

## **Address by the President of the NNDR, Patrick Kermit, at the opening of the 17<sup>th</sup> NNDR Conference in Helsinki, Finland**

Dear Rector of the University of Helsinki, Secretary General and distinguished keynotes and conference participants to the 17th Conference of the Nordic Network on Disability research.

I sit before you in my best pinstriped suit and the bowtie I usually wear on these occasions. As for hair, there is little to speak of.

First, I take the opportunity to thank the two former speakers for your welcoming words, and to thank Helsinki university for hosting this conference. Thanks to your generosity, the organizing committee has been able, both, to improve affordability, as well as granting an increased number of stipends for unfunded delegates.

The number of participants attending the NDNR conferences have been increasing steadily over many years and had a significant peak in Reykjavik two years ago. The NNDR Board has been wondering if this was a one-off happening, mainly due to post covid needs to travel and meet people in person. Today, I am happy to say that it was not, we are nearly 700 delegates from all over the world here today, something that consolidates our status as the world's probably largest event dedicated to disability studies and disability research.

So, to returning delegates: A warm welcome back! To those of you who attend for the first time: An especially warm welcome to you!

When we parted ways after the last conference, few of us would have believed that when we met here, we would have witnessed political changes, particularly in the US, that not only affect the life and wellbeing of numerous people inside and outside America, but also specifically targets some of the legal and societal principles that disability research and disability studies have promoted for more than five decades. Right now, universities in the US are pressured to remove or give up programs promoting "DEI": Diversity,

equity, and inclusion, key constituting concepts for much of what we are going to talk about over the next couple of days.

The seriousness of this situation can hardly be overestimated:

At least one American researcher retracted their paper from this conference because they – having immigrant status – feared they would not be let back into the US after attending our conference.

We do promote diversity, equity and inclusion, Yes, I would say we do more than that, many of us are actually invested in promoting and realizing DEI, be it in practices on a micro, meso or macro level of society.

We do this because we are informed, educated and conscious of social injustice and inequality, and if that is “woke”, well, so be it. More importantly, we represent a community of researchers, activists and other disability stakeholders who believe that we can bring the world and those inhabiting it forward by promoting a society that not only postulates, but actually realizes that all humans are “endowed [...] with certain unalienable Rights [such as] Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.”

That is why the NNDR is committed not only to high standards of research, but also to solidarity, interdependence and inclusive practices, and this applies both to our daily struggles, and to the things we do at this conference.

So, what does this mean? Well, I have used this address on several prior occasions to emphasize that this conference’s ambition is to be inclusive, particularly when we engage in discussions, when we argue and when we disagree, and I would say that this is now more important than ever.

Particularly those of you who are here for the first time and might feel nervous because you are to present your paper to people you do not know: The NNDR seeks to provide a safe and secure space for you, so that you get the chance to be recognized and welcomed into our research community.

Come Friday, I will step down as the president of this network after a period of service already overextended because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our democratic traditions and statutes ensure that new and competent hands will

take up where I leave, and probably do a much better job than I have been able to. I urge those of you who are still here Friday afternoon after the closing ceremony, to take the time to attend the network's general assembly, where you will all have the chance to cast your vote for our new board. Until then I wish every one of you a wonderful conference both academically and socially. Thank you!