

## ***The phase of construction***

Torstein Jøssang and Vigdis Ystad, Professors, University of Oslo

In the course of the past 30 to 40 years the quality standards that research must satisfy have increased considerably, both in our neighbouring countries and in the rest of the world. This applies to such different nations as Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Switzerland and Israel. In Norway developments have in many ways gone in the opposite direction. The sharp increase in the numbers of students from the 1960s onwards, and the almost explosive building of regional colleges in the 1970s, were not followed up with corresponding investment in basic research. Political and geographical arguments for the distribution of funding to higher education and research were instead ascribed increasingly greater weight in the argumentation, both from research council and ministry, and the weight placed on free, academic basic research was correspondingly weakened. At the same time as this development was going on, the universities were “democratised” in the course of the 1960s and 1970s. This process was accompanied by a bureaucratisation the effect of which was more paralysing than stimulating on all those who were genuinely concerned about basic research. Instead of helping research, this bureaucratisation led almost incessantly to extra work for the researchers themselves. Not seldom did our best researchers find themselves directly up against irrelevant considerations and demands. Therefore many talented, established researchers gave up, in a competitive situation in which the arguments in the struggle for research funding were concerned with relevance to the business world, geographical situation and other non-essential matters.

There were therefore many people who felt a sense of liberation when in 1986 Gudmund Hernes published a leading article in the Norwegian national daily newspaper *Dagbladet*, in which he put both to the powers that be and to the researchers themselves an open question about what they really *meant* by the development of Norwegian research. Gudmund Hernes was himself at that time famous as a researcher with an international reputation, and he was a man with a great deal of political influence. Just home from Johns Hopkins University in the United States, he confronted the Norwegian research world with a number of unpleasant questions. Hernes’ unpleasant challenge can be most simply summarised in two questions: Was it considered to be appropriate to stimulate elite research in Norway? If so, what measures would this demand?

Typically enough there were many who allowed themselves to be angered and irritated by Hernes’ challenge; he had clearly trodden on some pretty tender corns, and he had the ability to attack a problem that some people would have preferred to leave untouched.

There was not in fact any initiative to change this negative situation until the establishment of the CAS. This was to be the first signal of a turn in the right direction. And it was characteristically Hernes himself who was the driving force. He chaired a Royal Commission on reorganizing higher education and research in Norway (NOU 1988:28 *Med viten og vilje* [With knowledge and will]), in which he proposed the establishment of a centre for advanced study in Norway. In furtherance of this he took the concrete initiative to establish a Norwegian centre for outstanding research (or, if one prefers the term, elite research). His approach on this to the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters gained a positive response. The Academy placed itself right behind the establishment of the research foundation, the Centre for Advanced Study, and appointed a board that clearly showed that here research experience and insight were to mean more than geographical background and political affiliation. When the first board was nominated in 1989, Gudmund Hernes himself

became the chairman, a position he held until he was appointed Minister of the Church and Education in 1990. Dagfinn Føllesdal took over the leadership after Gudmund Hernes, and became the next chairman of the board, until the baton was passed to Vigdis Ystad in 1992.

Throughout this process Gudmund Hernes had referred to Princeton's Institute for Advanced Studies (IAS) as a clear ideal. It was a bold vision, the fact that he wanted to create an equivalent institution on Norwegian soil. The first application to the Norwegian Research Council in 1991 concerned funding to operate a centre manned by the most highly qualified researchers from Norway and abroad. Many people in the research communities were overjoyed that it was precisely an outstanding researcher and politician who was at last taking the initiative to ensure that quality research was to be given good conditions and be highly rewarded. But soon the Norwegian research world's joy at all this was to have a powerful damper put on it, as the financial grants for running the centre were below what was necessary, and the struggle to procure sufficient funding was to be tough and it encountered great difficulties.

Nevertheless, in September 1992, three years after its foundation, the academic activity at the Centre for Advanced Study was able to commence. By then Gudmund Hernes had become the Cabinet minister responsible for Norwegian research, and he had a brutal meeting with his alter ego, because as a Cabinet minister he was bound by the ministerial budget policy, and this meant that he could not manage to give the CAS the necessary funding for sound operation. Dagfinn Føllesdal and later Vigdis Ystad, who had both chaired the board after Gudmund Hernes, invested a great deal of their time and energy in securing the Centre's economy. It turned out to be a heavy task.

Not only Norwegian research officialdom but also the Norwegian universities had adopted a wait-and-see attitude to the establishment of the CAS, and it is no secret that there were clear signs of serious doubts about its establishment at the universities that were not located in the capital. When the management of the CAS wanted to invite outstanding researchers from these universities as visiting fellows at the Centre, it turned out to be difficult for the candidates in question to be granted a sabbatical year or to be given other forms of leave. Vigdis Ystad took this matter up with the Universities Council, and in the winter of 1994-1995 an agreement was put in place with three of our four universities that entailed a promise that those university researchers who were invited to the Centre should automatically be granted a sabbatical by their own universities. This would mean indirect financial support for the Centre on the part of the universities, but at the same time, after these researchers went back to their own institutions, the universities would get value for money in the form of new insights and new competence that would benefit both students and colleagues. In this way the universities could invest in their own future.

Nevertheless the grants from the Research Council, the Government and the three universities, Oslo, Bergen and Trondheim, were still not sufficient for sound operation of the Centre. Its economy continued to be an active brake on what could be done when it came to composing the research groups. A great deal of work was therefore put into informing the business world in Norway about what the Centre stood for, but the result was not in proportion to the efforts. The Norwegian business world's lack of understanding of the value of basic research has been one of the most depressing experiences in the history of the Centre.

From March 1994 Torstein Jøssang took over as the Chairman of the Board of the Centre. In 1994 a strategic plan and a goal structure were produced for the Centre. During this work the

Board had the thought-provoking experience that all expressions describing “excellence” and “elite” – central ideas behind the establishment and purpose of the Centre – must be toned down and rewritten. These concepts were still not *comme il faut* in our Norwegian understanding of the realities of research policy. In other words the reactions in the Norwegian community responsible for research policy contributed to weakening the Board’s planned presentation of the Centre as a top-level international research institution. The result was a strategic document that could not to a sufficient degree express what the Board wanted the CAS to represent.

However, work on assuring the quality of the Centre’s research continued tirelessly. From 1995 an international evaluation system was introduced under which all proposals for projects and research groups went for evaluation to a minimum of five international experts in the field. If their report and recommendation were clear, they were followed up by the Board of the Centre when new research groups were nominated. No other considerations could compensate for these purely academic standards of quality.

After the Centre had been operating for four years, in 1996-1997, the Norwegian Research Council then decided, in co-operation with the Ministry of the Church, Education and Research, that the Centre was to be the object of an academic evaluation. Among researchers there was some surprise that a basic research institution should be evaluated after such a short time, but the Board nevertheless contributed actively in proposing a number of internationally highly reputed researchers as suitable candidates for the work of evaluation.

The evaluation committee that was appointed by the Research Council was constituted on the basis of other criteria, perhaps because it was not given the task of carrying out any internal academic evaluation in depth. In the evaluation report *Ånden hus – på Drammensveien* [The house of spirits – in Drammensveien] (1997) the emphasis was instead placed on an evaluation of external features of the Centre’s activity. The CAS came out of the evaluation with honour. Everything was described in glowing terms, apart from one thing: namely the fact that the composition of the Board was dominated by the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters. This fact had already been met with negative criticism in advance from the Universities of Bergen, Trondheim and Tromsø, which argued for a different nomination process on grounds relating to regional development policy. On this point the evaluation led to the fact that geographical spread was also ascribed weight when subsequent boards were appointed.

When we chaired the Board of the CAS we also held the view that the members of the board of an institution like the CAS must be familiar with and understand the standards that top international research has to satisfy. This is best achieved with members who themselves have top-level research experience and have published in internationally prestigious research publications with recognition by colleagues in the field within the international research community. The reason that the CAS right from its tender start and through financially difficult years of operation has managed so well must be that the composition of the Board ensured that research considerations were the crucial factor in the composition of research groups. The CAS *dared*; the Centre invested where it saw talent, instead of spreading scant research funding geographically and bureaucratically.

In spite of all the difficulties and all the hidden opposition, the Centre for Advanced Study has demonstrated its clear right to existence, and a great deal of outstanding research has been done in the course of the ten years since the Centre was established. In the building in

Drammensveien researchers from the four corners of the Earth have been able to meet one another for a free exchange of knowledge and insight, for exciting co-operation that has sent the sparks flying and triggered new insights within a number of central areas of basic research. Because the Centre always has as its foremost aim the researchers' well-being and working conditions, liberated from bureaucratic interference and hampering duties, the CAS has – in spite of its financial difficulties – been able to stand forth as a living research community at top international level.

It provides food for thought that one of the institutions that at the start showed clear signs of doubts about the establishment of the Centre for Advanced Study, namely the Norwegian Research Council, now at last appears to have realised the value of such an institution. This cannot be interpreted otherwise, given that the Research Council has now taken the step of advertising funds for the establishment of a number of so-called Centres of Outstanding Research, as they are literally called in Norwegian, or Centres of Excellence, to use an international term. The idea behind these centres, and the selection of researchers and subject communities, must have been inspired by the CAS – but their establishment and organisation is taking place in a different manner from the governing principle for the CAS. Considerations for research bureaucracy and policy seem here to be receiving considerable emphasis, and instead of a concentration of the investment, it is here being spread over a large number of new centres with highly dissimilar subject profiles.

The situation in Norway is that so to speak all basic research must be conducted with the help of public grants. Norwegian firms and the Norwegian business world have never shown any active interest in basic research, and it has been virtually impossible to obtain research money from private funds. The competition for the available public funding is therefore keen. In such a situation we in Norway should not behave in such a way that the very few and really good, but vulnerable communities we have, suffer injustice. On the occasion of the celebration of the first ten years of the CAS, it is therefore our hope that the Centre can continue to exist on the basis of the philosophy that led to its establishment. It will and must continue to be a *unique* institution in the Norwegian research-political landscape. The responsibility for the Centre's future life and well-being rests to a high degree on the Norwegian research-political community. The quality of its research we can ensure ourselves.