



Difference as Resource?

A Pilot Study on Diversity at Uni Research

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Diversity at Uni Research: A Pilot Study

Uni Research is a multidisciplinary research institute comprising six thematic departments [CIPR (Centre for Integrated Petroleum Research); Climate; Computing; Environment; Health and Rokkan Centre] that carry out research in the fields of biotechnology, health, climate, energy and societal issues. Uni Research is a highly international workplace with around 400 employees from 34 different nations (www.uni.no). This fact makes diversity a key issue, both strength and a challenge for the working environment. There are no previous studies that focused on diversity as an element of the working environment at Uni Research as a whole, across its rather dissimilarly organized departments.

This pilot study is funded by the Committee for Gender Balance and Diversity in Research (*Kif-Komiteen*, <http://kifinfo.no/nb>) and its main aim is to gain more information on the working conditions and experiences of researchers with a non-Norwegian background employed at Uni Research. The study is initiated by the HR Manager Renate S. Lien and senior researcher Sevil Sümer at Uni Research Rokkan Centre, in cooperation with the former HR Director, Britt Skorpen. This report presents an analysis of focus group and individual interviews with international researchers and proposes some measures that could support these researchers in their daily work and promote a more inclusive workplace.

1.1 Background

The research sector in Norway has become increasingly international and diverse in the past decades. There are however a small number of studies on the working conditions and experiences of international researchers working in Norway. Based on the insight that there is very little research on diversity in research and academia, the Kif-Committee had commissioned a study in 2015. The project resulted in the research report "*Being a foreigner is no advantage—Career paths and barriers for immigrants in Norwegian academia*" written by a group of researchers from the Work Research Institute (AFI) and the Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and Education (NIFU) (Maximova-Metzoni et al. 2016). The report presents an overview of relevant research literature and statistics and an analysis of qualitative case studies. The review of existing literature shows that only a few Nordic studies focused on diversity and career paths among persons with an immigrant background in academia and that most studies focusing on ethnic diversity are carried out in the USA. The existing Nordic research (mainly from Sweden) and statistics document that it is more difficult for foreign-born scholars to gain employment in higher education and research compared to their Nordic-born counterparts with the same qualifications (Maximova-Metzoni et al 2016). The Norwegian case studies analysed in the study showed that workplace inclusion is a challenge for higher education and research institutions and that foreign-born academics may experience exclusion caused by 'unwritten rules' and communication problems. The various needs for support among foreign-born scientific staff have not been surveyed and therefore not identified by the management at the higher education and research institutions (*ibid.*). This specific pilot study is based on this overall insight regarding international researchers and focuses on Uni Research as a case in the research institute sector. The study is limited in its scope and available time resources but the initiators hope to motivate and initiate more comprehensive analyses and discussions in this field.

The first important note regarding diversity at Uni Research is the fact that its departments have very different compositions of researchers and a great variation with respect to share of researchers with a foreign background. Some departments have a large share of international researchers as PhD or postdoctoral fellows and a varying number of international researchers with permanent work contracts. This pilot study is designed to look into work situations and experiences of foreign born researchers who are employed as researchers with a permanent contract. The reason behind this decision was to focus on a group who have lived in Norway longer than two years and who thus have come over the first year which involves many different practical challenges (which are not always directly related to the work environment).

The following table provides an overview of the number of researchers that were within the scope of this study:

| Department | Approximate number of researchers (in permanent position- excluding postdoc and phD fellows) | Researchers with a foreign background |
|---------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| CIPR | 36 | 13 |
| Computing | 13 | 5 |
| Climate | 38 | 30 |
| Environment | 40 | 9 |
| Health | 52 | 4 |
| Rokkan Centre | 38 | 3 |

Approximately 65 researchers with foreign background are thus employed as researchers with permanent work contracts at Uni Research. If we include PhD and postdoc scholars with temporary contracts, the number increases to around 85.

Uni Research Climate distinguishes itself among the other departments with its highest number of researchers with a non-Norwegian background. The lowest ratio of researchers with a non-Norwegian background is found at Uni Research Health and Uni Research Rokkan Centre. These patterns are in line with the general Norwegian statistics showing that the share of foreign-born staff is higher in natural sciences and lower in social sciences (Maximova-Metzoni et al. 2016: 4).

1.2 Terms, methods and participants

Both the review of existing literature (Maximova-Metzoni et al. 2016) and Kif-Committee's report of the working group 'Action for Diversity' (Kif 2016) underline the importance of clarifying the terminology and being careful about the ambiguities related to the term 'diversity'. Diversity can refer to a number of markers, including gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability and age. In the context of this study, diversity refers to ethnic background and includes all employees who are not born in Norway. Given the author's discomfort with the term "immigrant" due to its negative associations in the Norwegian

context, this group is referred to as “international researchers” or “foreign-born researchers” interchangeably. Being an “immigrant” also implies a more permanent status than most of the international researchers’ actual realities. There is an increasing demand for mobility in the research sector and it is not a given that these researchers will continue to work in Norway in the coming years.

The main aim of this pilot study was to learn more about the daily working conditions and experiences of international researchers at Uni Research. Qualitative research interviews are suitable to collect in-depth information on personal experiences. Researchers were invited to participate in small group interviews in order to enable them to exchange ideas and include diverse viewpoints given the limited time and resources for the study.

Focus groups interviews provide researchers with direct access to the language and concepts participants use to structure their experiences and to think and talk about a designated topic. Focus groups are often fairly homogenous as the intention is to encourage participants to talk about issues in their own words, elaborating stories and themes that help researchers understand how participants organize their social world (Bloor et al 2001). A particular strength of the methodology is the possibility for research participants to develop ideas collectively, bringing forward their own priorities and perspectives.

In order to invite potential participants to the focus groups we contacted the Human Resource managers of all the departments and received a list of foreign born employees, including information on their positions and start date of their work contracts. We have selected 38 persons who had the characteristics that were decided beforehand (permanent, full-time researcher position) and sent them an email inviting to a focus group discussion (See Appendix for the invitation email).

We received 14 positive responses and interviewed 11 of these researchers in three small groups. The remaining three had to cancel participation due to sickness or other time related reasons. A total of 8 women and 3 men participated in the study. One of the researchers preferred to send written responses to the questions that were taken up in the interviews (See Appendix for interview questions). I also had a personal interview with a researcher who responded after the focus groups were carried out and had a follow-up interview with one of the participants of the groups to clarify some key themes. All the interviews were tape-recorded and fully transcribed. The analysis below is based on these interviews, analysed in the context of recent organisational processes at Uni Research.

2 Analysis: Being an International Researcher at Uni Research

In general, all participants were basically satisfied to be employed as a researcher at Uni Research, enjoyed their jobs and had ambitions to develop their careers as researchers. A few of them had experienced conflicts (either with their colleagues or leaders) and reflected on the reasons behind these problems in the group discussions. These experiences are analysed in sections 2.3 and 2.4 below.

One issue that became clear through the course of the interviews is that the ownership issues (regarding the relationship between the University of Bergen and Uni Research) that took place throughout 2016 and the recently planned merger of Uni Research with four other research institutes in Western Norway affects the daily lives and experiences of all researchers. These processes were taken up by the participants in the group discussions even though it was not a pre-selected topic for discussion. The interview accounts need to be

interpreted in this background. Here is an example on how this process influences individual researchers:

“The working environment this last year has been filled with concerns regarding this ownership process, and now this fusion process. There is a lot of noise, high level things happening in the background that make me very uncertain about the work situation in general”

A general sense of insecurity regarding future working conditions prevailed in varying degrees in the accounts of the participants.

There were differences between departments and also between research groups within the same departments, with respect to experiences of inclusion /exclusion, relationship to the closest leader and thoughts about the future. This variation was also taken up as an important factor in the focus group discussions:

“But I have seen there is huge variation between different research groups in how welcoming, how inclusive they are.”

Those who experienced conflicts with their closest leaders were those who were most dissatisfied with the work environment. In some cases, these conflicts were conceived of being related to having a non-Norwegian background, language issues and cultural differences.

“I do see sometimes it is a challenge for Norwegians to accept that we come with a different background that we react differently to stress situations, when problems arise. As a foreigner you might be more aware of that, more focused on seeing these differences, a bit more careful about how to react to that, than Norwegians.”

The need to have good command of Norwegian language in order to be included in the workplace was a recurring theme:

“There are idiosyncrasies to any new culture that take time to get used to....but I do not think being non-Norwegian has prevented me from accomplishing what I want to accomplish as a scientist. When it can be an issue is mainly related to the language, you have to talk Norwegian. But that's reasonable.”

2.1 Learning Norwegian

Other research in the field clearly shows that learning Norwegian is the key to inclusion in the workplace (Maximova-Metzoni et al. 2016). Participants in this study faced varying difficulties in learning the Norwegian language and many of them thought that Uni Research could offer more help with this, at the workplace:

“This is actually something Uni Research can do something about. If you want to be involved at a high level in scientific community in Norway, NFR and other government agencies (...) to be part of those conversations, it is really critical to be fluent in Norwegian.”

Most international researchers used English as their work language but were aware of the importance of speaking Norwegian for both social and work-related reasons:

“I started to learn Norwegian in the beginning but it was really a huge thing for me. Because it was 6 hours per week and a lot of homework, it was too much. So when I was in the second level, I was like ‘no, I cannot follow this’. So I just stepped back. (...) Everyone speaks English but when you go to streets and want to be part of the community, you need Norwegian.”

“For the important stuff, it is of course English. But at the coffee machine I try to speak Norwegian. But it is hard, when people see you are struggling they switch to English immediately. So it is hard to practise your Norwegian.”

General meetings at Uni Research which involves all the employees across departments are organized as two meetings following each other: first in Norwegian and then in English. In one of the focus groups, this was a topic of discussion. Researchers who followed the general meetings in English thought that there was less information and details in the English-speaking meetings:

“I don’t like that separation of meetings: one in Norwegian and one in English. It feels a bit like one for the large part of the company and one for the «second» people, like B-people.”

The researchers would appreciate support from Uni Research in learning Norwegian. One participant mentioned a model in Sweden where learning the language was considered part of one’s job and could be done during the work hours:

“That is a really nice model, something that would help. Because, time issue is tricky. (...) International employees have their families with them and we tend to have young kids. We have spouses who are also working or looking for work. Trying to learn the language on top of that, it is basically like taking on an additional project.”

2.2 Experiences with relocation

International researchers often need extra support in the first months of their stay, especially in dealing with the issues of opening a bank account, getting an identity number and finding housing. While some mentioned getting good support from their colleagues and administration of their departments, others had to deal with a range of bureaucratic issues themselves.

“... the support in relocating here was not very good. We got some funding but that was only money. There is no assistance with trying to find housing. And so there was very little assistance on these aspects. It is often hard to find information. We basically learned a lot by trial and error.”

An often mentioned possibility was having an assigned “contact person” (like a ‘mentor’ or a ‘sponsor’) whom one could easily consult.

“I think it would be easy to have mentoring, at least in the beginning, about what you have to do...I was lucky because my office mate was really helpful. But I was also a bit worried asking to the same person all the time.”

Having a formally assigned contact person would support newly recruited international researchers in understanding both the unwritten and formal rules and thus contribute to a quicker inclusion in the workplace.

2.3 Dilemmas related to the ‘flat hierarchy’

The structure of the working life and relationship between managers and researchers can be experienced as very different in Norway compared to the countries international researchers

come from. Some of the participants reflected on the lack of hierarchy and prevalence of an egalitarian culture in the workplace as a double-sided issue. For researchers with a non-Norwegian background, this was something that was felt as both positive and challenging. A researcher who was basically very satisfied about her working conditions reflected on this:

“I cannot think of any challenges. There are differences but I experience them as positive. I came here and was taken as a colleague, not as a student. I felt weird. But that was a positive thing. It took a long time for me to understand that, it was a process. I am *colleague*, OK, fine!”

Another participant who was relatively new in Norway explained about the difficulties she had at start due to unclear expectations and definition of work:

“It was a bit difficult in the beginning because (project leader) did not explain me clearly what my position was in each place and what were my duties. So I was thinking that I was doing OK but after some months he came and said “well, you are quite behind the schedule, you must do this, and this!”

“...it is still not easy to deal with Norwegian way of, kind of «la, la, la» not clearly defined, which I think cause a lot of problems and frustration as well.”

According to some of the participants, the flat hierarchy that characterises Uni Research was leading to “a lack of accountability”:

“...when you come to Norway, this is something that you discover over time. This process of understanding that, that you actually don't really know who is my boss, which leader you are supposed to ask, if there are any issues to report to. It is not always clear: your project leader is not always your official boss. So that's... It needs a little more clearly defined hierarchy to help.”

Even though the researchers appreciated the ‘culture of equality’ they also thought this had unintended consequences:

“It works both directions. On the one hand, I really like it that you are treated equal. On the other hand, I hate it, that there is not very clear hierarchy sometimes, because in the meetings, very often no one wants to make the decisions because we are all equal. It is like the Animal Farm: ‘we are *all* equal’. And then I miss, it is so much better the (*another European country*) system; you have a boss who makes the decision. But it is nice that you are appreciated...”

A recurring theme in the interviews was that the lack of a clear hierarchy, combined with ‘weak’ leadership can lead to problems. Most of the participants thought that a lot of time was used to discuss issues but this process did not really lead to taking of decisions:

“I just find it odd, everything is supposed to be open, transparent and public, to the point that it interferes with work efficiency. And yet there are always things that happen without clear explanation of process on how they are decided to happen.”

A researcher described this context as a “fake transparency”:

“Important decisions are taken behind doors. They pretend that your opinion matters. But that is only a waste of time.”

“And the fact that some decisions are taken... they ask for your opinion, they always ask for your opinion, but it could be that they ask to say that they have.”

International researchers thought that ‘stronger leadership’ would also involve higher competence in diversity and thus reduce the conflicts stemming from cultural differences.

“It is a challenge to have purely Norwegian administration that has to deal with all these different cultural backgrounds (...) they are not trained in cultural issues, to understand how (*people from a different national background*) are thinking... So I think there is quite a potential of misunderstanding, misinterpreting how people react and managing the expectations that people have as well when they come.”

Existing literature in the field also confirms that successful diversity leadership can promote a more inclusive work environment, create an atmosphere of cooperation and thus increase the efficiency and productivity of employees (for a review of literature on diversity management and the Norwegian context see Drange 2014 and Sandal et al. 2013).

2.4 Experiences of exclusion

A key issue documented by the former report on diversity is that foreign-born scholars may experience exclusion caused by internal recruitment processes and unwritten rules about academic career development (Maximova-Metzoni et al 2016). Some of the participants in this study also mentioned ‘talking behind the closed doors’ in the recruitment and promotion processes at Uni Research:

“I am not sure if it is specifically Norwegian but I think there is tendency to promote in-house candidates (laughs) (...)

People who have always been here, they are of course Norwegian and it gives the feeling that there is some talking behind closed doors in Norwegian about who is going to be...like who is the next one featured in this and this and of course it is a Norwegian. It is so frustrating. There are some inner circles that one cannot enter.”

These “inner circles” of power basically included ‘senior’ Norwegians and were resilient to change:

“They are so closed, they always eat lunch at the same table every day, always speak Norwegian, always the same...And the international researchers end up forming a little group outside, doing their own things. They tend to be like “the old boys’ club” extremely resilient to change.”

These researchers thought that they were excluded from these inner circles basically due to their lower competency in Norwegian language. Even though researchers who have been in Norway for a longer time and can speak the Norwegian language thought that it is more demanding for them to participate in the academic discussions in Norwegian. This is in line with the findings from a Swedish study which argues that foreign-born academics who do not use their own native language in work situations have to use extra energy to prove their competence and intellectual capacity (Andersson 2014).

One participant in this study experienced an extreme situation of exclusion which s/he believed stemmed from the conflicts s/he had with the closest leader. This researcher thought that her/his ethnic background had a role in these conflicts and felt being treated as a “third degree employee.” The same researcher thought that the ‘ethical values’ of Uni Research were not transparent enough and especially international researchers needed introductory courses about their rights and obligations. It is important to note that experiences of exclusion show a great variation across the Departments and research groups and cannot be generalized to the whole organisation.

2.5 Intersections: Being a female and foreign-born researcher at Uni Research

A question in the group discussions was related to experiences of being a female researcher at Uni Research. None of the participants reported any serious disadvantages or problems related to this. Some of them reflected on the remaining male dominance at “top positions” but they also thought that this was changing due to a generation change.

One female researcher talked about her experiences of being treated as a “secretary” and was upset about this:

“One of the research leaders came to me and said ‘can you check and see what we paid for this?’ And my first thought is ‘I am not your secretary; let’s just get that very clear. Figure it out yourself!’ But they do this constantly and this type of culture really disturbs me. Because there is the implication that; ‘my time is more valuable than your time, why don’t you use your time because I cannot be bothered to spend my time on it’. This kind of thing really irritates me.”

Persisting gendered stereotypes leading to a devaluation of the contributions of female scientists are well documented in the recent literature on gender in academia (e.g. Brandser & Sümer 2017). As the quote above implies, gendered hierarchies also exist in varying degrees at Uni Research. The main focus of the group discussions have been on the experiences of having a non-Norwegian background and thus gender issues were left more in the background. When gender was discussed, a common tendency was to compare working conditions of women scientists who are also mothers of small children to the conditions that prevail in other countries and to point at the positive aspects of Norwegian policies in this field.

Most participants were parents of small children and they had positive experiences related to combining this with a research career at Uni Research. They appreciated the support offered by the Norwegian welfare state arrangements (especially the public day-care institutions) and parental leave which can be shared between mothers and fathers. Researchers thought that possibilities of combining parenthood and research work were better in Norway, compared to most other countries they knew about:

“What I really like, in Norway it is accepted that fathers are involved in childcare, husbands are also used to take care of children. Because of that it is normal that fathers also leave the meeting to take care of children.”

“One of the reasons we came here was Norway’s reputation as fairly equitable country and dedicated to managing work-life balance.”

Researchers also appreciated the flexibility offered by Uni Research with respect to opportunities to work from home or to work outside normal working hours.

2.6 Future plans

As mentioned at start, the plans about the merger, increasing competition for research funding and rough economic conditions (for at least some of the departments) caused insecurity and influenced the ways researchers think about their future. Many would like to continue to work at Uni Research but had some doubts if this will be the case. The following discussion in one of the groups document different views and experiences on opportunities to “grow further”:

“I1: For my position, I am missing a bit future perspective here. So that, OK, you can attend courses on leading projects, learning a bit of these capabilities and getting better in that. I mean all those courses

that are offered at Uni Research, there are very few... and most are irrelevant for me. So I think in this respect Uni Research could be much better to train people, not everyone is just focused on a topic and happy with that. But kind of increasing other knowledge... at the moment there is absolutely no support to growth.

I2: It is very interesting because I am still on the positive side... I still think that I have opportunities here, so maybe in a few years... (laughs)

(later) I2: I see myself growing still within Uni Research. And maybe taking more responsibility so... But it depends on funding (...) I would like to continue here but it all depends on funding, if I manage to get funding. Or my colleagues or bosses get funding."

Increased competition leading to difficulties in project funding was a recurring theme leading to frustrations:

"But NFR is like... we send nice proposals and they are all rejected, why spending all that time on that? And then you wait half a year (for the evaluation) and start again... I find that extremely frustrating, there is nothing you can plan... Even if you rewrite the proposal and send again it is not given that the better version will be funded. So we have very high pressure. I find it very demanding, a great challenge..."

The following quote is a typical example of how researchers at Uni Research experience insecurities despite their permanent work contracts:

"There can be problems in future funding. If I get the feeling that it is continuously a struggle, I would stop. The contract is 'permanent' only as long as there is funding."

3 Suggested measures

The group discussions resulted in several suggestions that would make life easier and support international researchers. Below is a list of these suggested measures:

- More systematic and personal help in relocating
- 'In-house' and intensive Norwegian courses. Courses for better writing in Norwegian
- 'Mentor': assigning a contact person who can help with the formal issues, as well as the unwritten rules, in the earlier phases of employment
- Introductory courses to present general rules and expectations at Uni Research, as well as possible ways of cooperation across departments and career development for employees
- More systematic knowledge about the important parts of the working environment act, about formal rights and responsibilities of researchers and research ethics

The participants in this study think that a centrally designed and endorsed “welcome package” that would involve information on both bureaucratic and cultural issues would be a good support and could also enhance quicker inclusion into the workplace. Some of the departments already have special measures for new international employees but this study shows that there is a great variation between the departments and thus in the experiences of researchers. The study also documents the need for more systematic focus on Norwegian language learning as this is experienced as especially difficult to manage with individual efforts.

The interview analyses reveal that some international researchers experience conflicts in their daily work and conceive this as resulting from ‘weak’ leadership and an ignorance of cultural differences. A general suggestion that this pilot study promotes is the need to focus more systematically on ‘diversity leadership’ by integrating selected literature and perspectives into leadership programmes at Uni Research. This suggestion is also grounded in the former literature documenting the crucial need of anchoring equality and diversity work at the managerial levels and equipping leaders with a higher competence in inter-cultural communication, enabling them to recognize and appreciate differences. A leader with higher competence in diversity management would view differences among researchers as a resource and would be more attentive to the needs of researchers with a different background.

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Appendix

Invitation e-mail sent to 38 researchers on 23. March, 2017:

Dear Uni Research Employee

You are receiving this invitation together with a group of selected researchers with a non-Norwegian background working at Uni Research.

Rokkan Centre is carrying out a pilot study to uncover issues related to cultural diversity at Uni Research. The study aims at learning more about the working conditions of researchers who have background from another country. Questions related to the working environment, specific needs for support and the overall experience of working as a researcher at Uni Research will be discussed in small groups with the participation of researchers from different Departments. We hope that you will be interested to participate and share your experiences for this purpose.

Sociologist Sevil Sümer is responsible for the design and execution of this project in cooperation with Personnel Director Britt Skorpen and HR Manager Renate Storetvedt Lien. A key purpose of the project is to identify measures that could contribute to better inclusion in the workplace. The study is financed by the Committee for Gender Balance and Diversity in Research.

The focus group discussions will last around one hour and will take place at a meeting room at Rokkan Centre. The focus groups will be scheduled between 27. March and 3. April following a Doodle-appointment.

Please reply to this email if you have further questions or if you are interested to participate.

Many thanks for your time!

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Questions for Focus Groups / Diversity Project

- Brief background information: Research field; length of stay in Norway; current position; language used at work.
- How is it to be a researcher at Uni Research? Did you ever feel specific problems due to your non-Norwegian background?
- Did you have any specific support when you started working at Uni Research? Did you need any?
- How is your relationship to your closest manager? Do you get support and understanding?
- How do you experience the working conditions at Uni Research? (working hours; physical environment; social environment) How is the working environment at your Department? (How is it to be a female researcher?)
- How are your future plans? Do you wish to continue at Uni Research?
- Which measures could support researchers with a non-Norwegian background?