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Slow Shift—Developing Provisions for Talented Students in Scandinavian Higher Education

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Abstract: For decades, Scandinavian culture effectively prohibited the development of special provisions for talented students in higher education. However, in recent years, a cultural shift has gradually made more room for excellence and talent development in the national discourses. This paper analyzes the climate for talent development in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. Following a first inventory of honors programs in Scandinavian higher education in which the only programs were found in Denmark, 10 experts were interviewed to analyze their national situation and reflect on the leading role of Denmark. In this country, external incentives, focus on quality, pioneers, and an open atmosphere were found to produce a culture more appreciative of excellence over the last decade. Starting from the Danish experience, the situation in Norway and Sweden is analyzed, showing that the combination of factors leading to change in Denmark is not yet present here. Lessons for other countries are highlighted, notably the importance of sharing information and exchanging knowledge at an international level.

Keywords: talent development; higher education; honors programs; excellence; Scandinavia; Denmark

1. Introduction: Talent Development

“Pupils shall not normally be organized according to level of ability, gender, or ethnic affiliation.”

With these words, Norway’s Education Act of 1998 [1] enshrined a pillar of Norwegian culture: strict egalitarianism in the school system. That law exemplifies the Scandinavian approach to excellence since the mid-20th century. Denmark, Norway, and Sweden share a strong egalitarian tradition, though there are signs of a slow shift toward more focus on talent development.

Many studies e.g., [2–8] have articulated the rationale behind special provisions for talented or gifted young people. The need to provide them with extra challenges is increasingly recognized in Europe, though several international overviews reveal huge differences between countries [9–16]. What those provisions have in common is a focus on children in primary and secondary education. Less recognized is the need in higher education, though some scholars have stressed the importance of specific programs for gifted students [17–20]. Still, it is commonly believed that in higher education “gifted students will succeed anyway, even without support” [21] (p. 16).

Over the last two decades, however, attitudes towards special provisions for gifted or talented students also in higher education have been shifting in continental western and northern Europe. The terminology used to describe these provisions differs per country and is often linked to political views and/or educational policies. Terms to refer to the programs and the target group used in different countries translated into English include (variations on): excellence, hono(u)rs, talent, gifted,

high potential, elite, challenged, and talent development. Honors is a term often used to refer to the actual provisions. While the first American honors program started in 1922 [22], only in the early 1990s structural provisions for talented students were made at European higher education institutions (HEIs), starting in the Netherlands, taking American honors education as an example [23,24]. From here, the concept of talent development through honors programs slowly spread to neighboring countries. However, on the British Isles, the concept of 'honours' has taken a different meaning [25] which is not discussed here. We use the term honors programs here for the provisions for talented students mentioned in this study, with the following definition, based on experience in continental western and northern Europe: "Honors programs are selective study programs linked to higher education institutions. They are designed for motivated and gifted students who want to do more than the regular program offers. These programs have clear admission criteria and clear goals and offer educational opportunities that are more challenging and demanding than regular programs" [26] (p. 12). It should be noted that being gifted and/or talented as an individual does not translate directly into participation in honors programs. As the definition shows, motivation to do something extra also plays an important role, but of course the student must also academically be able to participate in such a demanding program.

Honors programs in Europe are a relatively new phenomenon and provisions vary among European countries. There are for example differences in the target group of the program (graduate or undergraduate), the program content (disciplinary or interdisciplinary, broadening knowledge, or deepening knowledge), program size (in credits), admission criteria (focusing on grades, experience, motivation and other factors, with some programs explicitly also targeting talented underachievers), relation to the regular curriculum, group size within the program, etcetera. A common theme however is that students are challenged and that programs are aimed at evoking excellence. A complete structured overview is still lacking, but a first explorative survey of honors programs in 11 European countries [26] was initiated in 2013/2014 by the Dutch Sirius Program, which was established to support honors education at Dutch HEIs. In this survey, 303 HEIs were studied to find out if they had any special provisions for talented students matching the above definition of an honors program. The fact that this research was initiated in The Netherlands is no coincidence: the Dutch are widely considered front-runners in the development of honors education in Western Europe [26–28].

All three Scandinavian countries were included in this survey. We follow the local definition of Scandinavia, restricting it to Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. On the basis of tight links throughout history and similarities in cultural heritage, language, and educational traditions, it could be expected that results would be similar for all Scandinavian countries, namely no special provisions for talented students, but this was not the case. In Norway and Sweden, no honors programs or structural policies to support talent development were found; while in Denmark, 6 out of 16 HEIs had developed honors education and national policies had been in place since 2005.

How can this situation be explained? What lessons can honors educators and policy makers elsewhere learn from the Danish experience? To answer these questions, we start with some general remarks about Scandinavia, its culture, and its approach to excellence. After this contextualization of talent development in Scandinavian higher education, we analyze its current development using ten expert interviews.

2. Scandinavian Approaches to Talent Development and Excellence in Education

Denmark, Norway, and Sweden share a large part of their history, having been ruled in different unions for many centuries [29] and now cooperating closely in the Nordic Council. In addition, they have languages so similar that they can generally understand each other quite well. The three Scandinavian countries are now all relatively rich countries with a strong emphasis on equal opportunity, equity, and equality. Persson states that "the strict notion of equality and social collectivism at all levels of society, is best understood as an inherent cultural characteristic in which certain political ideals have merged with indigenous traditions and sentiments, which draw on

historical facts and events dating from early medieval times and possibly even earlier” [30] (p. 4). In all countries, egalitarianism was politically expressed in a very strong position for social-democratic parties from the early 20th century and especially after World War II, when extensive welfare states were built up [31].

This tradition is captured by the Law of Jante, a concept derived from a 1933 novel by the Norwegian-Danish author Aksel Sandemose [32]. This ‘law’ implies that “you are not to think you are special or that you are any better than us” and it discourages people from promoting their own achievements over those of others [9] (p. 718). The ‘law’ is especially strong with regard to intellectual achievements. In a seeming contradiction, there is no problem with the acceptance of exceptional achievements in sports or the arts [33], however offering provisions for the academically gifted in the education system has been a no-go area for many years. Persson proposes a political explanation for this situation in his native Sweden. He stresses the link between intellectual development, education, and educational policies of the Swedish social democratic governments in the post-War era [34] (p. 96). Notwithstanding public debate about its validity [35], the ‘Law of Jante’ has certainly left its mark on the educational structure of all Scandinavian countries. The principles of equality and inclusive education are clearly visible [36]. No tuition fees are charged at any level and compulsory education is organized in government-funded comprehensive schools [37]. Education is considered very important, as demonstrated by both the high participation rates in tertiary education and the high expenditure overall compared to EU averages (see Table 1).

Table 1. Basic characteristics of Scandinavian countries ¹.

Country	Inhabitants (Millions, 2014)	GDP Per Capita in Purchasing Power Standard (Euros, 2013)	Participation in Tertiary Education (as % of Total Population, 2012)	Expenditure on All Levels of Education (% of GDP, 2010)	Expenditure on Tertiary Education (% of GDP, 2010)
Denmark	5.6	32,100	4.9	8.8	2.4
Norway	5.1	49,200	4.9	8.8	2.6
Sweden	9.6	32,700	4.8	7.0	2.0
EU average ²		25,700	4.0	5.8	1.4

¹ Sources: [38] for population numbers (tps00001), GDP (tec00114) and participation (tps00062) [39] (p. 218), for expenditure on education; ² EU averages are EU-27 averages for Eurostat numbers and EU-21 averages for OECD numbers. Note that Norway is not an EU member.

There are many similarities among the Scandinavian countries and their education systems, though each has its specific national approach to talent development and excellence. We discuss three factors that shape these national approaches: differentiation at the primary and secondary level; selectiveness; and national traditions.

2.1. Differentiation in Primary and Secondary Education

In Denmark, Norway, and Sweden there is just one type of school for pupils up to the age of 15 or 16. This integrated schooling is followed by upper secondary education, which differs between the countries. International comparisons reveal few provisions for talented or gifted young people in primary and secondary education [40] (p. 537). Some examples of provisions at the school level, such as grade skipping, advanced placement, and curriculum differentiation can be found in all countries. Some more structural strategies such as selective schools or academies for gifted students have been developed in recent years in Denmark, but are still very rare in Sweden and Norway.

The strictest views on equality are in Norway, where it is practically forbidden to permanently separate students according to academic ability. There is only one type of upper secondary school, which offers programs geared towards either academic or vocational higher education.

In Sweden, the public discourse about the equality issue in primary and secondary education is often linked with discussions about the country’s system of private schools. Alongside public education, Sweden has an extensive system of private schools (*friskolor*). Introduced in the early 1990s, these privately run institutions receive state funding, as long as they stick to the national curriculum

and allow open access. Despite their prominent position, they are strongly criticized. Some say their profit-seeking nature puts quality at risk, while others point at certain *friskolor* that select pupils with the best grades [41]. Recently, Sweden has introduced some experimental programs linking upper secondary school students to universities (*spetsutbildningar* or advanced placement; see [42]).

Denmark has various forms of differentiation, with many options for pupils in upper secondary education. There are four types of upper secondary schools, and all can lead to higher education. Several talent development programs, such as the Academy for Talented Youth (*Akademiet for Talentfulde Unge*) and the Science Talent Program (*ScienceTalenter*) came on stream after 2005. They provide a link between secondary and higher education.

2.2. The Selectiveness of Admission to Higher Education

Throughout Scandinavia, access to higher education is restricted and capacity is limited at each HEI. Although this seems to contradict the egalitarian tradition, Scandinavians recognize the need to cap enrollment and have tried to set admission criteria that are the ‘most fair’. Exam grades and/or grade point averages are paramount, but may be supplemented by work experience or age. In Norway, applicants older than 25 “can apply for a study program, be evaluated and admitted on the basis of their total documented formal, non-formal, and informal competence from work and life” [37]. In practice, competition for places in popular studies can be fierce, particularly in Denmark, while less popular ones are not filled to capacity. Pupils with poorer grades therefore have a fair chance of getting into a HEI, although perhaps not in their preferred program. Keeping with the egalitarian tradition, higher education is essentially free in all Scandinavian countries. Students do not pay tuition fees and—especially in Denmark—relatively generous government support grants are available. The structure of higher education study programs is similar in all Scandinavian countries and closely follows European standards set in the Bologna Process (see [26,37] for more detailed explanations of the respective systems).

2.3. National Traditions in Higher Education

Finally, Scandinavian traditions play a role in higher education, which is supposed to be available to all, also in very remote regions. Accordingly, Norway has university colleges in each *fylke* (province). Scandinavian students traditionally start higher education later than elsewhere in Europe. Upper secondary education generally lasts until age nineteen or twenty, and it is common to wait a few years before entering higher education. In 2011, the average age of bachelor graduates was well above the OECD average [39] (p. 54). The Danish government recognized this high average age at graduation as an economical risk and stimulated the development of programs that encourage talented students to move through the system faster. In ENGAGE, for example, talented bachelor students were matched with high-profile companies and stimulated to enter the labor market upon graduation at the bachelor level (see Appendix A).

How do these national approaches toward talent development and excellence translate into the existence of honors programs in higher education? Among the 65 Scandinavian HEIs approached providing a full overview, Wolfensberger [26] found six with honors programs, all in Denmark (Table 2).

Table 2. Honors programs at HEIs in Scandinavia (2014) [26].

Country	HEIs Approached in Total	HEIs with Honors Programs
Denmark	16	6
Norway	18	0
Sweden	31	0

The six HEIs with programs offer honors education in various ways, ranging from a general program targeting all master students at the Technical University of Denmark to a small-scale program

in physiotherapy at University College Lillebaelt. Two HEIs had two honors programs each, making eight programs in total. The exact number of participants is yet unknown, but it runs into the hundreds rather than the thousands compared to a total of around 210,000 students enrolled in higher education. Also the number of faculty involved is unknown (see Appendix A for more details on these programs).

Norwegian and Swedish HEIs still do not have honors programs. What explains the current situation regarding special provisions for talented students at HEIs in Scandinavia, and in particular Denmark's position as front-runner?

3. Methods

To gain more insight in these questions, 10 local experts in gifted education and talent development were interviewed. They were selected on the basis of their activities in talent development initiatives in education and/or their role in reports or research on this issue. The search for experts was partly executed by finding out what local terminology around the concepts of giftedness or talent were used (one of the authors can understand Scandinavian languages reasonably well) and subsequently conducting web searches including these terms in local languages, which proved more fruitful than using just English terms. Out of this search, a limited number of people either holding positions directly related to talent development or having published research or reports about these issues came up. These people were approached for interviews. Finally, three experts from Denmark, three from Sweden, and four from Norway were selected. These experts represented research, education, and policymaking sectors as well as program directors. Semi-structured interviews were held using an interview guide. Topics included the local culture towards excellence, country-specific views and measures in educational policies and comparisons with other Scandinavian countries. Interviews were held by phone or over Skype and lasted between 35 and 65 minutes. They were audiotaped and recordings were transcribed verbatim. In one case, there was a technical failure with the recording and an interview summary was made from memory. One interview was held by e-mail, sending a first list of questions based on the interview guide and two sets of follow-up questions based on the replies. All interviews were held in English, which is the mother tongue of neither the interviewer nor the interviewees.

The transcripts were coded, using topics as initial labels. These included background/expertise, education system, national politics, Nordic/Scandinavian culture, national culture towards excellence/talent, terminology, differentiation, selectiveness, educational policy, inter-Scandinavian comparison, international comparison, and finally future expectations. These initial labels were supplemented with additional labels using an inductive approach [43]. Quotes relating to specific labels were then grouped.

If topics related to facts or actual events, additional data to supplement informants' views were sought, for example in government reports. If topics related to opinions or analyses of situations, the convergence or divergence between informants' views was assessed by assessing the available quotes on the subject. In e-mails, additional clarification questions were also asked, the answers to which were included in the final analysis.

For each interview, a brief summary (500–700 words) containing selected quotes central to the research question was made. This summary was sent to the informant to verify these quotes could be used in publications resulting from the research. All respondents agreed to this. Every transcribed interview has been given a letter. We refer to those letters after quoting from the interviews (see Appendix B for a list of interviewees).

4. Results

Denmark clearly has a leading role among the Scandinavian countries in talent development initiatives and honors education. All experts confirm this. Therefore, we focus on developments in this country by taking a closer look at how attitudes toward talent development have changed since the early 21st century. In the following paragraph, we describe our interviewees' views on shifting

attitudes and policies. The perspectives of the three Danish experts were supplemented by the views of two Norwegian and Swedish experts, which indicated they were familiar with the Danish context. After describing and analyzing the Danish experience, we shortly turn to the situation in Sweden and Norway.

4.1. Talent Development in Denmark: A Closer Look

In the 20th century, the social-democratic values of inclusiveness and equality greatly influenced the Danish education system. This started to change in 2001 when a new government, without the social-democrats, highlighted two structural problems: the costs related to an ageing population and the lack of competitiveness of Danish business in globalizing markets. One strategy to deal with the costs of an ageing population was to get young people into the labor market at an earlier age. To confront globalization, the government decided to “make Denmark a leading knowledge society with strong competitiveness and strong cohesion” [44]. The government explicitly stated that the education system should “foster talent”. In 2005, the Ministry of Education officially made talent development a priority [45]. To kick-start the development of new ideas, the Minister of Education hosted TalentCamp05. He invited 48 experts in the fields of education, business, the arts, and sports to gather for 48 h to formulate proposals for talent promotion in the Danish education system. Around 1.4 million euros were set aside to put some of the best ideas into practice immediately. Some pioneering individuals seized the opportunity to start their own talent development project. One was the Academy for Talented Youth, linking upper secondary and higher education. Under enthusiastic leadership, notably that of program secretary Nynne Afzelius, it grew from 50 students in 2008 to around 1200 in 2013. For her efforts, Afzelius was awarded the title ‘Danish talent developer of the year’ in 2011.

In the aftermath of TalentCamp05, talent development experts from the Netherlands and Germany came to Denmark to discuss ‘good practices’. Then, in 2006, the government established the Globalization Fund with around 3.4 million euros in reserve to develop elite programs for excellent students in the master phase. Subsequently, programs at HEIs were started.

Two years later, the Minister of Education established a working group to review all talent development measures. This *talentarbejdsgruppe* produced a landmark report [46], which put the subject high on the political agenda. Not only were measures reviewed, recommendations were also made to foster talent development at all levels of education. The development of honors education became an official goal [47] (p. 11).

Then, in October 2011, the ruling coalition lost the elections and a new center-left government took over. Subsidies for elite master programs were discontinued, but the talent development agenda was still supported. In 2014, the government presented a bill to give talent more ‘legal room’ [48]. Parliament considered four initiatives: first, the introduction of distinction in diplomas, enabling institutions to award honors degrees; second, recognition of extracurricular activities in diplomas; third, removal of the maximum number of credits a student can obtain for a diploma, enabling talented students to take more courses; and fourth, more possibilities for secondary and vocational students to get an ‘early start’ in higher education. The law came into effect in the academic year 2014–2015.

4.2. Roots for Change

How do our experts analyze the changing attitude in Denmark, moving from a strict egalitarian view towards more focus on talent in academia? In the interviews, they offered a large number of explanations to which the change can be attributed. These explanations were clustered in groups and subsequently translated into four factors contributing to change: external incentives; focus on quality; actions of pioneers; and open-mindedness. We discuss the factors below, showing quotes from our interviewees as example with each factor; as well as evidence from other sources where applicable and available.

4.2.1. External Incentives

In Denmark, the main external incentive to change was the concern about competitiveness in the globalizing economy. The government concluded that education was a key factor in building upon the country's strengths and established the Globalization Fund with a program to promote excellence in education. The importance of the competitiveness issue as incentive to change was also explicitly recognized in the 2011 report of the *talentarbejdsgruppe* [46] (p. 4) and in the OECD's Review of Evaluation and Assessment in Education in Denmark produced in the same year [49] (p. 24).

"In 2004, Denmark was hit by globalization, just like everybody else, and everybody in the political system was suddenly saying: what are we going to do about this global competition? We can't manage. We really have to do something in order to keep up with the Asian tigers and so on." (interview C)

4.2.2. Focus on Quality

A second factor was related to strategic choices in both wording and timing in order to create opportunities to discuss the fostering of excellence. In line with Denmark's egalitarian tradition, getting the terminology right was a central component in this strategy. The 'golden key words' turned out to be a combination of the terms 'talent' and 'quality'. The term talent was well-known and recognized from the fields of sports and arts, in which it is well-accepted. The term quality focuses on the whole (education) system, while terms such as excellence, honors, or giftedness focus on singling out individuals, which contradicts the egalitarian Scandinavian culture.

Support for talent development was sought by building consensus on improving the quality of the education system. The government-initiated *talentarbejdsgruppe* which produced the landmark 2011 report [46] had a key role in this process. The possibility of progress on the quality issue by focusing on talent development is explicitly stressed in the foreword to the report: 'A number of the working group's recommendations would be linked to additional costs, if seen in isolation. However, it is estimated that at the same time significant synergies could be achieved in relation to overall resource utilization and the quality of education programs. In that way, overall spending will be kept within the existing framework' [46] (p. 5, own translation).

"The egalitarian tradition in Denmark is maybe not in our DNA, but it is extremely strong. It is a tacit assumption of everything. But it is being challenged nowadays. One of [the] strongest points in the *talentarbejdsgruppe* was that the best way generically to change culture is to stress the quality issue. (. . .) Most of the recommendations were generally speaking good things to do if you want to improve the quality of education." (interview B)

4.2.3. Actions of Pioneers

Educational programs are made by people and enthusiastic actors are vital to successful programs. Two examples of programs and connected pioneering individuals are mentioned by different interviewees. One program originating at TalentCamp05 but then brought further by pioneering individuals at Copenhagen gymnasia is the now highly successful *Akademiet for Talented Youth* (Academy for Talented Youth). This program links talented upper secondary school students to universities. The other example of pioneering is the *ScienceTalenter* program and especially the provision of funding for the Videncenter Sorø. This state-of-the-art building in the town of Sorø not only houses offices of the *ScienceTalenter* program but also provides laboratories, classrooms, and overnight accommodation for talent camps. It was donated to the state by the private A.P. Møller Fund.

“In 2009, a very rich man gave the state [. . .] the Science Center. This building in the southern part of Zealand, 100 kilometers from Copenhagen, is a national center for making provisions for the talented within science. They come from all over Denmark to participate in camps, which typically last three or four days.” (interview C)

While the actions of pioneers are deemed vital for starting new initiatives, more is needed for the next phase. In its report, the *talentarbejdsgruppe* explicitly stresses the need to make initiatives less dependent on single enthusiastic individuals [46] (p. 27).

4.2.4. Open-Mindedness

The fourth factor causing change in Denmark was formed by the open and supportive attitude of government. With the groundbreaking TalentCamp05, followed by small start-up subsidies, the Danish government paved the way for pioneering initiatives. Openness was manifest in the willingness to learn from good practices in other countries.

“After TalentCamp05 [. . .] the ministry gave 10 million kroner to support these [small] programs. Many of these turned out to be the first projects for youngsters in primary school and high schools. And so, slowly, a positive attitude to making provisions for the talented was started in Denmark.” (interview A)

This attitude was also recognized by this interviewee from Sweden:

“I think Denmark is among the Nordic countries that has [the] most freedom and it seems also they have more courage to test things and then maybe change the system.” (interview E)

This growing support for talent development is remarkable in view of the egalitarian culture in Scandinavia. While cultural change is a slow process, the Danish experience shows how much can change in 15 years. A combination of external incentives, the right terminology, a supportive government, and pioneering individuals have produced a situation in which honors programs can develop and prosper.

4.3. Slow Shift in Norway and Sweden

What has been the experience of the other Scandinavian countries? In Norway and Sweden, honors programs have not yet been developed [26]. How do our experts explain this? Do they recognize the factors leading to change in Denmark in their own countries, and do they think Norway and Sweden will follow the Danish developments? One Danish expert holds strong views on this issue:

“It is a slow turn, but now in Denmark we are the pioneers for the Nordic countries for this agenda (. . .) I think Norway, Sweden, and Finland will slowly come along. They are now where we [in Denmark] were 10 years ago.” (interview C)

First we look at Norway, where egalitarianism in the education system has been very strong up to the early 2000s. Since then, an emphasis on educational quality has been inspirational to what might be called ‘the new excellence agenda’. The trigger for a strong focus on educational quality was a shock caused by Norway’s poor performance on international university rankings. The government concluded that the country’s poor showing internationally was due to a lack of top teaching and top research and consequently implemented the 2002 Quality Reform [50]. This led to the establishment of Centers of Excellence at HEIs, first in Research (SFF) and later in Education (SFU). The SFF and SFU programs introduced the concept of excellence into the higher education system. The SFU program is monitored by NOKUT, the national quality assurance agency in higher education. HEIs that receive grants under the SFU program are expected to disseminate the knowledge thereby gained throughout the HEI system. In this way, the concept of excellence is linked to quality and trickles down through

the higher education sector. Crucially, the external influence leading to change focused on research and less on education and solutions focused on the level of institutions. Therefore, the link with individual talent development in education has not (yet) been made in Norway. The word 'talent' is not as wide in use in Norwegian education as it is in Denmark. Still, the establishment of Centers of Excellence in research and education provides a new context in which special programs for talented students are no longer unthinkable. Another external incentive is formed by the more recent realization of the need to restructure the country's economy, away from the dependency on oil revenues.

"The acceptance within the population in Norway probably is changing right now. Because it is more common and more accepted to talk about helping those with special talents to grow. That is also important in order to secure and develop the Norwegian prosperity in general. And the labor market. To have enough innovation, entrepreneurs, to create jobs. What is coming after the oil? That is a big discussion here, even though we know that here will be oil for many years still." (interview G)

Moving to Sweden, we find yet another external incentive to change. In Sweden, disappointing PISA results have rallied support for structural changes in the education system in recent years. In the PISA survey, educational achievement among 15-year-olds is measured in a large number of countries every three years, and subsequently international rankings and comparisons are made. While there is an ongoing vivid debate on what can or should be concluded from the PISA survey (see for example [51]), it is certainly influential when it comes to making impact on educational policy [52,53]. In the latest report [54], Sweden had the lowest scores in Western Europe. Many Swedes then called for educational reform [55], and soon afterwards (September 2014) the government announced measures to stimulate talent in compulsory education. One experiment started in this context are the *Spetsutbildning* (Advanced Placement) programs, focusing on providing extra challenges for secondary school students 'who like to be challenged'. However, while the importance of educational quality is stressed in Sweden as much as elsewhere, the link with terms such as talent development, giftedness, or honors is not made. In addition, terminology is still a highly contested issue in Sweden.

"The terms giftedness or talent are almost never used. In connection with the Advanced Placement, pupils are not even referred to as high achieving. They are referred to as "Pupils who like to be challenged"—this is a very political and intentional choice of words. You will not find any reference to gifted education, the gifted, the highly able, the high achieving—perhaps sometimes to talent." (interview F)

The first factor explaining the change in Denmark, external incentives, is now clearly present in both Norway and Sweden. The link between talent development and a focus on quality is clearly present in Norway, but less so in Sweden. Here the egalitarian culture seems still very strong, as shown for example by the issues around terminology. In both countries, pioneering initiatives and an open-minded government attitude still have to be developed further in order to bring the talent development agenda to a next level.

5. Discussion: Looking Ahead

This study started with two questions. How can the current situation regarding special provisions for talented students at HEIs in Scandinavia be explained, in particular the role of Denmark as front runner? And what lessons can honors educators and policy makers elsewhere learn from the Scandinavian experience?

Scandinavian culture is traditionally focused on egalitarianism and this also shows in the structure of the education system, with integrated schooling (just one type of school) for pupils up to lower secondary school (age 15 or 16) in all countries. In higher education, the need to cap enrollment is recognized, but it is handled in a national system focusing on 'fairness'. Special provisions for talented, academically gifted individual students do not fit into the traditional culture of egalitarianism. This

shows in the fact that no honors programs are especially designed for students who are willing and able to do more challenging education than the regular programs can offer in HEIs found in Sweden and Norway [26]. However, the Danish experience since the turn of the century tells a different story. Attitudes and policies have changed, moving away from traditions of egalitarianism. At the time of writing, this has produced a context in which talent development initiatives and honors education are a feature slowly gaining ground throughout Danish education. In 2011, a landmark talent report was produced for the government and by 2014, measures promoting talent development in higher education were introduced in Danish law. In that year, six Danish HEIs had developed honors education. Among the Scandinavian countries, Denmark had clearly taken a leading role in talent development.

We interviewed 10 experts from Norway, Sweden, and Denmark and asked them to reflect on this Scandinavian situation. Our interviewees explain the leading role of Denmark by stressing four factors: external incentives; focus on quality; actions of pioneers; and open-mindedness on the part of the government. The combination of these factors led to a changing culture in Denmark. In Sweden and Norway some factors, notably external incentives, can also be discerned, but the combination of the four factors is not yet visible here.

However, there is a sign of structural change for the whole of Scandinavia. In August 2013, around 50 Scandinavians gathered in Denmark to discuss talent development. They stressed the need to make provisions for the talented in a manifesto [56] and formed the Nordic Talent Network, which has since held meetings annually. As a platform for exchanging experiences and conducting effective lobbying, this network forms another incentive to change. The Nordic Talent Network is also linked to a new network at the European level. The European Honors Council (EHC) was formed in 2016, uniting talent development initiatives in HEIs from all over Europe [57]. Those networks focusing on talent underline “the importance of cultures of expertise and clusters of excellence” [58]. The formation of networks can even be indicated as an additional factor fostering talent development in Scandinavian higher education.

The formation of networks at the international level points to a key for success for honors educators and policy makers elsewhere: the importance of sharing information and exchanging knowledge. In this research, it turned out that a lot of information regarding talent development and honors education was only available in local languages, which makes it less accessible. In addition, while our informants were experts in their own country, they did not necessarily know a lot about developments in neighboring countries, even though they shared a similar language; let alone about the developments in the rest of Europe. The recent founding of the Nordic Talent Network and the European Honors Council improves the possibilities to exchange information internationally, although terminology issues remain. As Lovink stresses, in the information age, networking is key. Honors educators and policy makers aiming at creating honors education should invest in collaboration. “However self-evident it is, collaboration is a foundation of network cultures” [59].

In Denmark, the open-minded government (in the early 2000s) and individual institutions have regularly invited foreign experts to share their good practices at various moments over the last 15 years. The lessons learned proved inspirational for Denmark, which was for example recognized in the report of the government working group on talent [46]. With the current differences concerning special provisions for gifted students between Denmark on the one hand and Norway and Sweden on the other hand, one could argue that the Danish experience in itself is becoming an external incentive for Norway and Sweden to create honors programs. The Danish experience is now also more structurally communicated through the Nordic Talent Network. Indeed, some signs of change are already visible in the rest of Scandinavia, with Denmark explicitly serving as an inspiration, for example in the design of *spetsutbildningar* programs in Sweden.

Looking ahead from the current state of affairs, we think that new challenging talent programs can be created when taking the Danish and other international experiences as example. Our results show on the one hand that culture plays an important role in the design and implementation of

educational strategies, and on the other hand they also show that culture can slowly change (see also [60]). An egalitarian culture certainly has its advantages, especially with regard to giving all students equal opportunities. In the Scandinavian countries, the emancipatory function of education is further strengthened by the relatively large government expenditure on education. Then again, we strongly believe that there is a need to allow for individual differences, also in academic abilities, in the design of an education system. The changing culture in Denmark shows the advantages of a more open attitude towards differentiation.

Recent overviews show a growing interest in and support for special provisions for gifted students at HEIs around the world, regardless of cultural differences and distinctive educational systems [26–28]. However, in order to design those programs in the best possible way, we think it is also needed to further strengthen the use of research findings from the fields of gifted education, honors education, and educational sciences in general in the process of program design, with specific focus on the motivations of gifted students and their teachers.

By creating networks, good practices as well as lessons learned from failures can be shared and exchanged easily, also at an international level. Not only will this lead to better education, it will also inspire participants and educators to collaborate and broaden their horizons, ultimately benefitting society as a whole.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Honors programs at Danish HEIs, 2014 [26].

Organizing Institution	Program Name	Form	Founded	Participants
Aarhus University	Talentforløb Physics and Astronomy	Disciplinary program for first-year bachelor students	2013	Around 10 per module
University of Southern Denmark	Research in Corporate Communication	Disciplinary program for master students	2010	50 per year
Roskilde University	Language profile	Disciplinary program for all bachelor students	2012	30–40 in total
Copenhagen Business School	GLOBE	Disciplinary international program for second-year bachelor students	2006	18 per year
Copenhagen Business School	EngAGE	Disciplinary program with business involvement for bachelor students	2012	25 per year
Technical University of Denmark	Honors Programs	Master students (all programs)	2013	Unknown (target: 10% of all master students)
Technical University of Denmark	Biotech Academy	Disciplinary program for invited talented students	2007	10 to 15
University College Lillebaelt	Physiotherapy Talent Palette	Disciplinary program for bachelor students	2008	50 so far

Appendix B

Table B1. List of interviewees.

Letter	Function(s)	Country
A	Educator/program director	Denmark
B	Educator/policy maker	Denmark
C	Program director	Denmark
D	Researcher	Sweden
E	Educator	Sweden
F	Researcher	Sweden
G	Researcher	Norway
H	Policy maker	Norway
I	Policy maker/program director	Norway
J	Educator/program director	Norway

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