and on-site	National scope, but engages local employers for internships and job placements
Campus Nesna, (Nord University), Norway	Rural heartland	Revived in 2022 (original: 1918)	Revived satellite campus within a larger centralised university (Nord); historical teacher training institution; strongly embedded locally	Moderately hybrid; small-scale blended programmes (assembly-based)	New development project identified 18 programmes based on local labour needs; historical link to regional teaching
Campus Sundsvall (Mid-Sweden University), Sweden	Inner urban area	1993 (as part of Mid-Sweden University)	One of two campuses within a larger university; mix of online and in-person education	Highly hybrid, aiming for increased on-site presence	Extensive business and public-sector collaboration; formal labour market integration in some fields (ICT, engineering)

Table 3: Overview of EDYNORA case studies.

4.2 Key enablers and challenges: When do peripheral educational institutions succeed and what stands in their way?

While it is important to recognise that peripheral regions might have very different demographic, industrial, institutional and policy contexts, the EDYNORA case studies provide important insights into the key conditions that enable – or hinder – the success of PHEIs. The following section describes the most critical enabling factors and challenges observed across the six cases. Although presented under separate subheadings below, enablers and challenges often intersect in practice.

Key enablers

Strong collaboration across sectors and levels. Effective collaboration among public authorities, higher education institutions, employers and civil society actors (the quadruple helix model) is a crucial enabler for PHEIs. Institutions where municipalities or regional governments are co-providers – contributing both funding and strategic direction – demonstrate stronger and more strategic integration with local economies. The presence of both formal mechanisms (such as advisory boards) and informal relationships (such as personal networks) has been critical in maintaining regional relevance, responding to local needs and fostering stakeholder ownership.

Political support at national and local levels. Political backing – both at the national and municipal levels – is vital for long-term planning and strategic development of PHEIs. National strategies promoting decentralised education, such as those in Denmark and Norway, have created new opportunities for innovation and regional experimentation. However, political priorities often shift and the sustainability of such initiatives depends on consistent, long-term commitment. As a result, the lasting impact of these efforts remains uncertain.

Securing long-term and stable funding and investments. Long-term financial sustainability requires access to stable and diversified funding, including a combination of national and municipal contributions, formal accreditation and, where applicable, private sector engagement. Over-reliance on short-term project funding can undermine institutional stability and strategic planning.

Hybrid models, flexible programmes and the 24/7 campus. Offering hybrid, flexible, practice-oriented and locally responsive models of education delivery has been an important enabler. With Nordic countries boasting a high level of digital connectivity, even in rural areas, hybrid education formats have significantly broadened access to higher education and enabled students in both urban and remote areas to pursue professional qualifications without needing to relocate.

However, to be effective, these models must be carefully designed to ensure high quality, foster peer interaction and provide student support. Tailoring programmes to the specific needs of local students – including adult learners, part-time students and those balancing work and family obligations – is equally important. A concrete example is the provision of flexible opening hours, such as 24/7 campus access, which enables students to access learning spaces and resources outside of standard hours.

Strong link between labour market actors and educational programmes. Robust linkages with local and regional labour markets are essential for ensuring the relevance of educational programmes, enhancing graduate employability and improving student recruitment and retention. PHEIs establish structured collaboration with employers through project-based courses, internships and participation in advisory boards. These partnerships help align educational offerings with workforce needs and increase the likelihood of graduates remaining in the region after completing their studies. Furthermore, they are useful platforms for exchanging labour market insights, curriculum feedback and student evaluations. Several PHEIs are currently analysing the possibility of implementing methods of "life-long learning", such as upskilling modules and short-course formats, which may offer one promising pathway for more agile responses to these evolving needs.

Student engagement and support. While many peripheral educational institutions across the Nordic Region report that attracting and retaining students is a significant challenge, several of the case studies provide important insights on how to overcome this barrier. Some campuses have made deliberate efforts to foster a vibrant student culture and community, with the aim of enhancing the overall student experience – for example, by employing a student community facilitator. PHEIs appear to benefit when they refrain from competing with larger student cities and instead embrace their small scale and see it as an opportunity to build intimate, responsive learning communities. By adjusting to the needs of the student group, many PHEIs report that they are selected by students who prioritise smaller, more close-knit communities, accessibility and strong student-faculty relationships.

Key challenges

Limited local flexibility and structural constraints. A recurring challenge for PHEIs – particularly regional or satellite campuses embedded within larger centralised universities – is limited local autonomy in decision-making. These governance structures are often designed with large, urban institutions in mind, making them ill-suited to the scale, structure and innovation needs of smaller or rural campuses. As a result, PHEIs may face significant barriers in developing locally relevant programmes and responding flexibly to regional labour market shifts. Even institutions with more formal autonomy, such as UNAK, report difficulties in adapting to local needs due to rigid national frameworks that limit curricular flexibility and local adaptation.

National funding models are not adapted to small institutions. The economic models for higher education in the Nordic countries tend to follow a "one-size-fits-all" approach – emphasising scale, efficiency, standardisation and top-down governance, while often failing to accommodate the specific needs and potential of smaller campuses. PHEIs are particularly disadvantaged by frameworks that prioritise scale and standardisation over contextual and place-based relevance and flexibility. This is also reflected in funding mechanisms, which are typically linked to student volume or research output, disadvantaging small campuses with niche or low-enrolment programmes.

Frequently shifting political priorities. While Denmark and Norway are increasingly focused on decentralisation of education and development of rural areas – reflected in growing national interest in relocating and establishing educational opportunities in peripheral areas – the policy environment that peripheral educational institutions must navigate is reported as one of the largest obstacles. Even in contexts where decentralisation is formally supported, PHEIs report that the absence of stable, long-term political commitments has led to uncertainty and unmet expectations. Political decisions at the national level can abruptly change the future of such local educational institutions, for better or for worse. These shifts directly affect the economic foundations of educational provision, leading to unstable financial baselines, which hinder long-term planning and innovation.

Labour market needs are difficult for small institutions to anticipate and address. While collaboration with industry and labour market actors is robust, the case studies reveal that small institutions rarely manage to meet fully the diverse and rapidly evolving needs of local labour market actors. In many regions, labour markets are fragmented or small, making it particularly difficult to offer a comprehensive range of programmes that align with demand across sectors, such as health, welfare, education, business and technology. This mismatch is especially evident in specialised or creative fields, where job opportunities are limited regardless of institutional efforts. As a result, PHEIs are often faced with the near-impossible task of providing a very broad spectrum of programmes to satisfy local needs – a challenge that is, in many cases, unfeasible. Limited resources and scale often restrict their ability to provide interdisciplinary or varied educational programmes, which can reduce their attractiveness to prospective students and diminish their capacity to respond effectively to regional skill demands.

While advisory boards, networks and partnerships are established to ensure that local educations "are responsive to changing needs of the local labour market", the case studies highlight how difficult this task is in practice. Among the reasons are rapid shifts in local labour market needs, fluctuating number of students in the nearby area, along with limited resources and knowledge. Several case studies highlight difficulties in projecting and analysing future needs, as well as in providing high-quality educational programmes that can be adjusted to shifting demands.

Additionally, even where programmes are well-aligned, smaller labour markets often lack sufficient internship placements and employment opportunities, which can hinder graduate retention.

Designing educational programmes tailored to local labour market needs requires highly flexible and responsive models of provision – a challenge that persists in Nordic countries outside the largest educational centres.

Provision of hybrid education might undermine a vibrant physical campus life. While hybrid models of education delivery offer significant benefits in terms of accessibility and flexibility, they often result in lower levels of campus engagement, which can weaken students' sense of connection to the institution and the local community and unintentionally diminish campus life. This is particularly problematic in smaller towns, where attracting and retaining young people is already challenging due to limited local career opportunities after graduation and ongoing outmigration to larger cities.

Place attractiveness and fluctuating student numbers. Place attractiveness for students – such as access to affordable student housing, a vibrant campus environment and the overall appeal of the surrounding area – plays an important role in student retention and engagement. However, these conditions are challenging for many PHEIs to fulfil. For instance, housing that is affordable for students is often difficult to plan for in smaller urban areas, where the number of students often fluctuates. One case study referred to this as the "ketchup effect" of opening new programmes: in the first couple of years, students from various cohorts enrol, but the initial interest wanes over time and the student pool is depleted, making it difficult to sustain an active and attractive campus life.

Dependence on key individuals makes PHEIs vulnerable. It is evident in some of the case studies that the establishment and continued existence of PHEIs – particularly small institutions or campuses – are often highly dependent on a few individuals and their personal networks. These actors frequently play pivotal roles in maintaining strategic partnerships by securing funding and navigating institutional or political landscapes. While such leadership can be a strong asset, it also introduces a significant vulnerability. Many small campuses and institutions are vulnerable to changes in personnel, which can lead to fundamental and rapid changes in crucial organisational relationships and coordination. Such dependence highlights the importance of developing shared leadership models to strengthen continuity, reduce risk and build long-term resilience.

4.3 Nordic learnings

Based on the EDYNORA case studies, the section below presents key Nordic-level learnings from the interviews and practical recommendations for policymakers and practitioners working to strengthen the role and success of PHEIs across the Nordic Region.

Nordic learnings for national, regional and local governments

Recognise and support the strategic role of PHEIs in regional development. While PHEIs may incur higher costs compared to other types of institutions, they are uniquely positioned to address local labour market needs, reduce social inequalities, and enhance the attractiveness of regions. It is crucial that policymakers acknowledge their distinctive contributions and ensure adequate, long-term support to enable PHEIs to fulfil their role as drivers of regional development.

Enable local flexibility to enhance local responsiveness. Introduce more context-sensitive regulations that allow PHEIs to adapt to regional needs, including faster approval of programmes and flexible delivery formats. This would allow for prompter responses to labour market needs, evolving industries and demographic shifts.

Enhance forecasting and mapping of workforce needs at both national and regional levels, covering all levels of education, including vocational training. This is particularly important in light of the rapidly changing nature of work, the demands of the green transition and other emerging societal and technological shifts.

Ensure long-term and stable political support, as its absence may jeopardise institutional stability and hinder strategic planning. Recognise PHEIs as key actors in advancing national and regional priorities, such as labour market needs, lifelong learning and territorial cohesion.

Develop funding models for PHEIs that reflect regional realities. Move beyond performance metrics based on scale and research output. Adjust evaluation metrics to reflect PHEIs' broader contributions (such as social inclusion and reduced outmigration)**.** Provide differentiated funding for low-enrolment but vital programmes critical to local development.

Improve place attractiveness. By supporting student housing, transport and cultural offerings, municipalities and regions can contribute directly to recruitment and retention. Factors such as affordable housing, a vibrant cultural life and overall quality of place are increasingly important for attracting and retaining students.

Nordic learnings for educational providers and practitioners

Leverage the potential of hybrid and flexible models without compromising quality. These models can expand access to education and enable students to remain in their communities, but maintaining high quality is essential. This requires sustained investment in staff training, digital tools, and curriculum design.

Maintain on-site presence where feasible. While hybrid and flexible models can broaden access and participation, physical learning environments play a vital role in fostering social interaction and campus life. These are key factors for student well-being, retention, and recruitment.

Turn scale into an advantage, not a limitation. Smaller institutions can offer close student-faculty relationships, personalised learning and community-oriented environments – distinct strengths that should be promoted as unique selling points. Fostering a strong sense of community and student engagement on smaller campuses can enhance the overall student experience and support retention.

Co-develop programmes with employers and public authorities, with a focus on future skill needs. Expand work-integrated learning through internships, industry projects and real-life assignments to attract students and help retain talent in the region.

Share resources through multi-institutional campuses. Developing shared campuses can strengthen infrastructure, expand educational offerings and increase the attractiveness of institutions for both students and employers.

Build structured, long-term partnerships with regional actors. Establishing advisory boards, networks and joint planning processes with employers, municipalities and NGOs helps embed institutions within the regional ecosystem and fosters a sense of local ownership. At the same time, encouraging bottom-up initiatives and community-driven projects can further enhance engagement and responsiveness to local needs.

Think holistically about the student experience. Enhance student life through initiatives such as community facilitators, alumni networks and mixed-use campus spaces. Actively involve students in shaping their own experience – starting by asking what they need. A supportive, engaging environment is key to retention, well-being and academic success.

Clarify strategic goals and redefine success. Move beyond vague goals like "contributing to regional development growth" and "attracting more students". Instead, develop strategies that are responsive and sensitive to fluctuating student numbers, changing policy landscapes and evolving regional needs.

Act "global" – think locally, connect globally. Combine a strong local perspective with a global outlook. International partnerships and research collaborations can enrich educational programmes, enhance institutional capacity and bring new knowledge to regional contexts. Where relevant, these global connections also benefit local economies and business ecosystems.

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Interviews

HUSC, Denmark

Interview 1: HUSC project, Holbæk Municipality, education strategy, management of HUSC, 15 May 2024

Interview 2: Association of companies in Holbæk Municipality, "Holbæk Erhvervsforum", 20 September 2024

Interview 3: HUSC project, Holbæk Municipality, Student Environment, 17 June 2024

Handleplan for HUSC 2024-2025

Högskolan på Åland, Finland

Interview 1: Åland University of Applied Sciences, Business Community, 2025

Interview 2: Åland University of Applied Sciences, Student Council, 2025

Interview 3: Åland University of Applied Sciences, University Management 2, 2025

Interview 4: Åland University of Applied Sciences, University Management, 2025

Campus Jakobstad, Finland

Interview 1: Novia University of Applied Sciences, 20 January 2025

Interview 2: Jakobstad Region Development Company Concordia, 13 February 2025

Interview 3: Student Union Novium, 21 February 2025

UNAK, Iceland

Interview 1: Rector's Office at UNAK, 4 July 2024

Interview 2: Association of Municipalities in Northeast Iceland, 11 September 2024

Interview 3: Student Union, 21 August 2024

Campus Nesna, Norway

Interview 1: Nord University, 26 June 2024

Interview 2: Nord University, 30 August 2024

Interview 3: Nord University, 25 November 2024

Campus Sundsvall, Sweden

Interview 5: Mid Sweden University, Business Community, 2024

Interview 6: Mid Sweden University, University Management, 2024

Interview 7: Mid Sweden University, Student Union, 2024

About this publication

Higher education beyond major urban areas in the Nordics

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Nordregio report 2025:10
ISBN 978-91-8001-167-9 (digital)
ISBN 978-91-8001-168-6 (pdf)
ISSN: 1403-2503
http://doi.org/10.6027/R2025:10.1403-2503

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Layout: Kotryna Juškaitė, Marija Zelenkauskė, Nordregio
Cover Photo: novia.fi

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