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Geographical Names**
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Toponymic education

Of relevance to resolution: **IV/5**

E-learning course on the Norwegian Place Name Act

Submitted by Norway **

Summary:

The report contains a discussion on the development, structure, content and experiences to date of an e-learning course and the executive work done on the standardization of geographical names in Norwegian. As with many other countries that have reported previously to the United Nations Group of Expert on Geographical Names, the implementation of standardized name forms is often poor, regardless of the type of regulatory means. The overall goal of the e-learning course is to improve the implementation of standardized forms in accordance with the principles contained in the Norwegian Place Name Act.

The most recent amendment of the Norwegian Place Name Act, which came into force in July 2019, confirmed the role of the Language Council of Norway as the consultative body in the standardizing process. This role includes offering advice on the spelling of a name and on geographical name selection. On behalf of the Norwegian Ministry of Culture, the Council has therefore been given the main responsibility for developing the course.

The target group of the e-learning course is mainly employees in the public sector working on geographical names at the local government (municipal) level. With the use of visual and interactive content, the aim is to engage users and encourage them to learn about geographical names and their importance for society and culture. It is hoped that this course will lead to improved understanding of the rationale behind the Norwegian Place Name Act and make the procedures for standardization better known. The course will be released this spring on www.sprakradet.no and several other relevant webpages in the public sector.

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E-learning course on the Norwegian Place Name Act

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Like many other countries have reported to UNGEGN previously, the implementation of standardized names is often poor, regardless of the type of regulatory means that is applied. This is especially the case at the local level. Norway has come a long way with nearly 200 years of history in standardizing geographical names. Nevertheless, 30 years after the Norwegian Place Name Act came into force, it is still challenging to communicate the administrative procedure, the different standardization principles and, most importantly, the main purpose of the Act – which is to safeguard geographical names as intangible cultural heritage.

The standardization of geographical names is often looked upon as a top-down process, where state institutions, mainly the Norwegian Mapping Authority and the Norwegian Language Council of Norway, are believed to ignore the opinions of the local communities. Although the Mapping Authority is the decision-making body for the vast majority of traditional geographical names in Norway, the municipalities play an important role in all cases of geographical naming within their administrative borders. The municipalities standardize most newer names, typically street names, and facilitates local hearings for all standardization of geographical names (both traditional and newer names).

The administrative work on geographical names in the municipalities varies in terms of both organizational structure and quality. The reasons for these differences are complex and stem from a combination of factors such as size of the municipality, resources, individual initiatives, traditions and language and dialect awareness. Regardless of the reasons, the Language Council, the Mapping Authority and local government employees themselves have all expressed the need for training in standardization for employees at the municipal level. Therefore, the Norwegian Ministry of Cultural Affairs has requested the Language Council to develop an e-learning course on the Norwegian Place Name Act.

The Language Council has already developed three e-learning courses: A course in plain language, a course in Nynorsk (the official variety of written Norwegian based on the majority of the dialects, but in active use only by a minority) and a course in terminology. All these e-learning courses have been welcomed by the users, and the feedback as regards to content, design and utility value are positive. An important feature of the previous online courses is that they work as a check list or tool kit to be used in later work. Another great advantage of e-learning courses in general is that they can reach out to a large number of participants compared to a classroom course. Furthermore, once developed, an e-learning course is cost efficient.

The main goal of the e-learning course on the Place Name Act is to provide a fairly simple introduction to the purpose and contents of the Act and to assist the participants in how to deal with geographical names in their daily work. The course will be released in April/May 2021.

TARGET GROUP

The course is primarily intended for local government employees working with geographical names in the municipalities. This is a highly heterogeneous group of officers with many different backgrounds. They usually have higher education, but within various fields. In small municipalities, there are often only a few people working in the administration, and a single employee may cover a range of fields. It is clearly difficult to describe the target group in a uniform manner, which makes it harder to customize the course.

However, surveys have shown that Norwegian public sector employees in general are motivated and take pride in doing a good job. With this as a starting point, in addition to earlier success with e-learning courses, the Language Council expect the target group to find the course on the Place Name act both motivating and useful. The aim is to make the course both comprehensive and as user-friendly as possible.

COURSE DESIGN AND CONTENT

After a competitive tender in June 2020, the Language Council chose a company to help developing the e-learning course. The Language Council has cooperated with this company on two previous occasions, both of which turned out to be successful. The project group consists of three representants from the Language Council and one representant from the Mapping Authority.

The course includes visual and interactive content used to engage the participants. In the course you will find a combination of plain text, text that is read aloud by an actor, animated videos, music and sound effects, illustrations and practical exercises.

The course has built in a story line where Henrik, an employee working with geographical names in a municipality, plays the leading part. He has a lot of questions related to his work. Kristine, an experienced advisor at the Language Council working with geographical names, and the Mapping Authority both play supporting roles. The course consists of four modules, where the modules structures Henrik's questions, and all modules start with a video. The four modules are:

1. Introduction to the course
2. Presentation of the Place Name Act with regulations
3. Spelling rules and principles for standardization
4. Administrative procedures in geographical name cases

The first module is a short, general introduction, which also stresses the importance of geographical names as cultural heritage. By explaining the rationale behind standardization as a mean to safeguard geographical names, the module aims to motivate the course participants to help preserve local intangible cultural heritage through their daily work.

In the second module, the participants are introduced to the Place Name Act and the regulations to the Act. This module focuses on the sections and parts of the Act which are most relevant for their daily work.

The third module concentrates on spelling rules and principles for standardization of geographical names. This module teaches the participants how to select the "best" name based on for example local topography, local naming practices and functionality. This module addresses some common mistakes in the standardization process, pertaining both to the spelling of geographical names and actual geographical name selection.

In the opening scene of the fourth module, Henrik has questions such as what he is supposed to do and in what order, whom he is supposed to contact and when in the process he should contact them. The fourth module introduces the administrative procedures and clarifies the roles of the municipality and the institutions involved in the standardization of geographical names.

SAMI AND KVEN NAMES

Sami and Kven geographical names are briefly mentioned in the course. However, the process of determining Sami geographical names is the responsibility of the Sami Parliament. Furthermore, the administrative procedure for Sami and Kven geographical names differ somewhat from the procedures of Norwegian names. Therefore, there is a need for a separate e-learning course (or at least a separate module) for the standardization of these indigenous and minority names.

PLANNING AND PRODUCTION

The planning and production of the course is divided into several phases. The most extensive phase was that where the manuscript was written and adapted to fit the e-learning format. At the end of the manuscript phase, a reference group evaluated the manuscript and gave feedback to the project group. The group consists of representatives from the target group, that is employees in the municipalities who are already working with geographical naming. In addition, the reference group consists of members of the Advisory Board for geographical names and representatives from the Mapping Authority.

An early version of the course, the alpha version, has been tested and evaluated by the reference group. A beta version is currently being tested. Every step in the production process is thoroughly evaluated and validated before proceeding to the next step.

When released, probably in April/May, the course will be available at the webpages of the Agency for Public and Financial Management (DFØ) <https://dfo.no/kurs>, as well as on the Language Council's webpages <https://www.sprakradet.no/Vi-og-vart/kurs-og-arrangementer/Sprakradets-kurs/>.

Points for discussion:

- (a) The Group of Experts are invited to express its views on the need to educate employees in the public sector working on geographical names at the local government (municipal) level.
- (b) The Group of Experts are invited to express its views on online courses for toponymic education.
- (c) The Group of Experts are invited examples of similar work carried out in other countries.

The Group of Experts is requested to:

- (1) Express its support for geographical names standardization management as also belonging to the scientific domaine.
- (2) Endorse UNGEGN to continue, and appropriately accelerate, encouraging member states to implement geographical names management training courses according to the principles laid out in UNGSGN Resolution IV/5: Education in cartographic toponymy.