

Stip-HF annual report 2019

Board members: Ragnhild Gjefsen (LLE), Are Bøe Pedersen (LLE), Dinara Podgornova (SKOK), Juliane Tiemann (LLE), and Mikkel Paulsen (LLE, replacing Ragnhild Gjefsen from August 2019).

Secretary: Christina Videbech (AHKR)

Chairperson: Wassim Rustom (IF)

In 2019, Stip-HF was engaged in two main projects, in addition to regular following up of issues arising in the HF faculty board and research committee.

1. PhD duty work

The first project is a Stip-HF initiative to propose an updating and reform of the rules and regulations for organizing PhD candidates' duty work at HF.

Stip-HF created a task force with the mission of collecting information and drafting a new and detailed regulations document. The task force included both Stip-HF and non-Stip-HF members: Ragnhild Gjefsen, Are Bøe Pedersen, Wassim Rustom, and Kimberly Skjelde (PhD representative on the faculty research committee).

The task force created and administered in Spring 2019 a survey among PhD candidates at HF on duty work conditions at the faculty (published on the Stip-HF website). Stip-HF also held a general meeting for PhDs to discuss the issue. The major finding was that practices and experiences varied significantly, both between individual candidates and between the different departments. While a portion reported meaningful and balanced work duties and smooth process of setting up and following their duty work plan, many reported unclear expectations, rights and obligations, overwork, lack of meaningful and relevant teaching and/or administrative tasks, and/or lack of control over the planning of their duty work. Some PhDs also appear to end up with much heavier workloads than others. There is overwhelming consensus that teaching takes up significantly more hours than allotted. Not enough seems to be done to ensure candidates get the chance to do relevant teaching and admin that they feel benefits their department/faculty and/or their career, learning and prospects.

The task force then set out to draft a full and detailed document to regulate duty work, which we could then propose for HF to adopt after the necessary discussion. Such a document would harmonize work conditions and procedures across HF according to a minimum set of standards. It would provide a clear text expressing guidelines, rights and obligations, which can be referred to for information, and in cases of conflict should they arise. While largely based in

existing best practice at HF, which it seeks to formalize, the document also is meant to achieve better work conditions than those previously prevailing—for instance by increasing teaching coefficients to reflect more accurately the work hours required by teaching duties.

A draft was produced by June 2019, informed by the survey and discussion. We received some feedback from faculty members through the research committees (at department and faculty levels). Finally in November 2019, the task force met with the Vice-Dean for Research at HF and a group of Human Resources staff to discuss the proposals and the possible adoption by HF of some version of this document. Reactions were very positive, with regards to the need for such a document, our initiative and the thoroughness and reasonableness of our proposals. The task force will continue these meetings in 2020 and will keep Stip-HF informed of its progress.

2. Seminar on mental health for PhD candidates

HF introduced in 2019 the idea of “PhD Meetings on Key Topics” to replace the old “Introductory Meetings for New PhDs”, and asked Stip-HF to help choose a topic for the first meeting and organize the event. Stip-HF recommended mental health, which we saw as an important and under-emphasized topic, and in view of the increased risk of mental health challenges among PhD scholars, documented by research, and of the lack of a support infrastructure for PhD candidates.

Stip-HF delegated a committee composed of: Dinara Podgornova, Christine Videbech and Wassim Rustom. HF provided administrative support through Elisabeth Akselvoll, PhD-administrator at the Faculty.

A first attempt to organize a seminar in May 2019 failed due to the late-hour withdrawal of a main speaker. However, this gave a chance for Dinara Podgornova and Elisabeth Akselvoll to attend the 2019 annual National Conference on Doctoral Education in Tønsberg, where the year’s topic was PhD Candidates’ Psychosocial Health. Dinara succeeded in networking with potential speakers at the conference, identifying interested guests for our seminar.

The half-day seminar took place on October 16th at Scandic Hotel Ørnen in downtown Bergen, and was relatively well-attended (~20). The first part was a short talk by Dr. Priyank Nimje, who presents on the topic based on his own experience doing his PhD in Norway as a foreign scholar. After lunch, Prof. Rob Bongaardt (Psychology, University of South-Eastern Norway) held a 2.5-hour seminar containing research-based presentations on the topic and opening for participation and discussion.

The guests were interesting and competent speakers, and the talks were well-informed. We found that the seminar could have benefited more time, an additional hour perhaps, in order to maximize the time allotted to active discussion.

Some of the conclusions formed during the seminar were:

- There should not be a high threshold for PhD candidates to signal problems and seek support.
- PhD candidates are encouraged to reach out to administrative PhD-coordinators at their department as a first line of support.
- A support structure is otherwise lacking to deal with the particular predicament of PhD candidates: As employees, PhD candidates do not qualify for support from student health services. Apart from expensive private options, they can only seek professional support through the state health system. But waiting times are extremely long, and as short-term employees PhD candidates have a need for more prompt access. Bongaardt suggested the university can explore having nurses with mental health training as part of its occupational health service, which would be a cost-effective alternative to a psychologist.

This event was open only to PhD candidates and PhD administrators. A number of supervisors, however, signaled their interest in learning more about the topic. Stip-HF relayed this to the Faculty and suggested to consider organizing a similar seminar for supervisors.

3. Other topics and follow-up of HF issues concerning PhDs

Evaluation of PhD dissertations: The “minor revisions” option

UiB has introduced a new rule for the evaluation of PhD dissertations. Evaluation committees can now submit an evaluation of “minor revisions” for dissertations that do not in their current form meet the standard for approval, but which can reasonably be brought up to par through minor revisions equivalent to a labor of up to three months. In that case, the candidate is given three months to resubmit an updated version of their dissertation to the same committee, and this is still considered as their “first attempt”. In updating HF’s internal regulations to incorporate the new university-wide rules, the faculty research committee was considering a text that includes a formulation discouraging committees from using the evaluation “minor revisions”. The PhD representative on the committee, Kristoffer Økland (deputy for Kimberly Skjelde) contacted and coordinated with Stip-HF to formulate a position on behalf of the PhD candidate body.

We feel that the allowance of “minor revisions” is advantageous both to PhD candidates and to the Faculty. We disagree with the arguments against it, and with a formulation that in discouraging a certain assessment-option encroaches on the free academic judgment of evaluation committees. As long as it is understood that “minor revisions” can only be requested when the dissertation in its current form does not meet the standard for approval, there should be no disadvantage. Evaluation committees are competent to make this kind of judgment, which is regularly made in doctoral examinations in many parts of the world.

Kristoffer Økland raised our views for the research committee, and reported that many committee members agreed that the discouraging formulation should be removed. However, making changes to the document appears not to have been on the agenda for that day. A follow-up was made by Kristoffer Økland, seconded by a faculty member of the research committee. But it is unclear, as of now, whether the text will be revised. Stip-HF ought to keep up with the issue in 2020, in coordination with the research committee representative.

Bergen, January 2020
For Stip-HF
Wassim Rustom (chair)