

Stipendiatororganisasjonene i Norge

Quarterly meeting

Date: 27.05.2021

Time: 17:00

Place: Zoom

Agenda

1. SiN resolutions
 - a. Effects of the pandemic
 - b. Proposal for new academic position structure and guide for career assessment
 - c. Strategy for researcher recruitment and career development and long term plan for research and higher education
2. Institutional support for member organisations
3. Various

Attendees

Sin board: (**bold** = also leader of a member organisation)

- Present: Yannik, **Margret**, **Camilla**, Ingvild, Grace, Bikal (arrived late)
- Absent: Idd Andrea, Miro

Member organisations: (**bold** = also a SiN board member)

- Present: Runa Wolden (IBA-PhD, IBA), Oddbjørn Klomsten Andersen (NIHSPO, NIH), Martin Brattmyr (DION, NTNU), **Camilla Holm** (PhD-Forum, OsloMet) Henrik Siepelmeier (UiADoc, UiA), Mareike Brehmer (UiADoc, UiA), Immanuel Reim (UiBDoc, UiB), **Margret Veltman** (UiODoc, UiO), Hui Cheng (UiSDC, UiS), Steffi Schenzle (TODOS, UiT)
- Absent: Camilla Gjellebak (HiØ), Damiano Maggi (NHHDoc, NHH), Vinay Nannuru (SoDoC, NMBU)

Minutes

Meeting start: 17:05

1. SiN resolutions

SiN has the aim to publish short public statements on topical issues affecting PhDs and postdocs in Norway. The board wishes to represent the views of the member organisations in these statements, and has selected three different topics to gather input on today: 1) effects of the pandemic, including research delays, 2) a proposal for a new academic position structure and guide for career assessment (reports by UHR), and 3) the new strategy for researcher recruitment and career development and the long term plan for research and higher education

(consultations from the ministry). Each of these topics is introduced briefly with a powerpoint and followed by a discussion.

a. Effects of the pandemic

Ingvild introduces the topic. Yannik summarises her presentation in three broad issues: that extensions are assessed on an individual basis, that the situation is bound to get worse than we can see now (i.e. the effects of the pandemic will persist and have consequences for academia and young researchers long after the pandemic is over), and that despite the institutions underspending because of corona, it is still very difficult for PhDs to get contract extensions. Yannik opens the floor for comments.

At UiA PhD students received the information that they can always apply for extensions regardless of the grounds. Mareike (UiA) asks if other organisations received the same information? Individual assessment creates a situation where people have to argue for their subjective experiences of causes of delay. Different universities have different processes that are either not well communicated or not transparent enough. This is one of the main reasons why a common solution would be desirable. Camilla (OsloMet) underscores how different the institutions are and that SiN will continue to push for a blanket extension of at least two months, if (and only if) our member organisations agree with it. Yannik would like to subject this suggestion to a vote after people have had a chance to comment and ask questions.

Henrik (UiA) asks what the status is of our ongoing work regarding extensions. Ingvild explains that we are now focusing on trying to make the government understand the problem, and that we are choosing a media approach where we join forces with other Scandinavian doctoral organisations in writing an opinion piece. Henrik mentions concerns that a blanket extension will not be able to accommodate the differences in delays that people are experiencing, and that he would be rather in favour of better ways to quantify and measure delays. Margret clarifies that the blanket extension would be a minimum rather than a fixed extension for everyone, and that is precisely a way to cover for those intangible delays that are caused by reasons that are difficult to document or quantify. Henrik adds that in addition to the option to apply for more than two months, there should be an option (for individuals) to opt out of the blanket extension completely, because not everyone will need one. Martin (NTNU) argues that we will not benefit from splitting up in smaller groups, but that it is important there is one proposal we can all stand behind. Henrik further asks if we have an overview of how the extensions were handled by different institutions. Margret mentions that the UHR survey has conducted a survey among universities asking how they dealt with the extension application process, and that SiN submitted a reply on behalf of our member organisations earlier in February, and that it might be possible to see the results. In addition, it might be possible for member organisations to ask for data through their own institutions, and then compile this into a national overview. This might allow SiN to assess the differences.

Oddbjørn (NIH) mentions that almost all PhDs at NIH have gotten two months extensions during the first round, but that it is unlikely that NIH can cover the extensions that people are applying for right now in the second round. This means that people will have to argue and compete for the available resources, with limited success.

Steffi (UiT) has noticed lack of information about extensions and even active discouragement to apply at UiT, which TODOS has tried to counteract by notifying and encouraging their members to apply. UiT has now implemented new deadlines for extension applications. Steffi also mentions that there are not just delays in research, but also in the educational component of

PhDs, due to cancelled courses. Margret confirms this is an issue especially for students who are obliged to take courses through their own institution where course offerings are limited. Several years ago an initiative was launched to establish a national database for listing graduate level courses, which would make it easier for PhD students to find alternative courses across Norway. Such a database would really help right now, but the plan has been queued at UNIT (the directorate for ICT and joint services in higher education and research) for a long time. SiN could inquire about this initiative at UHR and try to promote its implementation.

Camilla (OsloMet) has had a meeting with their rectorate today to land a new solution for “infrastructural delays”, which are caused by the cascading effects of an impoverished research environment. To compensate for this, OsloMet will organise a “booster month” this Fall which aims to provide a social environment and provide academic networking opportunities. Camilla suggests this is something we could also include in our resolution on the pandemic. Yannik suggests that we draft a short statement with these proposals to send around next week for a brief round of review, before settling on an agreed standpoint that we can publish on our website. Henrik suggests we give this discussion a few more minutes if people still feel like they have something to add. Margret summarises the points recorded until now to see if it is more or less complete (blanket extension, more inclusive criteria, and other measures to compensate for the missing research environment). Additional points that are mentioned are: the possibility to redirect money from other sources, and the undesirability of deadlines. While it should be possible to organise extension applications on a rolling basis, the possibilities to reallocate funding towards extensions might be limited because budgets are often earmarked.

b. Proposal for new academic position structure and guide for career assessment

Margret introduces the topic. Yannik summarises the presentation in two main points: the merging of the senior researcher/lecturer positions into a common first position and top position, as well as the strengthening of the postdoc position as a preparation for obtaining a permanent position.

Immanuel poses the questions what sort of consequences this new position structure will have for the competition for jobs between people who did a postdoc in Norway versus abroad. Margret emphasises that the restriction of being able to do only one postdoc in Norway was lifted precisely in recognition of this fact. In this new proposal, the duration of postdocs is also lengthened, in the hope that a Norwegian postdoc will provide more opportunities than some postdocs obtained elsewhere. Immanuel agrees that three to four years is indeed very long and almost unheard of abroad.

Camilla asks whether Forskerforbundets alternative could solve some of the perceived issues of incompatibility with the international system? Margret explains that the separation of the top position proposed by Forskerforbundet is indeed meant to remedy this perceived mismatch and protect the special status of professors vis à vis researchers and lecturers.

Martin says the problem is that there are not enough tenure positions, so no matter what is proposed to change the postdoc, the lack of permanent positions will limit the throughput of postdocs to professorships. Henrik mentions this leads us to the question how (Norwegian) professors are hired. What are considered important criteria in the hiring process? Emmanuel argues that an important function of the postdoc is that it gives you experience where you lack experience (e.g. teaching), which makes the Norwegian postdoc kind of unique. Linking back to the hiring criteria for professors, Margret thinks the top position will create problems in establishing clear hiring criteria, because the role description is too vague and/or diverse,

opening up space for arbitrary decisions. Henrik wonders how familiar internationals are with the different positions and levels in Norwegian academia - would it matter to them what a position is called?

Margret poses the question whether we can agree on something to include in a resolution. In this respect, Yannik agrees with Camilla to promote the alternative position structure put forward by Forskerforbundet. At the same time he stresses that while the plans may look nice on paper, their implementation and effects in practice may be limited. How can we make sure that postdocs will not be exploited in the future system either? Margret says that many of these questions are connected to the new strategy for researcher recruitment and career development, and that it might make sense to discuss the next topic before arriving at a summary or conclusion of this issue.

c. Strategy for researcher recruitment and career development and long term plan for research and higher education

Camilla introduces the topic. Yannik summarises briefly by highlighting that the focus of both policies is to make academic jobs more relevant for society. Henrik argues that the extension of the postdoc is not the best way to fix academic career paths, and questions whether this will be good for the individual researchers. Margret reiterates that the main focus of the strategy and the long term plan is to build and retain competences for Norwegian society.

Yannik agrees that one of the concerns is to stop brain drain. Camilla brings up how this relates to the other goal of the recruitment strategy, which is to increase diversity. Henrik wonders why it is a bad thing to have a large proportion of international applicants for academic jobs in Norway. Margret clarifies that the imbalance in the recruitment basis refers mostly to women and ethnic minorities among Norwegian applicants, which needs to be diversified, and is not necessarily about reducing the number of foreign applicants. At the same time it is understandable that the government tries to make a PhD education more attractive among Norwegian students and employees, because they want more people with a PhD education across all sectors in Norway.

Henrik (UiA) likes the idea of having a clearer connection between postdocs and professorships and a more guided approach to the postdoc phase with room for development, but is worried that the way it is proposed right now it places more emphasis on people staying in Norway which is not something we should necessarily support from the perspective of young research career ambitions. The proposal would work well if doing a Norwegian postdoc would make it more likely to get a permanent position in Norway, but then why not turn the postdoc into a tenure track position instead?

Margret observes that the tenure track exists but does not seem to be a very popular solution right now, and wonders why not. Institutions seem to be struggling with this new kind of career phase. Yannik says this again has to do with how academic jobs are funded. Immanuel (UiB) brings up the current lack of recognition of PhDs degrees outside of academia. Ideally, employers in industry should acknowledge a PhD, because if they don't recognise the value (as a qualification for a well-paid job), then there won't be an incentive for students to start or finish a PhD if they want to end up in industry. Mareike (UiA) does a PhD in education, and knows that many of her Norwegian colleagues (who have a family and a mortgage) went significantly down in salary when they started their PhD. Extending the postdoc phase would prolong this situation of financial stability. Doing a postdoc at all would therefore become less attractive and academia will lose out on valuable talent. Henrik thinks that the

interaction between PhDs and industry and/or the public sector needs to be strengthened and developed more.

Oddbjørn (NIH) wrote a proposal to increase innovation and entrepreneurial capacity among PhDs at NIH. Not everyone will go for tenure in academia, so how to make the PhD more relevant? Margret observes that we seem to agree with the government that PhD education needs to be made more relevant for non-academic sectors and non-academic sectors need to better see the relevance of PhD education. One of the main bottlenecks to achieving this is that most PhDs right now are on a 3-year contract without any duty work, making it impossible to gain this experience and transferable skills during work hours. Yannik says this problem is caused by the funding of PhD positions, and that externally funded PhDs (who are more frequently on 3-year contracts) went from being the exception to being the rule.

Ingvild says the benefits of duty work should not be overestimated, because there can be little flexibility in deciding what it consists of. It is proposed that SiN should argue for the right of people to choose whether they want to do a short (three years) or a long (four years) PhD, and make sure that duty work is flexible. Immanuel stresses that especially teaching and supervision are valuable means to acquire the (leadership) skills which are the first step towards becoming a professor. Margret highlights that people on a 3-year contract sometimes want to acquire the same skills, but do not get compensated for any extra non-research activities. It varies by institution whether PhD students are paid for e.g. additional supervision or teaching, but at UiO and OsloMet there are cases where PhDs are encouraged to take on these extra duties without compensation. Ingvild mentions that even when people do have duty work, most of the teaching falls on the shoulders of Norwegians and that they have no choice but to teach, whereas international PhD students have to look for other opportunities to fill their duty hours

Margret asks whether SiN can propose that the opportunity to have a percentage of non-research duties should be available to all postdocs and PhDs, regardless of funding source, and that the type of duties should in principle be flexible? Henrik agrees in principle, but like Immanuel is convinced that teaching will still be some of the most relevant experience you can gain. Yannik thinks there is a need for more basic funding and more stable funding. In this respect, Margret is sceptical that the reduction in the number of postdocs will be filled with permanent hires, and worries that it will instead lead to other kinds of (unfavourable) temporary hires (such as researchers on fixed-term contracts) that may have even fewer opportunities for career development than postdocs do now. If this is the case, then that would be a step back from our current model.

Follow up: The SiN board will summarise the three discussions and try to come up with resolutions that are representative of the member organisations' points of view. These resolutions will be shared together with the introductory powerpoints and minutes of this meeting, so the leaders will have a chance to review and discuss them internally within their board. The aim is to publish the final versions of these statements before the summer holidays (in June).

2. Institutional support for member organisations

Margret has sent out a request for information describing how member organisations are supported by their universities financially and infrastructurally. Many people have replied already. Due to lack of time we won't discuss it today, but the board will compile and compare the results and share a short summary with the member organisations once all the results are in, including a proposal on what forms of support SiN would like to promote.

3. Various

Two topics were raised in connection to travel and visa issues caused by the pandemic. These topics were also raised in the new Teams platform that was set up for leaders of local organisations. The discussion can be continued there, and it will also be addressed at the next monthly meeting of the SiN board in June.

Meeting end: 19:20



Stipendiatorganisasjonene i Norge

Org. nr: 885 485 472

Margret Veltman

Dato: 27.05.2021