

Dreizehn neue SFF Exzellenzzentren in Norwegen

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In den kommenden Jahren werden sich dreizehn neue Exzellenzzentren (SFF) in der norwegischen Forschungsgemeinschaft profilieren. Die SFF Zentren treten mit einem breiten Themenspektrum an: Von Krebs-Biomarkern und mentalen Disfunktionen bis Multilingualismus und Erdgasspeichern.

In coming years, 13 new Centres of Excellence (SFF) will be making their mark in the Norwegian research community. The SFF centres will be researching a wide range of topics, from cancer biomarkers and multilingualism to subsea gas reservoirs and mental disorders.

Both the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development and the Research Council of Norway have high expectations for this third generation of SFF centres now being launched.

"All our evaluations and experience show that providing the best research groups with a generous economic framework over a long period is a fruitful way to use our resources," says Anders Hanneborg, Executive Director of the Research Council's Division for Science, who is eager to follow the progress of the new SFF centres.

Counting the 13 new centres awarded allocations from 1 January 2013, Norway now has a total of 21 SFF centres.

Organising into centres adds value

"SFF centres have acquired a well-deserved reputation as power hubs in the Norwegian research landscape," continues Mr Hanneborg. "There is a significant boost in value-added when research groups are amalgamated into a larger centre, as a rule under the same roof and always under a single research management team. We see that top-quality research is highly likely to emerge from groups that have researchers from a wide array of disciplines who can approach the same issue from different angles."

It is clear that a centre's status as an SFF attracts talented researchers as well as additional funding. Most SFF centres grow into a far larger group than the Research Council's funding alone could provide for. On average, Research Council funding accounts for only one-third of the centres' external funding¹ and at certain SFF centres, just 10 per cent.

Without exception, SFF centres evolve into driving forces of Norwegian university research activity. They are playing a vital role in recruitment of young researchers and attracting international expertise to Norway through cooperation agreements and by employing international research talent in their respective fields. Each of the current batch of new SFF centres has already drawn up plans for recruitment, with ambitious goals for expanding international collaboration.

"This is precisely what we have come to expect from SFF centres," adds Mr Hanneborg.

Scientifically diverse, geographically dispersed

Three of the new centres have their roots in the research environment of previous SFF centres. The Centre for Neural Computation (CNC), hosted by the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in Trondheim, originates from the Centre for the Biology of Memory, which concluded its 10-year period as an SFF centre in 2012. By investigating new kinds of neural computations, the CNC is now expanding its research into what happens in the brain when we form and retrieve memories, orient ourselves in the world with our sense of location, or simply think.

The Centre for Autonomous Marine Operations and Systems (AMOS) sprang from the SFF Centre for Ships and Ocean Structures (CeSOS). AMOS will focus on developing intelligent technology for ships and unmanned vehicles, and on robots that operate under extreme conditions. The Centre for Earth Evolution and Dynamics (CEED) at the University of Oslo has its roots in the research environment at the Physics of Geological Processes (PGP) centre, which concluded its SFF period in 2012.

The remaining 10 new centres are new to the SFF fold. Several of them are focused on health-related activities. The two located at the University of Bergen are: the Centre for Cancer Biomarkers (CCBIO) and the Centre for Intervention Science in Maternal and Child Health (CISMAC). At NTNU in Trondheim, the Centre for Molecular Inflammation Research (CEMIR) will study how the body activates its immune cells during the inflammation response. At the University of Oslo, the Norwegian Centre for Mental Disorders Research (NORMENT) is the first Norwegian SFF to focus on mental disorders.

The University of Tromsø is hosting one new SFF. The Centre for Arctic Gas Hydrate, Environment and Climate (CAGE) will focus on issues related to energy resources in the Arctic and the role of Arctic gas hydrate reservoirs in the future marine environment and global climate system.

Several Norwegian groups that have long been at the research front of their respective field were awarded SFF status in 2012, among them the Birkeland Centre for Space Science (BCSS) at the University of Bergen. This new SFF brings together groups of physics researchers that have distinguished themselves internationally in recent years. The Centre for Environmental Radioactivity (CERAD), hosted by the Norwegian University of Life Sciences (UMB), has also assembled a number of dynamic research groups under one management team. At NTNU, biologists and mathematicians at the new Centre for Biodiversity Dynamics (CBD) will be studying how and why populations of birds and other animals vary in size, and the ramifications of human intervention into nature for biological diversity.

One of the new SFF centres is dedicated to linguistics. The Centre for Multilingualism in Society across the Lifespan (MultiLing) at the University of Oslo has already garnered considerable attention in its field and will study multilingualism across the lifespan. The University of Oslo is also host to the Centre for the Study of the Legitimate Roles of the Judiciary in the Global Order (PluriCourt), where political theorists and political scientists will supplement the perspectives of legal scholars in carrying out research on the legitimacy of international courts and tribunals.

Three women directors

Recruiting women into senior-level research management positions remains a challenge for Norwegian research. However, the directorships at the new centres represent significant improvement in relation to the two previous rounds, as three of the new SFFs are headed by women: Brit Salbu at CERAD, Elizabeth Landa at MultiLing and May-Britt Moser at the CNC.

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