



To: Åse-Marit Kristiansen
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Consultation statement

“Draft of strategy for researcher recruitment and career development”

UiODoc is the interest organisation for PhDs and postdocs at UiO. In this capacity it is our role to promote the academic, professional and social well-being of temporary research staff - an increasingly large group that is responsible for much of the academic knowledge production at Norwegian higher education institutions.

We are happy to see that the strategy for researcher recruitment and career development addresses many of the challenges we observe with early career researchers today, including the culture for temporary employment, lack of career support and a more comprehensive assessment of academic competencies. However, we have some questions and concerns about how the various proposed measures will be implemented and any unwanted consequences they might have, which we describe below.

5.1 To increase interest in taking researcher education among students at Norwegian institutions, employees in the Norwegian labour market and to raise interest in employing doctoral graduates.

We welcome the diversification of opportunities in the duty work component of a PhD as an important means to make the PhD education more relevant for individual candidates and prospective employers in all sectors of society (p. 12). We would, however, like to stress that if this component is restricted to internally funded PhD students, this will exclude a large proportion of the PhD student body from benefiting from this measure. A majority of PhD students (see **Attachment A**) is employed on a 3-year contract consisting of 100% research, with no opportunity to develop any other competencies save in their spare time. If these PhD students are not considered in the strategy, the government will risk wasting a large fraction of the talent and resources present in Norwegian academia right now.

In this regard, we also have a concern about the scaling of the PhD education (p. 13), as the size of the PhD student body is driven to a large extent by the acquisition of external funding, much of which is not regulated by the institutions but relies on national and international funding schemes. We recognise that it is desirable to match supply of and demand for specialised employees with expert knowledge and general research skills, but are concerned that under the prevailing conditions, Norwegian academia will continue to hire more PhDs than either the academic or other sectors can employ post-graduation. We think that the best and most feasible remedy for this is not to restrict the hire of externally funded PhD students (or to push a speedy throughput of these students with minimal qualification), but to invest in the development of these students and ensure they get the same opportunities for training as the internally funded candidates, *i.e.* by offering them a fourth year consisting of duty work.

We would also like to ensure that it remains possible for PhD students to choose how they utilise their duty work component and to prioritise activities that are relevant for them and their career goals – whether this entails the deepening or expanding of academic skills, or the acquisition of particular kinds of non-academic experience.

5.2 To ensure good and predictable frameworks for further developing young research talents.

We encourage the remodelling of the postdoc in accordance with its intended goal: to prepare for a position in academia (p. 15). We are, however, aware that this goal will be difficult to realise without a concomitant increase in permanent positions to absorb these newly trained postdocs, and that in addition to preparation, the chances of getting hired are heavily affected by the number and qualifications of external/international candidates, which are difficult to regulate. We would therefore like to request more specific measures detailing how the postdoc will be restructured so as to meet its intended goal, given the international context of global competition for academic jobs, and especially how the development of an independent research profile will be ensured. We would also like to make sure that prolonging the academic training period by 3-4 years, through a reinforcement of the educational aspects of the postdoc, should not lead to a devaluation of either this position or the PhD. This could be a risk especially if the tenure track position increases in popularity and starts taking Norwegian postdocs as a recruitment base, rather than posing an alternative qualification for a permanent position (p. 16).

We also have a number of concerns about the plan to restrict the utilisation of postdocs to internally funded positions with a length of 3-4 years, that echo previous concerns about the idea to limit temporary employment to one postdoc (p. 15). Firstly, since this measure will reduce the number of postdocs available, we are worried it will limit the career opportunities for young researchers. Secondly, given the increasing project-orientation of research (p. 7), it is likely that the demand for short-term employment will persist, and will take on other forms once the postdoc becomes restricted (p. 19). In this respect, we are particularly worried about the increase in fixed-term positions in the researcher category (see **Attachment B**), that are hard to define and hard to monitor, because that often don't have the same benefits and training opportunities as PhDs and postdocs have. To avoid this

'dead end' in career development, there should be increased funding to hire more permanent researchers that can fill the need for specialist knowledge and expertise in externally funded projects when the postdoc as primary labour force is no longer an option.

Thirdly, external funding instruments remain important opportunities for young researchers to build their resume and demonstrate their scientific independence and interests (p. 16). We would therefore like to emphasise how important it is that these remain accessible to both PhD candidates as well as postdocs, and that adequate administrative support is given to those pursuing them. Particularly, we would like to make sure that the eligibility criteria of these grants cannot be designed in such a way that prevents PhDs and postdocs from applying. At the same time, we realise that recent PhD graduates are often unable to compete in these processes by nature of their limited (postdoctoral) experience. We therefore argue for the expansion of external funding instruments specifically targeting current or recently graduated PhDs, to give talented candidates with an interest in pursuing an academic career an opportunity to develop and demonstrate these skills early on.

Finally, we recognise the need to improve the career opportunities and integration of international researchers (both PhDs and postdocs) into the Norwegian working environment, and agree that the provision of Norwegian language training (free of charge) would be one of the most elemental and effective ways to achieve this (text box p. 15). However, we would like to stress that the country of origin or education of the new recruit should not be a guiding factor in deciding where the mobility of the postdoc (if any) takes place (p. 16). While we think it is an excellent opportunity for both Norwegian and international researchers to expand their experience and skills through training in other sectors and/or research groups in Norway or abroad, we think that the ultimate choice for academic or non-academic and Norwegian or international mobility and collaboration should depend on the ambitions of the individual and the needs of the project, more than their professional history.

5.3 To strengthen career guidance in and outside of research and higher education.

We recognise the need for better access to career services for PhDs and postdocs (p. 17), as many such services are now oriented towards the BSc and MSc stage of education. In this regard, we think it is a good idea to have independent mentors in addition to the main supervisors (text box p. 15, p. 18), which are able to give more qualified, diverse and neutral career advice. The mobilisation of role models and alumni networks to strengthen this initiative is also a welcome move if implemented as a complementary system to the mentoring scheme, but we caution against overly relying on these volunteers, as we believe that in the first instance, guidance should be available through mentors who are specifically trained and employed for this purpose.

We also feel the need to stress that even with such a mentoring scheme, supervisors should continue to receive adequate training in mentoring and supervising PhDs and postdocs, as they still serve as a gateway to career advice and services offered through the university in

practice. Knowledge of and experience in dealing with psychosocial well-being is especially important in light of the increased prevalence of mental health problems among PhDs and postdocs (occupational health services unit, personal communication; [Nature, 2019](#)), so we highly encourage the inclusion of these skills in current and future mentoring and supervision training schemes. Finally, it is our hope that the career guidance offered to PhDs and postdocs is designed in such a way that it does not become an administrative burden on the early career researcher. If sufficiently flexible with regards to individual needs and implemented correctly, we believe that reinforced career guidance at all stages will be highly beneficial not only to the PhDs and postdocs but also to the institutions.

5.4 To develop a stronger culture for research and personnel leadership at the higher education and research institutions.

We have already mentioned some barriers to removing the culture for temporary employment in section 5.2. Specifically, we are worried that the development of a new culture will be difficult without structural changes in the financing of new (permanent) positions. While we agree with the strengthening of hiring competences, and broader use of the job position structure, we realise there may be little scope for action if departments lack basic funding to hire permanent researchers. In addition, the increasing prevalence of project-based research requires the versatile appointment of researchers on different projects and ongoing training and development of researchers who carry out specialised tasks. Since the strategy does not mention any measures or follow-up to support the institutions in this transition towards more stable and permanent employment, we are curious to know how the ministry proposes to facilitate the realisation of their expectations.

5.5 To clarify and further develop the ministry's governance and regulation instruments.

In general, we wholeheartedly support the strengthening of recruitment and career development policies, but we think the specific measures could be fine-tuned to facilitate their implementation. We are specifically wary that the culture for temporary hires cannot change without strong intervention in the economic incentives (such as funding sources and conditions) that shape the current implementation of the recruitment laws and regulations. As such, we think that clarification and development of the latter will not be sufficient without strong institutional safeguards that facilitate compliance and an accurate interpretation on the side of the institutions.

We thank the university for the opportunity to give input on this strategy through an internal hearing, and hope the interests and concerns of temporary employees will receive appropriate attention in the final consultation statement of the university.

On behalf of UiODoc,

Margret Veltman

President

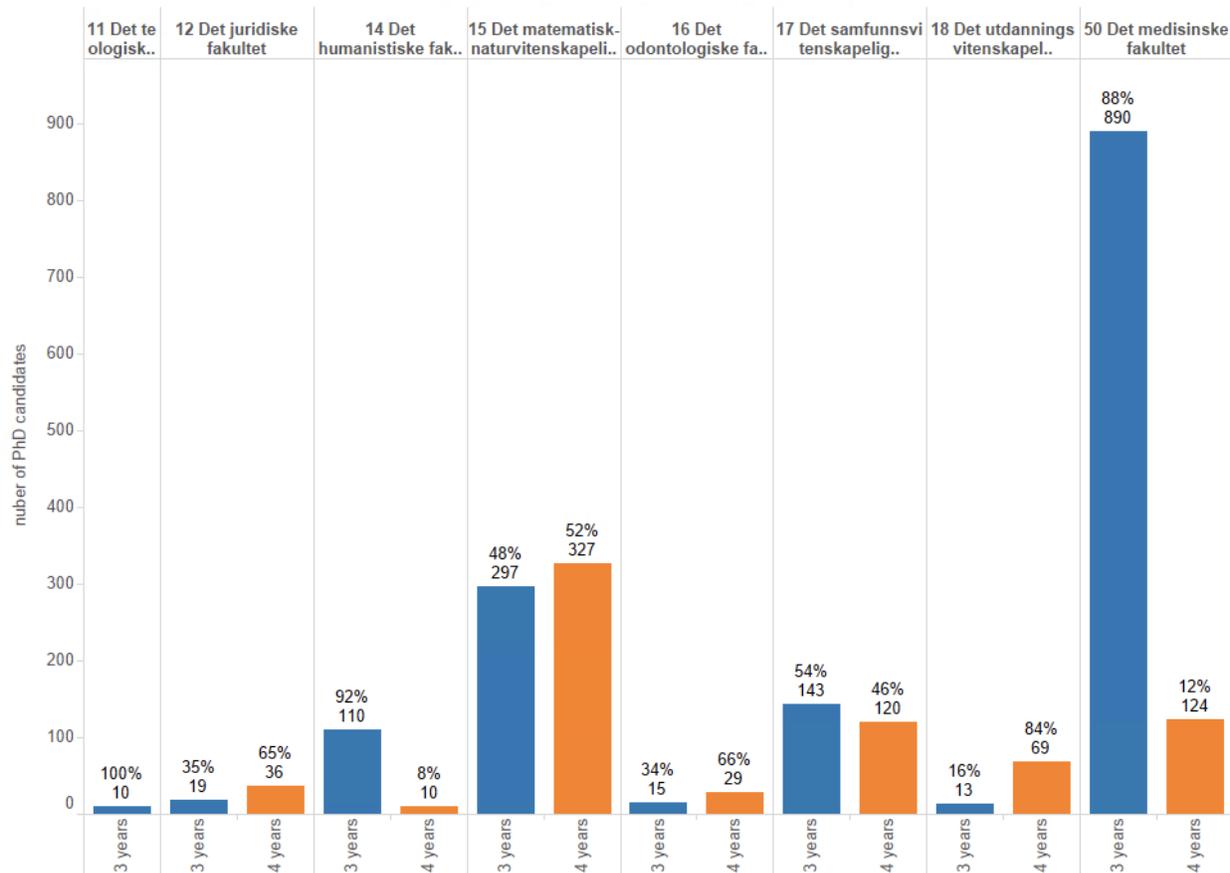
Michael Goul Larsen

Secretary

Attachment

A. Number of PhDs on 3-year and 4-year contracts

Number of PhD-candidates with active doctoral agreement by 25. May 2021. Categorised by faculty and programme length of 3 or 4 years



B. Number of researchers in temporary positions (2016-2020):

2016: 385
2017: 408
2018: 411
2019: 419
2020: 436