

# Mid-term evaluation of The UCPH Excellence Programme for Interdisciplinary Research

---

**Mid-term evaluation conducted in May 2016,**

**Copenhagen, by:**

Professor Klaus Bock (Chair)

Professor John Gardner

Professor Wim H.M. Saris

Professor Yasemin Soysal

Professor Peter C. Tyler

**Report drafted by:**

Associate Professor David Budtz Pedersen

## **Summary of findings**

The UCPH Excellence Programme for Interdisciplinary Research was initiated in 2013, and in 2016 a panel of internationally renowned researchers were asked to conduct a mid-term evaluation of the programme and give advice on how to proceed for the remainder of the project period, concluding by the end of 2017.

The panel finds that The UCPH Excellence Programme for Interdisciplinary Research has had a very positive influence on the university's research capacity, international excellence and visibility. The programme has been highly ambitious and successful in profiling and promoting some of the university's most important interdisciplinary research activities. Although the initiative has not yet reached all its goals, it has set the university on the right path. The 18 research projects sponsored by the initiative have excelled in both quantity and quality in a wide range of parameters. Several projects have developed new scientific approaches to highly complex problems, demonstrated a high level of research quality, created important international collaborations, and generated valuable cross-disciplinary and cross-faculty synergies and accelerated new external funding opportunities.

The UCPH Excellence Programme for Interdisciplinary Research has proven to be a unique instrument for building and extending the university's research excellence and helped boost the university's scientific impact in terms of new partnerships and new approaches to societal challenges. Although University of Copenhagen has long been home to top research groups, the purpose of the Excellence Programme for Interdisciplinary Research has been to strengthen the international

competitiveness and reputation of the university's interdisciplinary research teams. The initiative has supported outstanding scholars and research groups out of the traditionally egalitarian system to become internationally leading by attracting international talent and building research capacity and excellence for prospective external funding opportunities.

While only one of the projects supported by the initiative has reached the highest evaluation mark "world-leading excellence", several of the projects are considered to be truly international excellent and internationally recognised. Several of the projects funded by the initiative are still in the process of analysing data and publishing results and therefore still have the potential to reach international excellence within the coming years.

Below is a list of the panel's main findings, learnings and recommendations:

- Several projects have created strong international networks. Some projects have contributed to positioning the University of Copenhagen as a leading research hub. The international visibility of these projects will continue to be an important window to the world in the future.
- The programme has been successful in funding diverse research projects that cover a large number of topics and research areas in all academic faculties.
- Most of the researchers interviewed by the panel felt that the interdisciplinary research projects sponsored by UCPH 2016 Funds are a valuable complement and make a valuable contribution to their disciplinary speciality and research competence.
- A number of projects funded by the UCPH 2016 Funds have secured substantial additional external funding. Some projects have raised more than 200 per cent of their initial funding. Other projects have grant applications in the pipeline. It is the impression of the panel that the UCPH 2016 Funds have been instrumental in building capacity for future external funding, and that return on investment is already good and will improve further over time.
- In several instances, the panel finds it unlikely that external research councils or foundations would have supported the projects funded by UCPH 2016 Funds, mainly because the projects are interdisciplinary and involve numerous researchers. It is the considered opinion of the panel that projects funded by the programme have led to important capacity building and collaboration across the university.
- From the perspectives of early career researchers, participation in interdisciplinary projects is a valuable contribution to their scientific advancement. In the current research landscape, interdisciplinary

collaboration continues to be high on the agenda. Advanced students and PhD candidates trained in interdisciplinary projects have a unique chance of continuing their career in a highly interdisciplinary and international research environment.

- The wide scope of the interdisciplinary projects funded by the programme has at the same time given rise to unintended challenges. The administration and in particular teaching of interdisciplinary courses across faculties has proven to be difficult. Many projects have spent time and resources organising courses at the BA, MA and PhD level while only few projects have been successful in realising cross-faculty education. It is the impression of the panel that efficiency gains can be obtained from better cooperation on budgets, planning and teaching, eventually by a separate budget and accounting model for interdisciplinary activities.
- The integration of the humanities and social sciences in projects funded by UCPH 2016 Funds continues to be a challenge. In several instances, the humanities and social sciences have not been sufficiently embedded and have not taken part in the initial formulation of research questions and topics. Future interdisciplinary initiatives should ensure full integration of the humanities and social sciences.
- From the humanities and social sciences, representatives from law and philosophy are overrepresented as project participants. Some researchers participate in several UCPH 2016 projects at the same time. The panel is convinced that genuinely new and innovative research trajectories have been established by including the social sciences and humanities but that in future more diversity in personnel should be encouraged.
- Only few projects have succeeded in securing commitment to become embedded at one of the participating faculties. The panel notes that only one project so far has ensured two new junior positions in the faculty that will continue to work on research related to the UCPH 2016 project.
- The panel noted a large difference between the number of Co-PI's among the 18 UCPH 2016 projects. Several of those could have benefitted from a more focussed but still collaborative effort from the partners.
- It is the impression of the panel that a select group of the best projects could benefit by being turned into physical research centres that would in the long-term term provide recognised world-leading research. Rather than merely providing target funding for such research centre, attention is needed to facilitate organisational support and coordination.
- The UCPH Excellence Programme for Interdisciplinary Research has been successful in exploiting prior investments of the university by supporting researchers involved in e.g. the STAR programme 2008-2013. While the

STAR programme was PI-centric, the current Excellence Programme for Interdisciplinary Research is based on multiple PIs in order to generate interdisciplinary collaboration.

- The UCPH 2016 Funds has created a unique platform for collaboration among the natural, health and life sciences. It is the impression of the panel that more scientific excellence and efficiency (in particular in infrastructure) can be achieved by closer integration of these three faculties.

### **Conclusions and general comments**

The panel finds that The Excellence Programme for Interdisciplinary Research has been a very ambitious programme that should continued in the future – either in the form of individual projects driven by principal investigators or collective projects organised across faculties (preferably as physical centres or centres of advanced studies). It is notable that several of the projects funded by the programme have reached a high-level of excellence or international recognition, leading to substantial external funding from e.g. The Danish National Research Foundation, The European Research Council and private research foundations. The panel recommends that funding for interdisciplinary research clusters should continue but should be more flexible to allow for more organic collaborations and collaborations between departments that are within the same faculty.

Projects evaluated to be excellent or world-leading should have the attention of the university management for future funding and support. These projects make a truly valuable contribution to the university's profile in an increasingly competitive global research landscape (see under individual descriptions of the 18 projects).

The panel stresses that the mid-term review has not been based just on the excellence of the individual researchers involved in the projects but on an aggregated assessment of the interdisciplinary excellence of the clustered groups. In several instances, components of the funded project are outstanding and world-leading, while the consortium as a group still lacks integration.

Copenhagen June 2016