

Response from SiN to UHR on their *Guide for assessment of academic careers*

Submitted on June 18th 2021 via their response form

How to work with the assessment of academic careers

The input will contribute to UHR's further follow-up of the work with career assessment.

Q7: The working group's main proposal is to establish a comprehensive framework for assessing academic careers which:

- balancing quantitative and qualitative goals and forms of documentation for academic quality and competence
- enabling different career paths and promotes high quality in the three key areas: education, research and interaction with society
- recognizing the independence and individual competencies of academic staff and their achievements in groups and through collaboration
- valuing open research practices
- encouraging high quality academic management

Any comments can be posted here:

SiN is the Association of Doctoral Organisations in Norway. As such, we represent the interests of PhDs and postdocs in the national policy arena, and we will hence focus our input on aspects of the framework that are of importance to our members.

We are very enthusiastic about the trends towards a broader and more inclusive assessment of academic experience. We specifically welcome the shift away from a system dominated by quantitative metrics towards a more holistic and qualitative approach, and from the singular focus on research towards other activities and competence areas that are central to academia. What sets NOR-CAM apart from other (similar) initiatives across Europe, is the explicit intention that the research environment as a whole should encompass a range of skills, not each and every individual researcher, and the ambition to balance the competences of new hires with the needs of the research group.

While we agree with the contention that “everybody should not do everything” and welcome an increased appreciation of collaboration and teamwork in research, we do think there should be

room for diversity here also: academia should be able to accommodate both natural team players and those who like to work independently. We are worried that when a demonstrated ability to collaborate becomes integral to the assessment process, researchers with an excellent track record in solo projects will be evaluated negatively. Academia needs independent thinkers: an undue focus on the merits of teamwork could marginalise otherwise excellent researchers - who are nonetheless part of the social academic system through peer review and knowledge dissemination - which would be a loss for the research environment.

We also like the flexibility in assessment criteria that can be tailored to a variety of different career paths. In that light, we are wondering how this guide is considered to work in relation to the proposed new academic position structure in the Husebekk report, where academic career paths will be merged at the top in one joint top position. We fear that a joint position like this will not be the best foundation for implementing a flexible assessment tool like NOR-CAM, when there is no guidance on when to assess individuals against which competence areas. An open position structure like this will leave space for reverting back towards the currently dominant mode of assessment: by quantifying research output. We would therefore like to see the diversity of competences and assessment embodied in this toolbox reflected in a position structure with clearly delineated career paths (such as the alternative put forward by ForskerForbundet), that make it more intuitive to decide which competence areas to focus on for which positions.

We agree that the assessment of academic quality should be supported by increased transparency in what is considered meritorious, and by good design of local processes of recruitment and hiring. We do, however, recognise that the principles of open science and diversity are additional criteria that will interact with the assessment of merit. Changing the assessment criteria to incentivise open science and promote diversity, should not be confused with increasing quality of research. Instead, these principles embody separate values that interact with the assessment and hiring process. We therefore encourage the UHR to acknowledge that internal trade-offs may exist between some of the principles, and to be explicit about where, when and how in the assessment process these alternative values should play a role.

Q8: The working group has developed a matrix for assessment of academic results, competence and experience - Norwegian Career Assessment Matrix (NOR-CAM) - which will serve as a toolbox for such an assessment system, both for research and educational institutions, funders and scientific staff. Any comments on NOR-CAM can be posted here:

We think the assessment matrix represents a good diversity of fields, both with respect to the rows (competence areas) and columns, but have some doubts about its implementation. Firstly, we would like to avoid a situation where researchers, especially those early in their careers, can be assessed on all fields at all times. We are especially concerned about early career researchers, because we fear that with an extensive matrix like this, they may feel pressure to

develop their competencies in all six areas and not know where to start. We therefore believe there is a need to elaborate which competencies should be developed during the early career, and more generally which areas should be in focus at different career stages and in different positions.

We also share the concern that bibliometrics are not forward-looking, and that past experience cannot fully reflect talent or excellence. This is especially important in the case of early career researchers, who by nature have limited experience that can disproportionately affect their future. Given the extreme competition for postdocs and academic jobs, candidates with more research experience are naturally more favoured candidates, but these extra years don't always reflect future potential. We therefore think the added reflection column is a valuable extra dimension to place past experience into context and provide interpretations of the documented competence areas in light of future goals. In addition, we think it is an excellent suggestion and encouraging trend to ask for only a limited selection of e.g. publications, which hones in on relevant output and puts early career researchers in a position to compete with peers who have more experience.

A general challenge that we see with the implementation of NOR-CAM, is how to make sure that relevant fields are chosen for assessment that are tailored to the job advert (and how to make sure that the job advert matches the needs of the research environment), and how to ensure a diversity of jobs advertised and skills required. We already mentioned the ambiguity of role descriptions in the proposed new academic position structure, introducing an element of arbitrariness in the weighting of competence areas to be assessed for the joint first and top positions. We wonder how the assessment matrix can be used to promote diverse career tracks, instead of leading to a one-sided user case scenario where research is prioritised over the other fields in the majority of cases.

In summary, we think that NOR-CAM as a framework has merit but have doubts about the capacity of institutions to make full use of the breadth and scope of the matrix, without further measures in the design of hiring, promotion and funding procedures.

Q9: The working group has proposed that an "automagic CV function" be developed in connection with the national research information system. This will make it possible for researchers and lecturers to extract data that can be used to document competencies and results in their own careers, including applications for positions, promotion and external funding. Any comments on this proposal can be posted here:

While the automagic CV sounds ideal for workers already situated and embedded in the Norwegian system, we see limited applicability to the majority of international candidates who apply to academic jobs in Norway, and some serious drawbacks for national candidates as well. Many researchers with work experience in Norway or the ambition to work in Norway, will have gained work experience abroad that might not be easily accommodated into the Norwegian digital infrastructure. In addition, different disciplines might require discipline specific

competencies that cannot be easily coded into any of the pre-existing categories, and some experience is simply not easily documented at all.

Databases are coded in a way that reflects the cognitive categories and values of the people who design them, by virtue of what can be classified and is included, and what cannot be classified and is excluded. These categories and values may not necessarily match those of interest to the users. Hence the usefulness and effectiveness of data storage and retrieval heavily depends on the appropriateness of the system design for a given user context. With a variety of different nationalities and disciplines in academia, we therefore think the benefits of such an automatic CV building function will be limited to quite a narrow user base, and we anticipate that the majority of applicants will still prefer to exercise control over how they build their CV, as this allows them to tailor their CV and documented experience to the job at hand.

At the same time we are wary that this automated system, while presented as a solution for individual researchers, could be an attractive means for institutions and/or government to monitor individual and aggregate performance of academics. This prompts us to wonder how such a system will preserve its original intention and make sure that the infrastructure will not be co-opted for other purposes - than the ones presented here - in the future. Without a clear picture of the benefits for individual researchers, we therefore see more risks than value in the automagic CV.

Q10: To be answered by institutions: Is the institution in progress or does it have plans to further develop procedures and routines for assessments and merits in scientific careers?

1. Yes, we have work in progress
2. We have plans
3. Not yet

NA

Q11: To be answered by institutions: Will the report and NOR-CAM be useful for the institution's further work to further develop procedures and routines for assessments and merits in connection with employment and promotion?

1. Yes, definitely
2. Yes, to some extent
3. Unsure
4. To a small degree
5. No, probably not

NA

Q12: To be answered by individuals: If the report and NOR-CAM are used as a basis for merit and career development at institutions and financiers, do you think NOR-CAM will work well for your own part?

1. Yes, definitely
2. Yes, to some extent
3. Unsure
4. To a small degree
5. No, probably not

Yes, to some extent / unsure

Q13: We are interested in hearing how you may want to use NOR-CAM, either as an individual or institution. Feel free to be specific.

If NOR-CAM becomes the go-to standard for evaluating academic job applications in Norway, we foresee a growing demand in learning how to apply this matrix in career development programmes for young researchers. Given the diversity of career options open to PhD degree holders and the strong competition for a permanent job in academia, there is a strong need within the PhD and postdoc community to do self-assessment of competencies and areas with room for growth, in preparation for the job market. But for NOR-CAM to fulfil this role, more guidance is needed on which competencies to prioritise when and for which careers. In that respect we see an important role for career counsellors in providing context and explanation of this tool in a broader career orientation framework, that helps early career researchers to match their own skills with their desired career destination.

Q14: We are also interested in hearing what you consider to be challenges in using NOR-CAM. Feel free to be specific.

We have mentioned some challenges in our answers to the previous questions, but we will summarise them here.

We foresee a major challenge in ensuring that not just the matrix is adopted and survives, but also the goals, principles and philosophy behind it and that are meant to guide its application, so that NOR-CAM will not be used counter to its original intentions. E.g. how to make sure that departments will not score applicants on all possible areas? How to make sure that quality is valued over quantity? How to make sure that competence areas assessed match those required for the position? This will require concomitant changes in the hiring culture in academia, by tackling preferences and unconscious biases of individual academics on hiring committees, and steering the way that jobs are created and advertised.

While we think that NOR-CAM has merit as an assessment tool for individuals as well as institutions, the ultimate benefits for early career researchers will depend on how universities and funding agencies will embed the matrix in their current assessment practices. One crucial

point is that it should remain flexible and allow for diversity in skills, rather than forcing a standard model of bureaucratic competence on the majority of academics.

Most importantly, the competences assessed should match the requirements of the call/advertisement. We do not see how this matching can be ensured on a large scale without formal guidelines on each type of academic position or funding. Even with such guidelines, we believe there will be a large amount of variation depending on the particular grant/vacancy and committee members. If the preferences and expectations of individual academics are not actively changed, there might be little effect in the use of NOR-CAM because this framework still allows for the prioritisation of research and volume if that is deemed appropriate by those doing the assessment. The question is therefore how universities and funding agencies can be incentivised to adopt more broad (and relevant) assessment criteria in a way that does justice to the candidates and funding/position requirements, while awaiting the broader cultural shift that will hopefully allow this to happen more naturally.