In foreign policy and international relations, the Nordic states have been described as ‘moral superpowers’ (Dahl, 2005), ‘agents of a world common good’ (Bergman, 2007), ‘global good Samaritans’ (Brysik, 2009) or simply ‘good states’ (Lawler, 2005). Domestic features such as the universal social welfare state, consensual democracy, or weak constitutionalism are praised in similar terms. These domestic practices are viewed as not only distinct or exceptional (Esping-Anderson, 1990; Wind, 2010). They are also offered as the reason why Nordic states regularly headline global indexes on human well-being or institutional effectiveness (Hirschl, 2011).

Such conceptions and ideas of the Nordic states can be studied in two primary ways: as instances of national identity construction or as a model for be copied by other states. However, under certain conditions, such identities and models also emerge as brands. Brands tend to possess a number of distinct features. They are relatively stable and specific in nature, created through strategic behaviour, and designed to have purchase in the marketplace of ideas (Browning, 2007). Common requirements for the successful emergence of such brands or labels are the right constellation of actors (e.g. norm entrepreneurs, legitimators and disseminators) and mechanisms for creation and diffusion (Byrkeflot, Pedersen and Svjenova, 2013).

According to some authors, the emergence of Nordic exceptionalism was a branding strategy, whether in full or part. For example, Waever (1992), argues that Nordic identity was mobilised during the Cold War, to demonstrate superiority to a divided and militarised continental Europe. More recently, the Nordic gender brand was mobilised by the Norwegian foreign ministry to gain access to the former US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton (Danielsen, Larsen and Owensen, 2013). Equally, foreign actors of varying political stripes seem to regularly construct or sustain Nordic brands in order to legitimate certain policies. However, authors differ over the extent to which there was a slippage historically between Nordic brands and the actual ‘real’ product (cf. Browning (2007) with Makko (2012)). Nonetheless, there is a growing consensus that the dissonance is increasing. The recent refugee crisis has highlighted the fragility of the brand (e.g. global reaction to the Danish jewellery law) and the strong policy variations between the Nordic states.

The lens of branding is also a useful departure point for unpacking the Nordic model and its paradoxes. By foregrounding political agency, social structures, collective frames and self-understandings (Langford and Schaffer, 2014), a branding analytic helps test common essentialist explanations for Nordic exceptionalism (e.g. values, culture, even biology. This prism also allows us to draw together two separate strands of exceptionalism scholarship: discourse analysis and evaluation of empirical claims.
2. Objectives
The University of Oslo will host a 1.5-day workshop on Nordic Branding on 19-20 May 2016. It will address the following open-ended questions:

1) How are ideas about Nordic identity and models constructed and disseminated?
2) When and where have these Nordic ideas and models emerged as brands?
3) What drives the construction of such branding? Which actors are involved? What are the processes? Have some attempts failed?
4) To what degrees do the brands reflect Nordic realities?
5) How are the brands used? Is it for ‘progressive’ purposes or is there also a dark side?

3. Themes and Methods
The questions will be investigated in a range of areas, including democracy, human rights, peace and conflict, gender, social welfare states, development aid and penal practices. These themes all represent particular values/ideas that can be branded. The approach is inter/multi-disciplinary and methods/perspectives will draw from history, the social sciences, and law. In the last session of the workshop, participants will discuss a potential major research project application to UiO:Norden (deadline 15 August 2016).

4. Coordination
The workshop is coordinated at the University of Oslo by Malcolm Langford, Department of Public and International Law (IOR), Inger Skjelsbæk, Department of Psychology (SV); Sidsel Roalkvam, Centre for Environment and Development (SUM); Ruth Hemstad, Institute for Archaeology, Conservation & History (IAKH); and Johan K. Schaffer, Senior Researcher, Norwegian Centre for Human Rights (NCHR). It is financially supported by UiO:Nordic (a cross-Faculty initiative at the University of Oslo) and the NCHR and IOR. Frida Pareus will be assisting the workshop administratively. Email: f.m.pareus@nchr.uio.no

References