

Nordic Society for Middle Eastern Studies

Board Meeting, 27 October 2020, Zoom

Present: Mark Sedgwick, Pekka Tuominen, Olof Heilo, Helena Lindholm, Laura Wickström, Magnus Halsnes, Charlotte Lysa, Ulla Prien, Thorir Jonsson Hraundal

Minutes: Olof Heilo

1. Opening (13:13)

- a) Approval of the agenda: no additions.
- b) Review of minutes from last meeting: a brief note on 9b from the last meeting on taking over the *Nidaba* journal from the CMES in Lund. As the journal does not have funding we will not follow up on this offer.

2. Reports

- a) Membership (Olof): there is a slight drop in members, from 92 to 75, mainly among students and corresponding members. This is not so surprising given that the main motivation for such memberships seems to be conferences, and we currently are in an “inter-conference” period. Some existing members have complained about difficulties with the automated system for paying, which works by PayPal. This is mainly a problem in Norway, but there are also occasional cases in Sweden and Finland. The easiest solution is if these few cases can pay directly to the Danish account.

Last meeting, we decided to scrap the one-year ordinary memberships and it is no longer possible to apply for them on the website. However, some existing one-year-members still like this membership format, and rather than trying to push them all into three-year-memberships we should give them the option to renew their one-year-memberships at least until further.

- b) Website and online presence (Pekka): The weekly arrival of the Eurames newsletter also serves as a regular reminder of our existence. The website offers us a stable presence, and it looks good and is easy to navigate; there is no need for changes. Like memberships, visits to the website increases in conference years.

On Facebook, the Society has 651 followers. On average, we have one post every month, last time with 591 likes. It is vital that people start liking immediately so that the algorithms keep pushing them to the surface; this is something we should remind colleagues to do. MA initiatives and scholarship options usually get particular attention. Among the visitors there is an equal gender balance, but two thirds of them seem to be under the age of 44, perhaps indicating a basis of followers among students and younger scholar.

The Society could try to gain more followers by posting more frequently. This demands more activity from the board. Especially current online events arranged by our different institutes could be of interest. Even if we cannot be sure if everything is of interest to our followers, it is better that we send Pekka too much than too little; the only rule of thumb is

that content should be Nordic. Pekka ultimately decides what lands on the page, and he can also send us individual suggestions to forward materials when he sees a possibility.

3. Finances

- a) Accounts for 2019–20 (Ulla): incomes dropped after the conference, and we are relying on membership fees. Again, this is normal: the 2019 conference has rendered a slight surplus, and future conferences may do likewise, but it is no way guaranteed and should not be an objective. Due to the pandemic we are currently saving money because we do not have any expenses except for running costs. In all, the account looks good.
- b) Presentation and approval of budget: Estimate for 2021 expenses based on the premise that we can resume some physical activities, including board meeting IRL. The budget was approved.

4. Coming events

General discussion: under the pandemic, it is difficult to keep up with our mission to encourage international exchange. Most universities are already transferring events for 2021 to digital platforms. We have to accept that we are citizens and affiliates of different countries and universities and have to follow their different rules and restrictions.

Review of approaches, regulations and limitations in our different countries and universities: in Sweden most of the teaching takes place online, some universities (Umeå) mostly on-site, others with mixed solution (Uppsala), yet others mainly online (Lund). In Denmark, Aarhus is also rather mixed; in Copenhagen teaching takes place online but the campus is open and even some international exchange (students going to the Middle East) is expected to take place in the spring. In Norway, international students are prevented from entering, and in Oslo teaching and seminars takes place online and will keep doing so for the spring. This is not so much a matter of what happens in the classroom, as that people are discouraged from using public transport or go out drinking. In Bergen this is less of a problem as most students live downtown, but still most of the teaching takes place online, also for the spring. In Helsinki, almost everything is online and will remain so in the spring. People, especially new students, are significantly bored, and attempts are made to at least increase social interaction somehow through outdoor activities in the winter. Åbo has hybrid solutions with some students coming to class and others taking part online. On Iceland, teaching on site is permitted but discouraged and most students prefer to stay away.

- a) The 2020 MA workshop in Gothenburg

This workshop should have taken place in connection with the board meeting, but Gothenburg University still discourages physical meetings and there are no indications that this will change in the spring. Since the PhD school is already coming up, the solution is that we skip the workshop for this time.

- b) The 2021 PhD school in Bergen

The same problem pertains to Bergen as to Gothenburg. A hybrid solution is a possibility, but it would be unfortunate if people buy flight or train tickets and it turns out that the on-site event has to be cancelled. The solution is that we transfer the workshop to an online platform. If a physical element becomes possible, it could be added later. August 2021 currently seems like the best solution. Laura and Thorir will put together a program.

We need clear recommendations for ECTS points in order to prevent that different students from different universities receive different points for their participation in the PhD school.

c) The 2022 Conference on Iceland

Whether this can still take place as planned is currently unclear. Last year there was some criticism of Iceland as venue, since it would entail a lot of flying, which might be environmentally irresponsible. A possibility is to go back to the original plan for a 2022 conference in Sweden and postpone Iceland until 2025. However, the pandemic currently makes all options uncertain. It is best if we defer all decisions until next summer, when the future should hopefully be clearer.

5. General brainstorming

Funding: there are currently no real options to apply for external funding, but everyone is encouraged to keep looking for it.

Marketing: one way of getting exposure within the scholarly community is by giving annual awards to young scholars. Charlotte, Helena and Mark will discuss different possibilities and outline a proposal for annual awards to the best Nordic MA thesis on the Middle East. Unfortunately, our financial resources are limited, and in absence of an at least fairly generous contribution (maybe up to 5000 DKK), an award would need several years to become imprinted on the general consciousness and gain an aura of prestige. But something symbolic could be awarded, as well as a certificate.

Another way of getting more exposure would be to arrange annual lectures of more senior scholars. Since the habit of arranging such a lecture would most likely have to be announced at one of the congresses – 2022 the earliest – it is an option that can be discussed further on the next board meeting.

6. Any other business

Next board meeting preliminary to take place in connection with the PhD school in August 2021, preferably physically but otherwise online. If an on-site possibility seems viable, a location will be decided as the PhD school approaches.

7. Meeting ended (15:50)