

Quality research in Norway

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When Gudmund Hernes proposed a Center for Advanced Study at the November 10, 1988, meeting of the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters, I supported the proposal, on the condition that the Center be different from centers in other countries. While other centers invite fellows from many different fields and aim for cross-disciplinary contact, I maintained that most Norwegian researchers come from small institutions where they have few colleagues in their own field, and what they most of all need are opportunities to work together with top people in their own field.

When Norwegian researchers have an opportunity to take a year off, they should go to the best research centers in their field where they can get informed criticism and stimulation. I therefore proposed that the planned Center should be organized in groups, each group consisting of researchers from one field who together would make the Center one of the top places for that particular field that year. With twenty fellows there should be room for three such groups each year, each consisting of 6-7 fellows. In order to achieve opportunities for cross-disciplinary contact I proposed that each year there be one group in the humanities and theology, one in social science and law and one in natural science and mathematics.

Each group should include at least two of the most outstanding researchers in that field. In some few cases, the best people in the world in that field would come from Norway, but normally they would come from institutions that are at the high end of the salary scale, paying salaries that are about four times the normal Norwegian salaries. Would it be possible to get a budget for the Center that would allow for this sort of expense?

Fortunately, all the various ministers of research we have had during the ten years of the Center's existence have been very positive to the Center. They have seen that unless the Center has a budget that allows it to invite top foreign scholars, Norwegian researchers would be better served by going abroad than by going to the Center. The Center's budget has gradually been increased so as to make a high-quality Center possible. A most decisive contribution has been the willingness of the Norwegian universities to give the Norwegian participants in the various groups an extra sabbatical, so that the Center does not have to pay their salaries. This, together with the extraordinary frugality of the Center's administration, has made it possible to channel a major part of the resources of the Center into inviting fellows from abroad. The Center is still not at the stage where each group can invite two fellows from top foreign universities for the whole year, most of them can be invited only for part of the year. One of the attractions of the original plan was that inviting two top people together would increase the chances that they would accept. Now one usually has them one at a time.

The great understanding the Center has been met with by our various ministers of research makes us, however, hope that the budget of the Center will soon reach a level where it can live up to the original vision, that it shall each year be one of the top places in the world in three fields of research.

Norway has long been an egalitarian country, with a distaste for the elite. Sport has been an exception, and also anything else that has an entertainment value. The establishment of the Center for Advanced Study is an important first step towards acknowledging that there are other activities and other values that are important for the material and spiritual future of our

country. Fortunately, the ten years that have passed since the Center was established have brought several encouraging developments. I will mention some of these.

First, there is the establishment of the National Research Fund. In the mid 1990s the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters urged the Norwegian Government to earmark a part of the steadily growing oil fund for research. I am quoting from a letter in 1997 from the Academy to Jon Lilletun, who was at that time Minister of Research: “a part of the oil fund should be earmarked for fundamental research and research in the humanities and social sciences. The part of the yield that need not be added to the principal to compensate for inflation, will ensure a stable stream of funds into these areas of research, where it takes long to build up competence and where continuity is important.” Mr. Lilletun, who was one of the most attentive ministers of research we have ever had, responded very positively, and the contact continued, with a review of how similar research funds have been organized in Sweden and Denmark.

A further idea that was brought up in connection with such a fund was that this would be a good way of marking the Abel bicentennial in 2002. It now turns out that we can have our cake and eat it too. A research fund was created in 2001. It has now reached 1,300 million Norwegian kroner. In addition, an Abel prize in mathematics, of the size of the Nobel prizes, has been established in connection with the Abel bicentennial, with a fund of 200 million. This prize, which came about through good cooperation between the Ministry of Research and several mathematicians, is a boost for mathematics in Norway and it will increase the international awareness of the many remarkable contributions to mathematics that have come out of our small country.

Another departure from the traditional Norwegian egalitarianism is the recent establishment of centers of excellence, centers where groups of top researchers can pursue their research without wasting much of their time on paper work and grant applications.

The research prizes that have been instituted by some of our universities and also by the Research Council are further ways of channeling funds to prominent researchers who without applications and paperwork can pursue their own research, invite visiting researchers and in other ways strengthen research at their institutions. This is a way of delegating decisions about the use of research money from a board to selected individual researchers.

What more can be done to get quality research? Here is one suggestion: Let senior researchers get research money mainly on the basis of what they have published in major journals and with publishers with good international distribution. This has long been done in simple and un-bureaucratic ways in various university departments and it should be done on a nationwide scale. Junior researchers should be supported the way they are now, through doctoral and postdoctoral fellowships.

What then with the research programs, which are supposed to ensure that we get research in fields that are important and useful to our nation? In fields where we have no or too few researchers, we do not get good research by giving money to people who have never or only rarely been able to get their work into quality journals. Statistics seem to indicate that one reason that Norway gets exceptionally little out of each of the very few kroner it spends on research, is that too much money goes into programs and too little is distributed on the basis of quality.

Of course, we have to strengthen research in many areas where we lack competence. But we do not do this by establishing research programs. Instead one should establish programs to build up competence in such fields, with scholarships and comprehensive course programs. The Norwegian Research Council has done this, for example in the case of ethics. In my opinion, this is the way to go: have programs for building up competence, but let the further research support be determined by achievement.