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Input for Consultation – Long Term Plan for Research and Higher Education

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 central to much of the knowledge production at Norwegian higher education institutions. As such, we would like to thank the University for consulting this important group of employees in the drafting of their consultation statement.

We have read the University's draft consultation statement concerning the renewal of the Long Term Plan (LTP) for Research and Higher Education with interest, and would hereby like to share our comments. As requested, these comments focus on the question whether we think the current draft contains all the necessary elements, although we have added some comments on elements we think should be approached angled differently as well.

We will first offer some comments about the general response to the LTP and then our specific input on specific questions posed by the Ministry. While we have mostly confined our answers to the position PhD and postdocs within the Norwegian knowledge sector, we have made some additional remarks not restricted to the early career phase where we thought they could be useful.

Part 1: A long-term plan that addresses Norway's needs in the short and long term

Consider how collaboration with Norway will benefit low-income countries

We are part of a global knowledge community (p. 3): The draft correctly highlights that we are part of a global knowledge society, and we agree that the LTP should consider the Norwegian knowledge economy in relation to the international academic landscape.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the youngest age bracket of researchers: PhDs and postdocs, more than 50% of which are non-Norwegian nationals.

We notice that the draft focuses particularly on low-income countries as places of strategic interest for future collaboration. While we agree that Norway should strive to be an attractive place for international students and researchers, we would like to ensure that the attraction of these foreign talents fits within the philosophy ascribed to the collaborative programmes and developmental aid funds mentioned, in that they promote the development of these countries and their knowledge base and not in the first place serve to enrich Norway's knowledge economy and research environment. The knowledge sector of Norway should not only adapt to increasing globalisation by strengthening its competitive position, it should also consider what it exports in participating in the trend of globalisation.

We would therefore like to urge the government and the higher education sector to make sure that any financing instruments that are meant to attract researchers from low-income countries will enable the same standard of living and working conditions that PhD students and postdocs from other countries enjoy, and that there should not be any material differentiation between researchers coming to Norway within the framework of international development and collaboration and others. This goes especially for exchange PhD students or guest researchers, who might be visiting Norway temporarily on a salary or stipend that falls outside the Norwegian collective labour agreements and who are therefore not as well protected.

Promoting democracy and equality within Norwegian academia and the global academic community also means that the possible implications of an Africa strategy for Africa need to be carefully thought through. Education, collaboration and training should not only benefit the most affluent members of a low-income society, lest it increases inequality, but also empower students and researchers in less privileged positions.

Part 2: Answers to specific questions from the consultation letter

- 1. What changes in society (or in sectors) will require changes or intensified efforts in research and higher education in the years to come?*

Recognise the material consequences of digitalisation

Digitalisation (p. 5): The current version of the draft gives the impression that digitalisation is a completely virtual process. We believe that such a characterisation overlooks the material reality of digitalisation, which like any industry, will consume energy, resources and can impact our health, hence influencing many of the Sustainable Development Goals. We believe that it is therefore necessary to ground the digitisation process onto its physical reality as is already done at the EU level ([Öko-Institut v.E., 2019](#)). We believe that only through a concrete and holistic approach to digitisation that explicitly takes into account its links with other environmental and societal concerns (as mentioned on p. 4), we as a society can effectively respond to these interconnected changes in society.

Prioritise physical infrastructure for research and education, now more than ever

In addition, we would like to emphasise the ongoing need for a physical infrastructure to support the activities of the academic community, despite the possibilities of digital technology. Covid-19 has shown precisely how much students and staff need the physical and social working environment to thrive and do well. Learning does not only happen by

watching recorded lectures or doing online assignments, and neither do novel ideas arise solely through remote desktop analyses and zoom meetings – it happens in the spontaneous meeting places in between, where chance interactions can lead to unexpected insights and new collaborations. We write more about the importance of physical infrastructure for the PhD and postdoc community under section 9. *Other input: Buildings.*

2. *Are there specific obstacles in the Norwegian knowledge system that weaken the achievement of goals for the long-term plan, and if so, what can be done?*

Address precarious employment and invest in the development of young researchers

With regards to the LTP goal to develop research communities of outstanding quality, we see several hindrances in retention of young research talent that are not addressed in the current draft. The first hindrance concerns the strong culture of temporary employment; the second the increasingly complex and rigid standards of performance that researchers are expected to meet; and the third the tendency towards viewing unfinished projects as “collateral” within the academic struggle for survival.

Many of the problems with temporary employment were already addressed in our input to the strategy on researcher recruitment and career development in May, but we would like to reiterate some of these here. The current draft places a lot of emphasis on excellent research environments, but very little on developing and retaining excellent *researchers*. Free basic research is done by researchers who are ‘free’. This freedom does not only entail a freedom to pursue their own interests and intuition, but also a freedom from obstacles, especially the stifling worries of whether one will have a job next year, where that job will be, how much it will pay and whether one should not be working harder to get it. None of these conditions aid the peace of mind that is required to perform great, visionary, long-term studies. In contrast: they incentivise low risk projects, short-term thinking and corner-cutting – anything to ensure the fast track to publication.

The proliferation of academic performance metrics is exacerbating this trend, with increasing areas of competence being subsumed in a numbers-based ranking system that is used to single a smaller and smaller percentage of candidates for jobs among a large pool that are already qualified. We consider the excessive focus on metrics an obstacle not just because it is time-consuming to survey and report, but also because it presents a “construction of excellence” that might have little to do with differences in competence and the actual needs of the job.

Lastly, the Covid-19 crisis has shown not just that excellent research is needed for emergency preparedness, but ironically also how easily the government and higher education institutions swap the potential for excellence in one generation for the promise of the next. The growing numbers of highly qualified, temporary researchers in the global academic market renders them exchangeable in a way that, without strong governance intervention, promotes a rapid turnover and minimises personal investment. As a result, we see strong reluctance to extend the contracts of an entire cohort of PhD students and postdocs who are struggling to complete their research in a satisfactory manner due to conditions beyond their control – with unfinished projects and unrealised potential as a result – opposite extreme readiness to promote graduation and hiring of new PhDs.

We urge the University and the government to not leave their PhDs and postdoc hanging in this crisis, but to treat their early career researchers as an investment that will pay off in the future: the Norwegian knowledge nation will have to be built on them. The current crisis and lack of sustainable career perspectives in Norwegian academia is liable to disenfranchise a generation of researchers if it is not managed well, and thereby to lose out on important talent. Research communities of outstanding quality are built on people. If the LTP and the higher education institutions led by it do not consider how to identify, nurture and retain these people, it will significantly limit the institutional capacity to achieve this goal of the LTP. We therefore argue to give the creation of more stable career perspectives and a long-term vision on academic development a central place in the long-term plan as well.

- 3. What should be continued and what should be changed by the goals in the current long-term plan?*

We fully agree with the input provided here.

- 4. What should be continued and what should be changed by the priorities in the current long-term plan?*

Attract international talent with long-term funding opportunities

Basic research (p. 8): We are in agreement with the alternative framework that UiO proposes, describing five long-term priorities and three cross-cutting dimensions, which we think is an improvement on the goals listed in the current LTP. We are especially happy to see that the current draft emphasises the importance of basic research and of long-term funding to guarantee that curiosity-driven research can flourish. In this respect, we have a comment regarding the proposal to establish a Norwegian version of the ERC (p. 9). We wish that the suggestion for a Norwegian ERC also aspires to have the international outlook that the European version has. We also believe that the kind of longer-term framework offered by funding programmes such as the ERC will be decisive to attract the best possible talents at UiO and reach the various goals outlined. Critically, the stability such programmes provide to a researcher's work is necessary for the breadth and depth of investigation that produce the transformative ideas required to reach the government's long-term goals.

- 5. What kind of escalation plans should the new long-term plan have, and how and in what areas should they be set up?*

Match the growth in PhDs and postdocs with an increase in permanent academic jobs

Previous escalation plans have steered towards an expansion of the PhD and postdoc employee categories. We believe that this growth is unsustainable, without a matching increase in the number of permanent academic jobs. PhD candidates require high quality supervision, which is increasingly under pressure due to the increased student body and bureaucratic "overload" mentioned on p. 7. In addition, with the new Norwegian postdoc model there will be fewer chances for PhD students to continue in Norwegian academia after their disputation. The precariousness of academic employment is plaguing young

researchers everywhere, but we believe that the Norwegian system is an excellent position to offer better conditions and to truly nurture (and retain) academic talent, if it offers longer-term support and funding to budding scientists in the early stage of their careers. Rather than further increasing temporary employment – which risks creating an academic proletariat of contingent employees without job security – if there is any area where expansion is required, we think it is the amount of structural funding that can be allocated to permanent salaried positions.

6. *Are there areas that can be prioritized down or possible efficiency measures that can be implemented to ensure room for maneuver for priority escalations?*

Don't stabilise bureaucracy – reduce it

The number of salaried employees at a university is understandably bound by organisational and financial limitations. However, we are convinced that temporary and permanent research staff could make more and better use of their research time if they were less burdened by reporting demands, and that more (permanent) research staff could be hired for the same research budget if fewer employees are needed in the reporting, review and auditing processes surrounding research. We realise that bureaucracy expands more easily than it contracts and that setting cap on the “overload” mentioned on p. 7 might be the more pragmatic thing to ask, but we think that UiO can go even further and ask for a reduction in the reporting requirements, as these do not only affect the management layers of the universities, but also the academic workforce themselves, and place a strain on the entire institutional system without noticeable gain.

7. *If instruments are to be developed for social missions / "missions" in Norway, how should they be arranged, and in which areas are social missions particularly relevant?*

Give more freedom within the scope of externally funded projects

We agree with the current draft in that it is not clear to what extent these “missions” will overlap or complement the current priority areas of the LTP, and that it should not crowd out the possibilities to do basic, curiosity-driven research. We also think there should be relative freedom in designing mission-oriented research, and that it should not be restricted to applied research with clear outcomes. Blue skies research can have unforeseen benefits for society in the future, and in this respect, it is crucial that universities and researchers retain a degree of autonomy over which themes and topics they would like to pursue.

We would like to highlight one problem with delineating desired research outcomes prior to receiving (project-bound) funding, which is that it can impose a significant constriction on the academic freedom of the researcher that will be hired to carry out the work already before they start. We believe this is not conducive to the professional and academic development of the temporary research staff – often postdocs – employed in these projects, who are particularly in need of demonstrating independence and original thinking at this stage in their careers and should as much as possible be able to pursue their own interests.

8. *What is the most important thing that can be done to ensure a high level of trust in research-based knowledge in the population?*

Strengthen university democracy as a sign of a healthy academic environment

Knowledge about knowledge (p. 19): We wholeheartedly agree that a lively debate and open discourse are central to a healthy academic community, and necessary to uphold the democratic principles and values that should characterise higher education. We believe that in this respect, UiO could represent an inspiration for democratic vitality for the rest of Norwegian society. In order to live up to such an ideal, these democratic principles should be embedded, lived and expressed within all corners of the university.

We therefore encourage all efforts towards a more formal and concrete commitment to ensure the highest realisation of university democracy. These could include more institutional support for outreach to make UiO's political life more inclusive, a greater consideration for and training of staff representatives to ensure they can effectively voice the interests of their constituents and, and steps towards increased ethnic, linguistic, national and gender diversity within the democratic governance at UiO. We believe that it is only through this perpetual betterment of UiO's democracy that our university can remain credible as an embodiment of these essential values to Norwegian society.

While freedom of expression, open debate and the possibility to dissent are important hallmarks of a healthy academy, these values cannot only emerge from within the education sector – they need to be upheld outside as well. We would like to see this section expanded with some specific examples of threats and how to safeguard against these threats, beyond the need for training in critical thinking and dialogue in primary schools and secondary schools, since the latter will likely not have an effect until these school children will reach college age.

9. *Other input*

Allocate real estate to housing for international researchers

Buildings (p. 21): We also understand that infrastructure and buildings in particular represent a central element in the long-term strategy for Norwegian research and education. While we welcome the overall effort towards actualising the current building stock to align with the changes in Norwegian society, we think more consideration should be given to the situation of international students and staff and to the importance for dedicated learning and research infrastructures despite the opportunities offered by digitalisation.

The Covid-19 crisis has highlighted inequalities in the living conditions among students and staff. This is particularly true with regards to the capacity for remote working which varies greatly among members of UiO. This situation demonstrates the crucial role played by UiO infrastructures in guaranteeing the necessary learning and working environment for all its members regardless of their individual life circumstances. In this regard, incoming international staff should be given particular attention, and we are acutely aware of the growing need for housing within this particular group, which faces particular challenges related to language, network and dependents on top of a growingly tense housing market. Just recently, ISMO (17 August 2021, personal communication) has confirmed that more than 50% of the research staff at UiO is currently composed of non-

Norwegian nationals, and the vast majority of these struggle to find accommodation when they arrive, with the waiting time for university housing often amounting to several months. Offering accommodation and other support to (visiting) international researchers should be a central consideration in UiO's management of existing real estate and decisions related to building new infrastructure. This is especially true if UiO wants to meet the government's goals for attracting international talent and strengthening the position of Norway internationally.

Furthermore, we wish to remind the Ministry of the importance of dedicated infrastructures to match the pedagogical and research needs of different fields. The current use of digitisation in the Ministry's goal suggests a re-purposing of existing buildings to consolidate the trend towards greater digitalisation of university activity. We hope this effort won't come at the expense of the necessary investment in infrastructure and equipment to support the growing body of local and international academic staff called for by the ambitious long-term goals set by the government.

We would like to thank the University for preparing the draft and inviting us to provide comments, and for taking the considerations of the PhDs and postdocs at UiO on board in their final consultation statement.

On behalf of UiODoc,

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