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1

## English prescriptivism in higher education settings

2

Focus on Nordic countries

3

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4

### Abstract

5

6 This chapter explores the use of explicit language policies and regulations in higher  
7 education settings where English is used as a foreign language. In particular, the chapter  
8 presents a case study of the Nordic countries of Europe, which, in today's Europe, are  
9 considered some of the settings where English users have overall high proficiency in  
10 English. The chapter presents a collection of public university language policy documents  
11 from the countries of Iceland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland. An analysis of  
12 these documents reveals two sets of outcomes. The first is that, presumably as a by-  
13 product of Nordic union and collaboration, English language skills in the Nordic countries  
14 are upheld as elite among Nordic Universities. The second outcome is that the prescribed  
15 use of English in these institutions mirrors that of colonial and imperial norms of English.

16

### 1. Introduction

17

18 In this chapter, our aims are to explore the role of prescriptivism with regard to the  
19 English language in the Nordic countries. Our specific focus is on the use of English in  
20 institutions of higher education (HEIs). The reasons for pursuing this line of investigation  
21 are two-fold. First, there has been a concerted effort among Nordic universities to enhance

1 their global visibility and competitiveness through the use of English as a language of  
2 science and higher education. The outcome is that Nordic universities are, in fact,  
3 increasingly the target of prospective students as well as researchers who come to these  
4 destinations with the expectation that they will be able to carry out their academic work –  
5 as well as their personal life – using English. This phenomenon is not without its  
6 consequences and tensions, which leads to the second main aim of our treatment here. The  
7 use of English in higher education gives rise to many ideological questions that link to  
8 prescriptivism. These questions, in no specific order, include: What varieties of English  
9 are valued over others in the context(s) of Nordic universities? How does prescriptivism  
10 with regard to English relate to prescriptivism with regard to the national language(s)?  
11 How is English proficiency treated among and between the Nordic countries compared to  
12 speakers of English from other territories?

13 A couple of key factors warrant such an investigation of the Nordic countries. Of  
14 particular interest is the fact that the Nordic countries, despite the fact that English has  
15 foreign language status in the Nordic region and is overwhelmingly an additional, not a  
16 first language, routinely rank among those having the most widely proficient speakers of  
17 English in the world ([Jeong et al., 2021](#)). In addition, English has come to these countries  
18 as a result of so-called “cultural” imperialism, not colonialism, a situation that  
19 distinguishes their use of English from territories such as Australia, Bermuda, Canada,  
20 India, the Philippines, and other territories that have been under British or American rule  
21 ([Phillipson, 2008](#); [Lønsmann, 2009](#); [Leppänen et al., 2011](#); [Þórarinsdóttir, 2011](#); [Rindal,](#)  
22 [2014](#); [Hult, 2017](#)).

23 In the Nordic countries, there has been no model of English established through  
24 historical widespread settlement, as is the case in, for example, Australia, Canada and the  
25 United States ([Schneider, 2007](#)). Likewise, English-medium schools and other formal

1 establishments such as government and courts have not been established through  
2 colonization, such as in places like Kenya, the Caribbean, and Pakistan (and, obviously,  
3 many other places). Thus, the development and accepted norms of English in the Nordic  
4 countries emerges as a joint outcome of cultural imperialism (as per, e.g., [Phillipson,](#)  
5 [1992](#); [Pennycook, 2017](#)) and local interpretations of what any norms of English can and  
6 should be. For the purposes of this chapter, *prescriptivism* is regarded as an orientation  
7 toward the norms of use offered by the canonical (i.e., “norm-providing”) varieties of  
8 English, namely British English, and American English. The term “British English” is  
9 used in this chapter as a more common way of referring to the norms of Standardized  
10 Southern British English ([Hughes et al., 2012](#)). In conjunction with this definition,  
11 prescriptivism with English manifests in the treatment of English users from differing  
12 language backgrounds. This is an especially pertinent point when it comes to English, a  
13 language used by an estimated 1.5 to 2 billion people around the world ([MacKenzie,](#)  
14 [2018](#)) and a prime example of a pluricentric language ([Clyne, 1992](#)); due (in large part) to  
15 its colonial history, English is a language with many homes. In the case of the Nordic  
16 countries, then, it is critical to note whether they gravitate toward the norms of English  
17 imposed through its history of colonialism and colonality, or if they recognize and are  
18 open to other norms of use.

19         While the role of ideologies about English has been explored relatively  
20 extensively in research on languages in Nordic universities (see Section 3 of this chapter),  
21 the relationship between ideologies about English and prescriptivism with regard to  
22 English remains mostly underexplored, at least from the perspective of the institutions  
23 themselves.

## 24 2. The language situation in the Nordic countries

1 The countries comprising the Nordic region of Europe – Denmark, Finland, Iceland,  
2 Norway, and Sweden – are by many standards considered “small” populations (see, e.g.,  
3 [Hoffmann, 2000](#)) where, in general, the relationship of national identity and language  
4 identity is seen as quite direct. In other words, there is a strong ‘one-nation-one-language’  
5 ideology, a concept considered a premise of successful nations under the assumption that  
6 the use of a single language is beneficial for national unity and social harmony (see, e.g.  
7 [Piller, 2015](#); [May, 2012](#); [Blommaert, 2006](#)). For example, the Finnish language has been  
8 referred to as a “holy cow” for Finns due to its perceived difficulty ([Latomaa &](#)  
9 [Nuolijärvi, 2005](#)), and the distinction between Norwegian and Danish is a common  
10 example in linguistics classrooms to support the famous observation “a language is a  
11 dialect with a navy”. Indeed, the Declaration on Nordic Language Policy (Nordic Council  
12 of Ministers, 2006) states, “There are six languages in the Nordic countries that are both  
13 *complete and essential to society* [emphasis added]: Danish, Finnish, Faroese, Icelandic,  
14 Norwegian (in both written forms: Bokmål and Nynorsk), and Swedish” (p. 91). Thus, the  
15 relationship between Nordicness and national identity and language is well established,  
16 even though, of course, each country has its own unique linguistic history.

17 The Nordic countries, with the exception of Finland and Norway, each have a  
18 single official language, but also have recognized various regional or minority languages  
19 (Table 11.1 here)

20  
21 Following linguistic classifications, the Germanic branch of the Indo-European family  
22 tree is the most represented in the languages of the Nordic countries. Of the languages  
23 listed in [Table 11.1](#), Danish, Faroese, Swedish, Icelandic, and Norwegian are  
24 characterized as Germanic languages. The second most represented language family is  
25 Finno-Ugric: the Sami languages, Finnish, Karelian, Kven and Meänkieli. While the  
26 population majority in Iceland, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden are users of Germanic

1 languages, and the population majority in Finland are users of a Finno-Ugric language,  
2 there is overlap across borders – as would be expected. In other words, there are speakers  
3 of Finnic languages in parts of Norway and Sweden, and there are speakers of Germanic  
4 languages in Finland. For example, as a result of its proximity and shared history with  
5 Sweden, Swedish is an official language in Finland (according to the Finnish Constitution,  
6 1919). Today there are approximately 289,000 speakers of Swedish in Finland, about 5.2  
7 percent of the total population. As the list of languages may already demonstrate, each  
8 country has a distinct history. As always, any list of “official” or “recognized” languages  
9 should also be considered more indicative of power relations and politics, rather than  
10 reflecting actual linguistic realities<sup>1</sup>.

11 While the Nordic countries each have their own systems of governance  
12 (constitutional monarchies and republics) and political trajectories, they do interact  
13 economically and politically and have for a long time. Denmark, Finland, and Sweden are  
14 members of the European Union (EU), and all of the Nordic countries are members of the  
15 European Economic Area (EEA). As such, Iceland and Norway are affiliated with the EU  
16 through the free movement of goods, services, people, and capital. Due to their proximity  
17 and similar cultural beliefs, the Nordic countries have also forged a regional partnership to  
18 enhance Nordic cooperation.

19 For cooperation purposes, including the Nordic Council and Nordic Council of  
20 Ministers (inter-governmental and -parliamentary cooperation), the Scandinavian  
21 languages of Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish are to be used, although the practicability  
22 and fairness of this has been questioned and, in practice, cross-Nordic communication  
23 often takes place in English ([Kristinsson & Hilmarsson-Dunn, 2012](#)). In fact, English is  
24 extensively learned and used within the Nordic countries, including as a lingua franca  
25 among Nordic people in certain contexts. It is important to note that English is an L1 for

1 an extremely small minority of people in the Nordic countries, as only one of hundreds of  
2 immigrant languages.

3 As mentioned previously, there is no history of Anglo-colonization in the Nordic  
4 area, although Iceland was occupied by British, Canadian, and American troops during  
5 World War II. Rather, there is a complex history of Nordic colonization with colonial  
6 presences in or ties to places such as the Caribbean, North America, and Africa, and  
7 within the Nordics and surrounding regions. For example, the Sami territories in Finland,  
8 Norway, and Sweden were colonized by people living in each respective area. Iceland has  
9 also been under Norwegian and Danish rule, and Finland and Norway under Swedish rule  
10 (for more information see e.g. [Höglund & Burnett, 2019](#)), and there is extensive shared  
11 political history between Germany and Denmark and Russia and Finland, to name a few  
12 examples.

13 The manner in which English language learning was introduced is similar across  
14 the Nordic countries – and indeed bears similarities to how and why English language  
15 learning spread around the world in general in the post-World War II era (see, e.g.  
16 [Pennycook, 2017](#)). For the Nordic countries in particular, the widespread adoption of  
17 English as a foreign language coincided with strong social movements that peaked in the  
18 social welfare model of the 1970s. These other factors included urbanization and  
19 modernization, education reforms, taxation benefit models, changes to the childcare and  
20 healthcare systems, and so on. Country-specific legislation notwithstanding (see [Hultgren  
21 et al., 2014](#)), today English is the dominant foreign language learned in school throughout  
22 the Nordic region ([Björklund, et al., 2013](#)), as either a *de jure* or *de facto* required subject.  
23 Although the [European Parliament \(2017\)](#) has long promoted the 1+2 model (“mother  
24 tongue” and two foreign languages) specifically with the aim of maintaining and  
25 increasing multilingualism in the EU region, the reality in the Nordic countries tends to be

1 “national Nordic language + English + other”. In Finland and Iceland the “other” foreign  
2 language, however, is fulfilled by the second national language (Finnish or Swedish), and  
3 Danish (or other Scandinavian language), respectively.

4 Today, the Nordic countries routinely rank among the places where there is the  
5 highest proportion of English-speakers per capita outside of inner-circle settings such as  
6 the UK and the USA ([Jeong et al., 2021](#); [Peterson, 2019](#)). While to a large extent English  
7 is embraced, especially by younger generations, there is concern over the effect of English  
8 on the national languages. In other words, English is often considered to be a useful and  
9 necessary tool and a lingua franca, and as such, mastery in it is considered highly  
10 important. At the same time, English can be construed as a threat that ‘pollutes’ the  
11 Nordic languages and decreases their importance and usage locally – a position which can  
12 certainly have puristic and nationalistic undertones ([Nevalainen, et al., 2015](#); [Hakulinen et  
13 al., 2009](#); [Ljosland, 2015](#); [Haberland & Preisler, 2014](#); [Salö, 2014](#); [Josephson, 2014](#);  
14 [Saarinen, 2020](#)). In settings of higher education, internationalization and the increasing  
15 use of English are often perceived as destabilizing or threatening not only to local science  
16 but to nationhood.

17

### 18 3. Higher Education the Nordic Countries

19 The Nordic countries have a similar approach to higher education, in that it is based upon  
20 a commitment to welfare, particularly in providing equal access to education. For this  
21 reason, higher education has traditionally been public and tuition-free. In the past decades,  
22 however, higher education has undergone notable changes due to globalization and  
23 neoliberal economic practices. These broader global realities serve as a backdrop to  
24 understanding the shifting of roles of HEIs, specifically in terms of moving from public  
25 sector institutions to more competitive and market-oriented ones (e.g. [Bagley & Portnoi,](#)

1 [2014](#); [Piller & Cho, 2013](#); [Olssen & Peters, 2005](#)). While naturally there is notable  
2 variation in the actualization of HEI policies in each of the Nordic countries and across  
3 different institutions; in general Nordic HEIs are increasingly expected to compete in the  
4 global education market – while at the same time contributing to national economic  
5 development and serving the welfare state ([Hultgren, et al., 2014](#); [Saarinen & Taalas,](#)  
6 [2017](#); [Kivistö, et al., 2019](#); [Fägerlind & Strömqvist, 2004](#)). Internationalization has thus  
7 become a key objective for HEIs in the Nordic countries as it is considered a key factor  
8 contributing to the overall success and competitiveness of a university. For example, the  
9 number of international students and research projects serve to boost international  
10 rankings ([Hultgren, 2014a](#); [Hultgren, et al., 2014](#); [Rumbley et al., 2012](#); [Altbach, 2007](#);  
11 [Hénard, et al., 2012](#); [Maassen, et al., 2005](#); [Elken, et al., 2015](#)), and such aims are  
12 connected to the use of English.

13         With the increase of international student mobility globally, English-speaking  
14 countries have tended to attract more students, resulting in an Anglophone asymmetry (cf.  
15 [Hughes, 2008](#)) in the international student market (e.g. [Saarinen & Taalas, 2017](#); [de Wit,](#)  
16 [et al., 2013](#)). To compete with Anglophone countries, although perhaps a bit  
17 paradoxically, HEIs around the world have incorporated English as a medium of  
18 instruction (EMI). In addition, in Europe, several cross-national policies and practices  
19 aimed at facilitating international mobility have been implemented, for example, the  
20 Bologna Process and the ERASMUS programme. The former seeks to ensure that  
21 institutions can easily recognize foreign studies and credits within Europe, while the latter  
22 is a European exchange programme making temporary studies at other European  
23 universities possible. The agreement on Nordic Admission to Higher Education (e.g.  
24 SOPIMUS Tanskan, Suomen, Islannin, Norjan ja Ruotsin välillä pääsystä korkeampaan  
25 koulutukseen, 1997) also seeks to increase mobility within the Nordic countries by

1 recommending that students from other Nordic countries should be considered for  
2 admission on the same or equivalent basis as local applicants (cf. [Elken, et al., 2015](#)).  
3 Each Nordic country has also ratified the Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997),  
4 guaranteeing the recognition of foreign degrees (unless substantial differences are  
5 observed), including the admission to tertiary education based on the same criteria as the  
6 applicant's home country in signatory countries – although more specific entry  
7 requirements, such as language, can be set. Language requirements, as discussed in  
8 Section 5, are typically satisfied through degree equivalency or local or international  
9 language tests.

10 Internationalization on the tertiary level has been comparatively fast in Northern  
11 Europe, and especially the Nordic countries. Efforts to internationalize are of course also  
12 intricately tied to the issue of language(s) and their use at institutions of higher education.  
13 Many institutions in the Nordic countries have indeed adopted English as a language of  
14 instruction and even administration, in addition to or even in lieu of the respective  
15 national languages (e.g. [Altbach & Knight, 2007](#); [Wächter & Maiworm, 2014](#);  
16 [Hilmarrsson-Dunn, 2009](#); [Bolton & Kuteeva, 2012](#); [Hultgren, et al., 2014](#); [Lindström &](#)  
17 [Sylvin, 2014](#); [Hultgren, et al., 2015](#); [Airey, et al., 2017](#); [Saarinen & Rontu, 2018](#); [Holmen,](#)  
18 [2018](#); [Nissen, 2018](#); [Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2018](#)). In addition, English-language materials are  
19 increasingly used in classrooms, with approximately 70 to 90 percent of academic articles  
20 and dissertations being written in English in Nordic universities. Nordic HEIs, thus, could  
21 be considered to be at the forefront of Englishization, with a seeming purpose of enabling  
22 mobility rather than imparting knowledge per se ([Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2018](#); [Hultgren, et al.,](#)  
23 [2014](#); [Saarinen & Taalas, 2017](#)).

24 The incorporation of English seems to have been quite effective, as the number of  
25 international students in the Nordic countries has increased dramatically since the start of

1 the millennium (OECD). For example, between the years 2000 and 2015 Norway more  
2 than doubled its number of international students, most likely due to increased English-  
3 medium instruction and free tuition ([Wiers-Jenssen, 2018](#)). However, EMI is more  
4 common in graduate level programmes (20–40 percent) than it is at the undergraduate  
5 level (10–25 percent). In all, international students make up about 5–15 percent of the  
6 total student populations in the region ([Hultgren, et al., 2014](#); [Wächter & Maiworm,](#)  
7 [2014](#)).

8         The most obvious advantage of incorporating English into academic functions, in  
9 terms of language of instruction as well as research, is that it is already quite widely used.  
10 It thus provides a practical common medium of communication, even if the majority of  
11 the incoming students are not L1 speakers of English. In addition, EMI programmes do  
12 not only attract international but local students as well ([Marginson & van der Wende,](#)  
13 [2009](#); [Wächter & Maiworm, 2014](#)). Of course, due to the various languages spoken and  
14 used in Europe, relying on education in the national language(s) would decrease the  
15 potential pool of students, especially if the national languages are not widely spoken  
16 outside of the national boundaries. Typically, Nordic HEIs do not require that  
17 international students learn the national language(s), although faculty and staff might be  
18 expected to do so within a “reasonable” time period – normally three to five years.

19         These changes in the academic environment have led Nordic HEIs to reassess their  
20 institutional language policies and practices, which has prompted discussions and concern  
21 over the decreased usage of national languages. While there is a push for English as a  
22 means of internationalization, many stakeholders, including policymakers and university  
23 officials, consider universities as having the role of preserving and promoting the national  
24 language(s) and cultures ([Cots, et al., 2012](#); [Soler, et al., 2018](#); [Hultgren, et al., 2014](#);  
25 [Björkman, 2015](#); [Haberland & Preisler, 2014](#)). Thus, HEIs simultaneously attempt to

1 internationalize and safeguard national languages and cultures. Many Nordic universities  
2 engage in a practice of parallel language use, which is also encouraged by the Declaration  
3 on a Nordic Language Policy (2006), touting the benefits of multilingualism. However,  
4 the reality is that “multilingualism” and “parallel language use” often equates “national  
5 language(s) and English” – for example, Swedish and English in Sweden ([Källkvist &  
6 Hult, 2016](#)) (in line with the general language learning patterns, national language +  
7 English, stated in the previous section). As [Hultgren \(2014b\)](#) argues, parallel language  
8 policies at Danish universities may actually be more about the promotion of English than  
9 Danish.

10 University students, therefore, are largely expected to be able to understand and  
11 produce English even as L1 speakers of Nordic languages (at Nordic universities), which  
12 can be problematic as they are not necessarily trained to do so. Indeed, it is difficult to  
13 complete a higher education degree in the Nordic countries without some kind of  
14 proficiency in English, even if the programme is not EMI (e.g. [Ljosland, 2015](#)). Iceland,  
15 having the most conservative policy on parallel use, is particularly interesting because  
16 Icelandic is so heavily emphasized throughout schooling, and compared to other countries  
17 in the Nordic Region the approach to the Icelandic language is perhaps the most purist  
18 (see Section 6). Thus, students are expected to primarily read texts and be taught in  
19 Icelandic in secondary school, but are expected to read academic texts in English at the  
20 tertiary level, with the assumption that this poses no problems ([Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2018](#);  
21 [Albury, 2016](#); [Hilmarsson-Dunn & Kristinsson, 2010](#)).

22

## 23 4. Materials

24 With the linguistics and academic set-up described so far in this chapter, there are many  
25 approaches which could be – and have been – adopted to explore the phenomenon of

1 language use in higher education. For our purposes, the data used to describe the use of  
2 English in HEIs in the Nordic countries comes from official, top-down sources.  
3 Specifically, the data comprises publicly available language policy and language  
4 requirements from public institutions of higher learning from the five Nordic countries.  
5 We began our investigation by collecting language policy documents we could find online  
6 from universities in each of the five Nordic countries, with our initial set of documents  
7 amounting to 25 policies and guidelines. After gaining a comprehensive overview of the  
8 language situation from examining these documents, we chose to narrow our focus to the  
9 following investigations: 1) an overview of the English language requirements for student  
10 applicants at the MA level 2) an overview of the English language policy of the  
11 universities. It should be noted that each of the universities made their language policy  
12 texts available in at least two languages – the main national language and English.  
13 Because we are writing this chapter in English, about English, and for an international  
14 audience, we have chosen to use the English language version of the relevant documents.

15 Further, for the purposes of this chapter we limited our scope to the highest-  
16 ranking, multiple-programme public university in each of the five Nordic countries. The  
17 main reasons for limiting our scope was that the minimum English language requirements  
18 are in some cases set at the national level (for example, by the country's Ministry of  
19 Education) and therefore do not vary widely across individual institutions within each  
20 country. Second, in some respects the largest and/or most prestigious universities in each  
21 country serves to influence or offer a benchmark in terms of how smaller universities set  
22 their own language standards.

23

24 5. Whose English is good enough?

1 Section 3 of this chapter highlighted the perceived necessity to offer English-medium  
2 courses for students and to attract top-tier international scholars who, presumably, use  
3 English as their working and research language. At the same time, Nordic countries  
4 actively strive for, and have in fact enacted legislation that allows for uninhibited  
5 movement and shared resources among Nordic HEIs. Of particular interest is the status of  
6 English as a component part of this cooperation, and it is this component which we now  
7 bring into focus.

8 An investigation of the language requirements documents for English medium  
9 programmes in HEIs across the Nordic countries shows several areas of similarity. First,  
10 not surprisingly, applicants are required to submit a current set of results from a  
11 standardized test of English proficiency. This requirement is specified mostly for master's  
12 programmes conducted in English, but in some cases also for bachelor's programmes or  
13 specific courses conducted in English. The most commonly cited tests across the  
14 university documents are the TOEFL, IELTS, Cambridge ESOL and Pearson PTE. In  
15 addition, it is also worth noting that each of the English language requirements documents  
16 analysed for this study were written more or less according to the norms of British  
17 English, as evidenced, for example, through spellings such as *programme* as opposed to  
18 *program*. Some universities, such as University of Oslo and Lund University have also  
19 explicitly outlined the preference for British English in official university documents in  
20 their respective language policies (seeSection 6).

21 Perhaps not surprisingly, there is variation in the required minimum scores for  
22 standardized language tests across Nordic countries, universities, and for different kinds  
23 of degree programmes. For example, master's programmes in English language and  
24 literature for some universities require a higher score than other programmes. Overall, the  
25 required TOEFL scores, for example, range from 79 to 108, with the lowest, 79, for

1 specific programmes in Iceland, and the highest, 108, for specific English major  
2 programmes in Norway. By way of comparison, the average expected TOEFL scores for  
3 admission to Ivy League universities in the United States is around 100, and around 110  
4 for Cambridge and Oxford in the United Kingdom. The average range across top  
5 universities, both Ivy and non-Ivy League, is 79–100. Therefore, it is evident that the  
6 English language expectations for admission into an English-language medium  
7 programme in the Nordic countries is on par with places like the US and the UK.

8 Exemptions for standardized English proficiency tests, however, are similar across  
9 Nordic countries. For example, a minimum grade in English from an International  
10 Baccalaureate is cited almost uniformly across countries. In addition, a minimum grade in  
11 English from an EU/EEA country is also usually recognized (see [Table 11.2](#)). These  
12 general observations aside, specific differences enacted at the national level of each  
13 country are explored in turn, highlighting areas of overlap against nation-specific  
14 distinctions. The exploration concludes with an overview of the relationship of these  
15 requirements against prescriptivism in English.

16 (Table 11.2 Here)

17  
18 There are several discussion points to be extracted from the descriptions in [Table 11.2](#). In  
19 terms of the aims laid out in the introduction to this chapter, a key concern is the varieties  
20 of English which are considered adequate for admission to a master’s programme without  
21 an applicant being required to demonstrate English proficiency through an expensive  
22 exam. (The current price for a TOEFL exam, for example, is 185 US dollars.) Across  
23 HEIs, there is a prominent partiality for so-called inner circle varieties of English  
24 ([Kachru, 1982](#)), or what has also been termed “a majority English speaking country” (as  
25 stated in the English language requirements for the University of Iceland). Indeed,  
26 citizenship and/or proof of upper secondary school studies from Australia, Canada (except

1 French-dominant regions of Canada), Ireland, New Zealand, the USA, and the United  
2 Kingdom are exerted preferential treatment across the HEIs examined here. In Denmark  
3 and Finland, these inner-circle settings of English are in fact the only countries that are  
4 treated as exemptions – aside from European and Nordic countries, a topic taken up later.  
5 What this means in practice is that a person from, for example, Barbados, may need to  
6 take an English proficiency exam such as TOEFL to apply for a master’s programme in  
7 Finland, Denmark, and Sweden, but not in Iceland or Norway.

8         These six inner-circle locations of English aside, it is likewise of interest to note  
9 which English-speaking nations, and, presumably, the varieties of English used in these  
10 places, are evaluated as being of a high enough standard for admission. With Finland and  
11 Denmark at one end of the scale of acceptability with a limited view of only six English-  
12 speaking countries and the Nordic/EU/EAA, the other end of the scale is Sweden, with its  
13 much more comprehensive list of countries including India, Pakistan and 17 African  
14 nations: Botswana, Eritrea, Ethiopia, The Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia,  
15 Malawi, Namibia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and  
16 Zimbabwe. Iceland and Norway occupy a position somewhat more in the middle,  
17 reporting a comparatively long list of countries that are exempt from English proficiency  
18 tests. For the University of Iceland, this list entails mostly countries in the Americas, and  
19 the Caribbean region in particular, including Anguilla, Antigua, Bahamas, Barbados,  
20 Barbuda, Belize, The British Virgin Islands, Dominica, Grand Cayman Islands, Grenada,  
21 Guyana, Jamaica, Montserrat, St. Kitts & Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent & the Grenadines,  
22 Trinidad & Tobago, and the Turks & Caicos Islands. As per their guidelines, it seems the  
23 University of Iceland has based its decision on what overall proportion of the population  
24 has L1 English in a given nation. Given the small populations of the nations in question,  
25 however, it is statistically unlikely that many potential applicants would take advantage of

1 this language perk by applying to an Icelandic university. The University of Oslo's  
2 requirements appear less territorially oriented; in addition to several Caribbean nations,  
3 considerations are also made for Hong Kong, Singapore, and South Africa.

4 In terms of prescriptivism in English, a key consideration emerges on the basis of  
5 these lists of countries. It is well established that there is extreme variation in the use of  
6 English in any setting, including inner-circle settings (see, e.g., [Hughes et al., 2012](#);  
7 [Peterson, 2019](#); [Schneider, 2007](#); [Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2016](#)). The countries that  
8 are or are not included in the list of exemptions point toward attitudes about the perceived  
9 correctness of a variety used in a given location by a given population, and also how  
10 uniform that variety is perceived across speakers. For the core six inner-circle countries  
11 which are exempted without exception, then, there appears an assumption that any  
12 (English) speaker who applies from these countries – Australia, Canada, Ireland, New  
13 Zealand, the USA, and the UK – conforms to the expected standards of English. This  
14 assumption raises numerous questions relating to ethnicity, race, social class, education,  
15 and language. Presumably, an applicant from the USA who would apply to a Nordic  
16 university would have among other required credentials a history in education in the USA,  
17 a situation which likely precludes the use of certain (undervalued) varieties of US English.  
18 That is, there is an informed assumption that the applicant will be fluent in standardized  
19 US English. While the same assumption could well hold across other English-speaking  
20 territories, it appears that for most Nordic universities these other varieties of English are  
21 not considered good enough. Despite the fact that English speakers from places such as  
22 Hong Kong or India can be and indeed are speakers of standardized, prescriptive norms of  
23 English, for most Nordic universities their English is not given a chance; they are required  
24 to pay for and pass a proficiency exam in English. In this regard, it can be stated that  
25 overall the Nordic countries uphold norms of English that favour existing power

1 structures, including colonial and global powers (see, e.g., [Pennycook, 2017](#); [Peterson,](#)  
2 [forthcoming](#); [Piller, 2016](#); [Saarinen & Nikula, 2012](#)). While on the one hand this can be  
3 viewed as a practical measure, it is on the other hand a clear favouring of pre-existing  
4 power dynamics external to the Nordic system. Whether intentional or not, these Nordic  
5 universities are aligning themselves to these existing power structures by re-enacting their  
6 language prescriptions.

7         The English language guidelines and requirements, then, have the overall property  
8 of privileging certain English speakers from certain territories over others. At the same  
9 time, it is evident that Nordic proficiency in English, in particular, is elevated to a similar  
10 status bestowed upon inner-circle varieties of English. This is clearly based on the fact  
11 that applicants who can demonstrate a minimum grade in English from their upper  
12 secondary schooling in a Nordic country (either in English or in general, depending on the  
13 requirements) are exempted from an English proficiency test, presumably based on the  
14 assumption that the level of English proficiency resulting from upper secondary education  
15 in a Nordic country is on equal footing with a native speaker from places such as the US,  
16 the UK, and so on. Furthermore, the implication is that the level of English achieved  
17 through schooling in the Nordic countries is superior to the English language used in other  
18 places throughout the world. In one way, this portion of the language guidelines is a  
19 practical and even exemplary outcome of Nordic (and EU/EAA) cooperation. Indeed, the  
20 Common European Framework of References for Languages was established precisely for  
21 such purposes, contributing to the possibility for cross-border cooperation. After all, one  
22 might reason, these are Nordic universities, so why shouldn't students from the Nordics  
23 be prioritized? Yet by placing themselves in the same league as inner-circle English  
24 speaking territories such as the US and the UK, the Nordic HEIs further demonstrate a

1 perceived level of superiority regarding their own use of English, positioning themselves  
2 as more qualified English language users than those from other backgrounds.

## 3 4 6. What do we do with English? What about *our* language?

5 A second component of our investigation in this chapter deals with the English language  
6 policies of the Nordic HEIs. For the most part, the language policy documents are freely  
7 available on the university websites, with the exception of the University of Copenhagen.

8 All of the universities' language policies have explicitly made accommodations  
9 for the use of English at each institution. Unsurprisingly, the reason for the inclusion of  
10 English into the functions of the universities is cited as "internationalization" or  
11 "international collaboration". While the use of multiple languages is also encouraged in  
12 the name of internationalization, multilingualism, and multiculturalism, for example, they  
13 are typically clumped together under the term *other (foreign) languages*, leaving English  
14 as the only (non-Nordic) language with a name (cf. [Nikula, et al., 2012](#)). As mentioned  
15 earlier, many of the universities advocate for parallel language use, but the reality again  
16 seems to be a Nordic language and English (cf. [Källkvist & Hult, 2016](#)), as exemplified in  
17 the following statement from the University of Oslo's language policy:

18  
19 The University of Oslo shall promote so-called parallel-lingualism. This means that Norwegian is  
20 to be nurtured as the primary language at the University, at the same time as linguistic diversity is  
21 encouraged, with English as the main foreign language. *Language policy guidelines for the*  
22 *University of Oslo*

23  
24 Similarly, although one of the main purposes of the formulation of a language policy at  
25 the University of Helsinki is that it "raises linguistic awareness, builds well-functioning  
26 bilingualism, highlights multilingualism as a strength and encourages the parallel use of

1 different languages” (*Language policy of the University of Helsinki*, p. 48), subsequent  
2 mentions of “parallel language use” primarily refer to Finnish, Swedish (official  
3 languages of the university), and English. “Linguistic diversity” and “multilingualism,”  
4 thus, seem to be reduced to a limited number of languages, and as such, are perhaps  
5 misnomers (cf. [Lasagabaster, 2015](#)).

6 An exception to this is the University of Iceland, which clearly designates  
7 Icelandic as *the* language of the university: “Icelandic is therefore the default language for  
8 all work at the University and shall be used unless specific circumstances dictate  
9 otherwise” (*University of Iceland Language Policy*). Although this edict is rooted in  
10 governmental acts and policies in Iceland, it is nevertheless in contrast to the other  
11 universities’ policies which all allow for the use of English or other languages when  
12 ‘appropriate’ or ‘necessary,’ for example when a member of a committee is not proficient  
13 in the national language. In some cases, this also extends to providing administrative  
14 bodies/departments the freedom to decide which language is to be used within their own  
15 affairs.

16 All universities, however, implicitly or explicitly note the importance of nurturing  
17 the national languages, as well as developing and protecting them as academic languages.  
18 These observations highlight the tensions described in Section 3 of this chapter: Nordic  
19 HEIs are in the precarious position of being forced to operate on a world stage while at  
20 the same time serving as protectors of their own national – and Nordic – languages and  
21 cultures, often in conjunction with broader national efforts, as exemplified in the policy  
22 for Lund University:

23 The Language Act prescribes Swedish as the language of the public sector in Sweden, and public  
24 authorities have a special responsibility for making Swedish terminology in their various areas of  
25 expertise accessible, and ensuring that it is used and developed. Access to information in the  
26 common language of Swedish is a question of democracy

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As noted previously, other universities made similar remarks about the development of the national languages in academia. Perhaps in an attempt to quell concerns about English, Lund University, along with University of Helsinki, also explicitly note that the use of English is not in contradiction with the aforementioned guidelines:

Lund University constitutes a part of an international academic environment, and the dominant international research language is English. English is also the most important language for international educational collaborations and other forms of international cooperation. The Language Act's requirement for Swedish as the public sector language does not stand in contradiction with this practice.

When it comes to prescribed use of English, the language policy documents investigated reveal individual differences, but overall demonstrate a strong core adherence to the norms established as “a recognized international English” (*University of Iceland Language Policy*), presumably meaning an inner-circle variety. It is notable that none of the language policy guidelines we observed made explicit mention of exclusively US norms, while two of the universities – Oslo and Lund – made specific mention of British English as a model. The University of Oslo's language policy states: “For official information from the University in English the standard is British English (Oxford English Dictionary)” (*Language policy guidelines for the University of Oslo*), while Lund University states:

1 The norm for official texts of a general nature at Lund University is British English. If there are  
2 different variants, the BE version is to be preferred for the names of activities and units, titles,  
3 names of organisations and higher education terminology. *Lund University Language Policy*, p. 3  
4

5 Aarhus University states that documents must be written in “correct English”, “in  
6 compliance with [British and American English standard],” although the language policy  
7 further specifies that official university letters, brochures, etc., should be in British  
8 English. The universities of Copenhagen, Helsinki, and Iceland, on the other hand, do not  
9 recommend adherence to the norms on any particular variety of English, although support  
10 services are mentioned to aid in the production of written English, and as such, there  
11 seems to be an expectation of adherence to at least some standardized written variety  
12 (even if that variety is not explicitly mentioned).

13

## 14 8. Conclusion

15 HEIs in the Nordic countries have positioned themselves among an elite set of global  
16 universities. This chapter has described how several Nordic universities have come into  
17 prominence in recent decades (judging from rankings such as Times Higher Education,  
18 QS World University Rankings, Best Global Universities, etc.) and the role English has  
19 played in achieving this status (cf. [Hultgren, 2014a](#)). In addition to highlighting some of  
20 the tensions involved with achieving global prominence – in English – while at the same  
21 time serving as arbiters of national and regional languages and cultures, the main concern  
22 of this chapter has been to describe prescriptivist attitudes about English. This line of  
23 questioning was approached through an examination of publicly available documents  
24 from Nordic HEIs, in particular language regulations for students to English-medium  
25 master’s programmes and language policy documents. The overarching finding is that, for  
26 the most part, Nordic HEIs adhere to and perpetuate prescriptive ideals of English that are

1 offered up from English colonial powers, especially Britain. This is largely in evidence  
2 from the English language requirements for prospective students. Applicants from a  
3 handful of inner-circle settings, namely the UK, the US, Australia, New Zealand,  
4 (English-speaking) Canada, and Ireland are especially privileged. Of the Nordic countries,  
5 Finland and Denmark demonstrated the most restrictive regulations on English varieties,  
6 while Sweden demonstrated the most liberal, in essence recognizing that English is a  
7 pluricentric language with many different standardized varieties around the world.

8 Simultaneously, influenced by the drive for both Nordic and EU/EAA  
9 cooperation, the English skills achieved by students from Nordic countries (and other  
10 European countries) are treated as on par with inner-circle standards of English. This  
11 means that while an L1, monolingual speaker of English from, for example, Barbados,  
12 needs to demonstrate English proficiency through an exam such as the TOEFL (for some  
13 Nordic universities), an applicant from a Nordic country (who has a high enough English  
14 grade from upper secondary school) does not.

15 Language policy documents from Nordic HEIs underscore these tendencies, but in  
16 a more nuanced fashion. Perhaps because language policy documents apply mostly to  
17 staff members and existing students, there are less stringent language gatekeeping  
18 tendencies evident in them. Characteristic of the language policy documents is an  
19 emphasis on promoting parallel multilingualism and preserving the national languages as  
20 languages of learning and science. English is presented as a necessary tool in these  
21 documents, and only a few of the language policy documents we viewed recommended  
22 adherence to the prescriptive norms of an inner-circle variety; when this occurred, British  
23 English was the preferred variety.

24 The information in this chapter – and indeed the findings of other research –  
25 highlights an unsatisfactory and bleak reality: that is, to participate in the global stage of

1 world academia, there appears to be either overt or covert pressure to adhere to  
2 exclusionary, elitist rules that have thus far dictated English language use and its  
3 relationship to higher learning. This certainly appears to be the case for Nordic HEIs,  
4 especially considering their external status to colonialism and English; in this regard, they  
5 would have no obvious reason to participate in the colonial perseverance of prescriptive  
6 English norms. Rather, to align themselves with elite universities, they have adopted  
7 similar English language standards as other English-medium universities. While a strong  
8 case can be made for the practical necessity to uphold and adhere to norms of use of  
9 English in formal institutions such as universities, the specific array of information laid  
10 out in this chapter is nonetheless telling in ideologies about Nordic exceptionalism, in this  
11 case relating to the use of English.

12 As a final note, one obvious shortcoming of this chapter is that we have  
13 necessarily treated the documents used for data in isolation from the policy-makers and  
14 other actors who created them. While there are clearly many other possible avenues of  
15 research related to the topic of higher education and the role of English, an investigation  
16 into the decision makers and broader policy sectors behind these policies and guidelines  
17 would be a fruitful and necessary way of gaining further knowledge about the content in  
18 the documents. After all, policymaking is socially, politically, and historically rooted, and  
19 as such, highly multi-layered.

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25 Table 11.2. English language requirements/equivalents for master's degree  
26 programmes at Nordic Universities

<b>Co unt</b>	<b>TOE FL</b>	<b>citizensh ip</b>	<b>schooling</b>	<b>higher ed</b>	<b>other / International</b>
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ry					<b>Baccalaureate</b>
Denmark	iBT >83	Australia, Canada (except for Quebec and northern New Brunswick), Ireland, New Zealand, UK, USA	completed upper secondary school in Denmark with a min. grade of 3 in English B, completed upper secondary education in a Nordic country <i>and</i> have B-level English	studied or completed a bachelor's degree at a Danish university; Completed a bachelor's programme in Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, UK, or USA	IB diploma with minimum grade of 3 in English
Finland	iBT >92	(NA, see next column)	<i>Upper secondary school</i> in the Nordic Countries, Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, UK, USA	Foreign language studies <i>in English</i> as part of a Finnish university degree; completed degree at a Finnish university with English as the major subject; University degree in an EU/EEA country or Switzerland, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, UK, USA <i>in English</i>	Language skills test specifically for University of Helsinki applicants; IB diploma with a minimum grade 2/A1, 5/A2, 2/A European Baccalaureate with min. 5/L1 (after 2021) min. 7/L2

Iceland	79, 85, 108, depending on programme	Australia, Canada (except Quebec), Ireland, New Zealand, UK, USA, 18 different locations in the Caribbean (see full list below)	English A equivalence from an EEA/EFTA country	Completed min. of 1 year of higher education <i>in English</i> in UK, USA, Ireland, New Zealand, Australia, Canada	IB or European Baccalaureate in an English-taught programme
Norway	90 or 108, depending on programme	(NA, see next column)	<i>Entire upper secondary education in English</i> in Australia, Bahamas, Barbados, Canada, Denmark, Fiji, Finland, Guyana, Hong Kong, Iceland, Ireland, Jamaica, Macao, Malta, Mauritius, New Zealand, Norway, Samoa, Singapore, South Africa, Sweden, Trinidad & Tobago, UK,	Studied or completed a degree in English in a Nordic country or the Netherlands	Completed upper secondary school in Norway with a min. grade of 4

			USA; completed upper secondary school in Norway with grade of 4 or higher		
Swe den	90– 100, depen ding on progra mme	(NA, see next column)	<i>Completed upper secondary studies</i> depending on the country of study	Completed 60+ ECTS (credits) <i>in English</i> in an EU/EEA country, Switzerland, USA, English- speaking parts of Canada, Jamaica, Australia, New Zealand, UK	Completed degree in English- medium program from a recognized institution; partial degrees also accepted in some cases: USA, Australia, NZ, Jamaica, Canada, 17 different African countries (see full list below), India, Pakistan

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<sup>1</sup> See map at <https://nordregio.org/maps/languages-in-the-nordic-region/>