

Comments on the evaluation of the Centres of Excellence Scheme of the Research Council of Norway

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The Evaluation Committee asked by the Research Council of Norway to assess its Centres of Excellence scheme has recently delivered its report [[Link](#)].

We, several directors of past and current centres, are grateful for the extensive and thorough work of the Evaluation Committee, and fully support their analyses and recommendations. In the following, we highlight and comment on some of their observations and recommendations.

Assessment criteria: focus on scientific impact

The Evaluation Committee insists that scientific excellence “is of utmost importance for the scheme” and that “the selection criteria continue to maintain this singular focus”. They further warn the Research Council against placing more emphasis on “impact” and “implementation.” Indeed, they also recommend that the “objective is to promote groundbreaking, curiosity-driven research that pushes the frontiers of international research”.

We fully share this view, and hold that any impact and implementation should be understood as ‘scientific impact’ and ‘implementation in the scientific community’ in the form of publications, recruitment of the best, setting the research agenda, etc. Any broader societal impact is of course welcome, and experience shows that it will occur in the wake of most centres. Indeed, even though broader impact should not be an evaluation criterion, it may well be part of the reporting requirements. But such impact is often impossible to predict and promise, especially given the 10-year life span of the centres.

Running the centres: foster best practice learning among hosts

The Evaluation Committee underscores the need for some universities and departments to enhance their roles as hosts for a centre. We agree, and highlight the particular needs concerning flexibility, speedy solutions, and the support of interdisciplinary approaches. It is necessary to streamline the bureaucracies and routines of several host institutions. This may also facilitate collaboration among staff and students in general.

Midterm evaluation: timing, criteria and consequences

The Evaluation Committee recommends that the midterm evaluation is postponed by a year, until after year 6, to reduce the pressure to publish prematurely.

We fully support this: in several fields the publication pipeline is long. This is particularly true for the highest quality publications, which are of course the goal of centre researchers.

With regard to the criteria used to assess whether the SFFs should continue after the mid-term evaluation, we fully agree that “The rules and objectives of the mid-term evaluations should be clear, transparent and used to phase out dysfunctional or underperforming centres”. Of course, the Research Council should be able to stop underperforming centres, assessed according to the academic standards relevant for each centre. However, we warn against proposals to allow only a certain proportion of centres to continue after the mid-term evaluation. Such comparative assessments across disciplines are difficult, if not impossible.

More importantly, such a rule of ‘musical chairs’ would be detrimental to the ability of CoEs to initiate long-term and groundbreaking research projects. And it would threaten the opportunities for collaboration and sharing of ‘best practice’ among centres and their hosts. Today many ongoing centres enjoy good collaboration: Annual meetings of centre directors under the auspices of the Research Council and the networks of centre directors have created important meeting points for developing ideas and routines, such as career development workshops in the Oslo area. This not only benefits the centres, but also has a ripple effect on the institutions at large.

Legacy: commitments from the hosts

The Evaluation Committee underscores the importance of embedding the research fostered within the centres within the activities of the host institutions in order to maintain the research activity, momentum and networks when the temporary funding ends.

We agree with this, and welcome the Research Council’s requirement that some “post-centre plans and host commitments should be included in the original application.” We recommend early dialogue about how to incorporate the activities of each individual CoE once the RCN funding stops. We underscore the Evaluation Committee’s recommendations of ‘soft borders’ between the centres and their host departments to facilitate collaboration among colleagues, to avoid perceptions of an ‘A team’ and a ‘B team’, and to foster broader exploitation of research networks.

Finally, the centres should be a strategic tool for institutional development. We emphasize that the Research Council and the host institutions must address the career challenges of researchers early in their careers. Young researchers often face having to move several times from one temporary position to the next. This is neither a good solution for them nor a sustainable strategy to attract the best and the brightest to academic positions. One way to contribute to the long-term added value of the CoE’s strong research environments would be for the host institution to commit to at least some permanent positions within the CoE’s most successful research fields.

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