

The Norwegian Association of Researchers' policy on PhD candidates

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PhD candidate positions offer the most important route to a research career and play a key role in Norwegian research and higher education. Postgraduate studies also secure updated research-based knowledge, new ideas and competency resources for other areas of the employment market.

Norwegian postgraduate studies have expanded significantly in recent decades. In 2017, almost 10,000 graduates have been engaged in postgraduate studies in Norway (the Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and Education [NIFU], R&D statistics bank). Growth in student numbers, retirements at educational and research institutions, and Norway's ambition to be a knowledge nation indicate that this growth will continue. It is important that recruitment to fellowships mirrors society's needs without jeopardising the institutions' right to self-determination and capacity to provide good postgraduate education.

The growth in postgraduate studies has not been accompanied by a corresponding increase in permanent or temporary posts in universities and university colleges (the higher education sector). The Norwegian Association of Researchers wishes to help to improve PhD candidates' working conditions by safeguarding career paths within academia and ensuring that PhD candidates receive guidance on alternative career options.

Uncompetitive terms are currently hindering recruitment in a number of disciplines. On top of this, research careers are complex and unpredictable. Pay and working conditions and career options must be favourable enough to allow the education and research sector to successfully compete for and recruit leading talents. Consequently, improving pay and working conditions, and above all future prospects, for PhD candidates are important objectives for the Norwegian Association of Researchers.

1. A single, joint, clear regulation that governs the employment relationship for all PhD candidates

All institutions that appoint PhD candidates shall comply with legislation and regulations applicable to the post. All special terms and conditions for PhD candidates and all scholarship schemes should be regulated in the same regulation.

The employment relationship for PhD candidates is regulated in the *Regulations concerning terms and conditions of employment for the posts of postdoktor (post-doctoral research fellow), stipendiat (PhD candidate), vitenskapelig assistent (research assistant) and spesialistkandidat (resident)* and founded on the Norwegian Act relating to universities and university colleges (the Research Fellow Regulation). This means that all educational establishments covered by the Act relating to universities and university colleges are bound by the regulation in respect of terms and conditions of employment. However, other private and public enterprises that are not covered by the Research Fellow Regulation can fill PhD candidate positions. This results in unclear employment relationships and poorer terms and conditions for PhD candidates outside the HE sector. The right to appoint temporary PhD candidates constitutes an exception to the principal rule of permanent appointments. This makes it important to ensure that all establishments that can invoke this exception do so under the same regulatory framework.

The Norwegian Association of Researchers believes that the regulation should also apply outside the area covered by the Act relating to universities and university colleges. Terms and conditions of employment for PhD candidates should be established in the Norwegian Working Environment Act, if necessary in an associated regulation, so that corresponding terms and conditions apply for the private sector, hospitals and private research institutes. These currently have to be regulated in collective agreements, in order to avoid this group being afforded poorer terms and conditions than state-employed PhD candidates.

The applicable regulation is also vague and defective in a number of areas, which results in a lack of clarity and an increased risk of differential treatment.

The NIFU's PhD candidate survey from 2017 revealed that mandatory duties included in postgraduate studies continue to pose a problem. Four out of ten respondents whose job description did not include tasks similar to those normally described as mandatory duties stated that they nonetheless performed such tasks (NIFU report 2017-10).

In recent years, postgraduate studies have been expanded to include schemes for industrial PhDs (since 2009) and public-sector PhDs (since 2014). These are not explicitly governed in regulations, despite the fact that particular characteristics of the schemes can result in inappropriate use of the post and unclear terms and conditions of employment for PhD candidates.

An evaluation of the industrial PhD scheme in 2013 showed that nearly half of the graduates were obliged to assist with business assignments that had not previously been agreed. In total, 13 per cent found it difficult to work on their doctorate because they were instructed or requested to perform other assignments for the enterprise (NIFU report 2013-2). The Research Council of Norway's annual report for the public-sector PhD scheme in 2015 revealed that the enterprises have little experience of implementing research projects and that "the project design is demanding for the parties". This emphasises the need for an expanded regulation containing provisions specifically applicable to the industrial and public-sector PhD schemes.

The standard term for PhD candidate positions is essentially four years, three of which involve pure research training. If the research period is included in the appointment term, PhD candidates are immediately entitled to employment protection when they transfer to a new temporary post. The service period calculation for PhD candidates has been much discussed, with various solutions tabled to accommodate their needs. The regulation to the new Act relating to government employees establishes that time spent on own research training should not be included in calculation of the appointment term. This regulation entered into force on 1 July 2017. The proposed regulation to the Act relating to universities and university colleges proposes that one year of the research period be included in the appointment term.

The Norwegian Association of Researchers has supported a revision of this regulation in this area, and believes that it would be most beneficial if two years of the PhD candidate position period were included in the appointment term. This would provide the PhD candidate group with a greater degree of recognition for the work they have performed, while retaining the option to make a short-term appointment in prolongation of the PhD candidate position period to enable candidates to complete an article or to perform other qualifying work. Both the adopted regulation to the Act relating to government employees and the proposed regulation to the Act relating to universities and university colleges on calculation of service time for PhD candidates contribute to PhD candidates having no employment protection for a significant time after concluding their research period.

The Norwegian Association of Researchers recommends that the Research Fellow Regulation be revised to apply to all PhD candidates during research training.

Consequently, the Norwegian Association of Researchers strives to ensure that:

- All PhD candidates are entitled to equal working conditions regardless of the sector in which they work – the Research Fellow Regulation must apply to all enterprises that employ PhD candidates.
- The Research Fellow Regulation is revised, taking particular account of the following:
 - The rules relating to statutory absence/leave and prolongation are clarified. The following addenda are incorporated into Section 2-3 (5) of the regulation: “Documented short-term absence can on application to the institution provide a basis for prolongation if the total absence corresponds to at least two consecutive weeks.” (See also item 5).
 - Mandatory duties are deemed to be relevant to the research training, and the institutions have their own guidelines relating to the content of mandatory duties, as well as the allocation of work assignments during the appointment term (Sections 1-3, 13 and 14 of the regulation). The wording “to the greatest extent possible” is removed from Section 1-3, paragraph 10.
 - Specific provisions are formulated for industrial and public-sector PhDs detailing the respective duties of enterprises, research institutions and graduates.
 - Two years of employment as a research fellow are included in calculation of the service period.

2. Competitive pay

Terms and conditions of pay and employment in PhD candidate positions must assist the education and research sector in recruiting research talents in open competition.

In order to be able to compete for and attract qualified and motivated candidates, universities and university colleges must be perceived as competitive workplaces that offer good career prospects. Pay and working conditions, during both the PhD candidate position period and the research career, must be sufficiently attractive to allow the education and research sector to successfully compete for leading talents. For a long time, growth in PhD candidates’ pay has trailed growth for other groups in the HE sector and society as a whole.

Consequently, the Norwegian Association of Researchers strives to ensure that:

- Posts are announced covering the entire pay spectrum and employers’ pay policies guarantee PhD candidates pay commensurate with their skills, attractiveness and experience.
- Starting pay is raised, to enable PhD candidates to compete for available funds on an equal footing with other members in local pay negotiations.
- All PhD candidates working outside the public sector are afforded at least the same pay conditions as those contained in the Collective Wage Agreement for government employees.
- The enterprises operate a pay policy with criteria for individual starting and promotion levels.
- All PhD candidates are offered annual salary reviews.
- Individuals who arrive from a higher-paid post in the enterprise can retain corresponding pay as PhD candidates.
- PhD candidates are allocated sufficient operating resources and have access to modern academic equipment.

3. Recruitment, working conditions and the ability to complete studies

Many researchers' careers are characterised by unpredictability and uncertainty. Consequently, clear career plans must be developed for PhD candidates at all institutions that use this post. Working conditions must be facilitated to allow more candidates to complete their postgraduate studies in the standard time frame.

The institutions must develop predictable career paths with clear expectations and terms of employment for PhD candidates aiming to establish a research career. An absolutely key element of work to establish predictable career plans involves reducing the use of temporary appointments in ordinary academic posts. The Norwegian Association of Researchers believes that permanent appointments should be the principal rule and that further qualification following completion of postgraduate studies should preferably be achieved within a framework of permanent employment. The main problems with research careers today relate to the extensive use of temporary appointments and lengthy temporary career paths.

In 2014 the authorities ratified a pilot scheme with tenure tracks in a bid to secure greater predictability for research careers. This post has not been evaluated, and it remains to be seen whether it will contribute to the overarching objective. One reason for the extensive use of temporary appointments is that the Norwegian Civil Service Act and the Act relating to universities and university colleges afford state-run universities and university colleges greater freedom to make temporary appointments than other workplaces. It is not yet clear whether the new Act relating to government employees will result in fewer temporary appointments. Prospective permanent introduction of tenure tracks should be viewed in the context of the requirements of legislation and agreements concerning the right to make temporary appointments without contributing an overall increase in the number of temporary appointments.

The working conditions for PhD candidates must be facilitated to allow more candidates to qualify within the standard time frame. While the percentage of researchers completing their research training has risen slightly over recent years, it remains the case that only two out of three have presented their doctoral thesis six years after being accepted on a postgraduate programme (Status report for higher education 2017) and a high proportion never complete their studies (NIFU report 2012-29). The degree of completion varies significantly by both discipline and institution. The Norwegian Association of Researchers wishes the reasons for postgraduate drop-outs and lengthy completion periods to be surveyed in more detail with a view to establishing measures to improve the degree of completion.

The regulation establishes the standard appointment term as four years. The Norwegian Association of Researchers supports this. Four-year appointments result in better integration, greater flexibility and opportunities to complete theses within the PhD candidate position period. Mandatory duties in the form of teaching/supervision and administrative assignments represent a relevant preparation for future assignments. It is assumed that the mandatory work is relevant and appropriately adapted, so that this does not adversely affect research work. Where three-year contracts are offered, it is important that these uphold the regulation's clear principle of "three years of pure research training". Compelling graduates to undertake mandatory assignments during a three-year term, whether or not the appointment term is prolonged, will not stimulate predictability or the ability to complete their studies.

A number of other measures must be evaluated to motivate more graduates to complete their studies, for example writing off student loans on completion of postgraduate studies and prolongation of the appointment term, including for valid short-term absences. In accordance with the regulation, absence must currently comprise at least two consecutive weeks to trigger entitlement to a prolonged appointment term. Even if valid absence comprises in total several weeks or even months, there is no right to prolongation. This is unreasonable and makes it more difficult for PhD candidates with a legitimate need for multiple short-term absences to complete their postgraduate studies. The regulations are also inconsistent with the Letter of Intent on inclusive workplaces, and primarily affect the chronically ill and individuals with specific responsibility for children and immediate family.

Consequently, the Norwegian Association of Researchers strives to ensure that:

- The institutions establish systems for career planning, both for PhD candidates wishing to pursue research careers in the HE or institutional sector, and for anyone applying to other areas of the employment market.
- The new Act relating to government employees helps to reduce the number of temporary appointments. The institutions employ clear and predictable recruitment and staffing plans.
- More permanent academic posts are established.
- PhD candidate positions are fully funded, in order to preserve the institutions' basic allocation and opportunities to create new permanent posts.
- An evaluation of the tenure track is carried out before the expiry of the pilot scheme. This evaluation must take into account the intention to offer internationally competitive terms and conditions and predictable career development.
- A survey is carried out of the reasons for drop-outs and lengthy completion periods among postgraduate students.
- PhD candidates have annual performance appraisals with their Head of Department, including a discussion of what measures can be taken.
- Four-year PhD candidate position periods are the standard arrangement.
- A scheme is established to write off parts of student loans on completion of postgraduate work.
- Multiple short-term absences based on statutory or collective agreements, where total absence corresponds to two or more weeks, must be placed on an equal footing with continuous absence of the same length and must trigger corresponding prolongation of the PhD candidate position period (see also item 1).
- No one has their pay or operating resources reduced due to lengthy sickness absence or parental leave.

4. Supervision and follow-up

PhD candidates shall be guaranteed supervision and follow-up in accordance with generally accepted academic practice and research-ethical guidelines.

Supervisor follow-up and extensive integration into the professional environment are of major importance for PhD candidates' well-being and ability to complete their studies. A survey of the working conditions of the Norwegian Association of Researchers' research-fellow members revealed that almost half were uncertain or stated that they did not have regular performance appraisals, and that a large proportion felt that they were poorly integrated into their professional environment, and that many did not receive regular supervision (NIFU report 2017-10). The Norwegian Association of Researchers believes that all PhD candidates should have regular and effective contact with supervisors and other researchers, be integrated into their professional environment and have access to the equipment and operating resources required to complete their research project.

PhD candidates risk being exposed to undue interference and pressure with regard to the publication of research results, for example through established researchers blocking publication of research results that contradict their preconceived opinion or demanding unwarranted prominence as co-author of an academic publication. In 2017 only a few PhD candidates (between 3 and 6 per cent) reported having felt pressured to engage in dubious research-ethical practices, such as plagiarism, or unprofessional data collection, analysis or presentation of results. However, a significant proportion (11 per cent) had felt pressured in connection with the sequencing or inclusion of authors of publications (NIFU report 2017-10).

Asymmetry in the relationship between the supervisor and the PhD candidate makes the relationship vulnerable, and supervisors have a specific responsibility not to exploit their position with regard, for example, to publication and joint authorship. The institutions must adopt clear guidelines concerning the contents of the supervision and what the supervisor and PhD candidate should expect of each other. Given the present composition of the PhD candidate group, effective training of supervisors must include competence in cross-cultural understanding and communication. The institutions must adopt clear guidelines to prevent and manage a negative culture and imbalances in work relationships, for example bullying or undesired attention.

Consequently, the Norwegian Association of Researchers strives to ensure that:

- A dedicated website is established for PhD candidates that collates all relevant information about postgraduate work, duties and rights and further career opportunities. This task could be assigned to the Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions, perhaps following the Swedish model www.doktorandhandboken.nu.
- All institutions have procedures governing how they receive and integrate PhD candidates in a professional and social context, including the best way to look after foreign graduates.
- Well-structured and practical postgraduate study instructions are formulated, containing clear guidelines on implementation, and requirements and ongoing expectations of both employees and employers.
- It is standard practice to have two supervisors for each PhD candidate.
- Supervisors receive mandatory training and have clear supervisor contracts.
- [The Vancouver Recommendations](#) (or corresponding research-ethical rules for academic publications) are followed.
- PhD candidates are guaranteed academic freedom and intellectual property rights in the same way as other academic authors.

5. Internationalisation, mobility and quality

Research training shall be of a high international quality and all PhD candidates shall have the opportunity to take up extended secondments abroad during the period.

International collaboration helps to raise the quality of Norwegian research. Consequently, arrangements must be made for collaboration across national boundaries and for research secondments abroad, including for PhD candidates. It should be noted that internationalisation and mobility are not quality-advancing in themselves. PhD candidates who go on exchange or long-term research secondments in their home country or abroad must receive help in establishing relations and networks, and in planning academically rich secondments outside their own institution.

Since many PhD candidates are in an establishment phase, effective schemes must be available to facilitate and fund secondments abroad, including visits from families and children.

Consequently, the Norwegian Association of Researchers strives to ensure that:

- All PhD candidates, regardless of their source of funding, are offered funds and mobility scholarships to facilitate secondments abroad.
- The institutions provide advice on relevant secondments abroad and make resources available to PhD candidates through the operating budget.
- A national NAV office is established for researcher mobility with expertise in arranging secondments abroad.
- PhD candidates can continue to receive child benefit during their entire secondment abroad.
- Special support is given to families who need help with kindergartens, schools and accommodation for partners.

6. Career follow-up

Clearer career paths and more permanent associate professorships must be established in order to secure recruitment of researchers. Career opportunities outside academia must be promoted and highlighted. Institutions that appoint PhD candidates must undertake to offer career advice specifically aimed at this group.

In recent years research training has been significantly scaled up, with the aim of catering for growing needs outside the research sector. The majority of people with postgraduate qualifications continue to work at universities, university colleges and other research institutions, including the health authorities. If we include the business community, three out of four post-doctoral PhD candidates employed in Norway find work at institutions or enterprises involved in the R&D sector. At the same time, the bulk of newly qualified post-doctoral PhD candidates find work outside the HE sector.

More diverse career prospects are establishing new requirements for evaluating the relevance of postgraduate training. In the postgraduate survey from 2017, some 30 per cent of respondents stated that their postgraduate studies were only “slightly relevant” to their desired career, while graduates looking for posts outside the HE sector regarded their training as the least relevant. Only 15 per cent had received career guidance (NIFU report 2017-10). Institutions that employ PhD candidates must attach considerably more importance to career supervision and career-preparatory studies during postgraduate studies. In this context, career guidance must be viewed as more than just a “reality check” on the likelihood of obtaining a permanent post in the HE sector, and should not be delegated solely to supervisors. Specific measures could, for example, include establishing dedicated career centres for postgraduates and relevant courses as part of postgraduate studies. This could include courses focusing on the benefits of generic skills within communication, project management, technology, review and analysis for both academic and non-academic careers.

Consequently, the Norwegian Association of Researchers strives to ensure that:

- A national survey is also carried out of candidates who have completed their postgraduate studies in order to learn more about the subsequent careers of qualified researchers.
- Institutions that provide postgraduate training offer career guidance specifically aimed at postgraduates.
- The value of postgraduate qualifications and research training is highlighted, including within the non-academic employment market.



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