NORDITA
NORDIC INSTITUTE FOR THEORETICAL PHYSICS
DENMARK • FINLAND • ICELAND • NORWAY • SWEDEN
Hannes Alfvéns väg 12, SE-106 91 Stockholm, Sweden Tfn: +46 8 5537 8436 info@nordita.org www.nordita.org

Stockholm 13/06-2023

To the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Nordic Council

Subject: Formal complaint about the handling of NordForsk call `University Cooperation'

In connection with the nationalization process of all Nordic cooperation bodies, it was decided that these should apply for Nordic funding for further operation for the period 2024-2028 in accordance with NMR's requirement that the institutions participate in a competition-based distribution of research funds. With this letter we wish to point out serious deficiencies in the evaluation process and reiterate some of the points that are contained in a similar complaint, which is simultaneously sent by NordVulk.

Before commenting on details, we wish to recall that, as was communicated to the Secretary General of NMR in a letter from the directors of the four Nordic cooperation bodies on Feb. 28, 2022, the call itself did not reflect what was envisioned by NMR in the first place. The Nordforsk University Cooperation call is essentially an extension of tools already existing at NordForsk (Nordic hub https://www.nordforsk.org/calls/call-proposals-nordic-university-hubs)

The call that NordForsk launched was entitled "University Cooperation – a call for pre-proposals" with an application deadline of 2 November 2022. According to NordForsk's website, the call contained 5 criteria for submitting a valid application. These were (quoted directly from https://www.nordforsk.org/calls/university-cooperation-call-pre-proposals)

- The contractual partner for a University Cooperation Grant must be a Nordic university, university college or university of applied sciences.
- The consortium must include universities, universities of applied sciences or university colleges located in at least three Nordic countries/ autonomous regions (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Åland Islands).
- The cooperation partners are obligated to contribute twice the amount sought from NordForsk. The contribution must be guaranteed through a letter of commitment signed by the rector or a dean with the authority to assume obligations on behalf of the university, university of applied sciences or university college.
- The Project Leader of the university cooperation must be a qualified researcher employed by the host institution during the grant period.
- The grant application and all attachments are to be submitted in English via the NordForsk Call and Application Portal.

Nordita initiated and was a node of two applications for such University Cooperations:

- proposal no. 150786, "Q-Field: Nordic Network for Research in Quantum Field Theory and Quantum Gravity" (with University of Copenhagen and University of Iceland)
- proposal no. 148486, "Nordic Consortium for Astroinformatics" (with Aalto University and Oslo University)

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Both submitted applications met all five application criteria. Furthermore, in NordForsk's announcement it was stated that the submitted applications are assessed according to the following criteria:

Assessment criteria

All eligible proposals will be rated using a scale 1-7 (1=poor; 2= weak, 3= fair 4= good, 5= very good, 6= excellent, 7= outstanding) based on the criteria described below, and a written statement will be provided.

The evaluation did not follow the announced rating scale. The applications were assessed on an A,B,C scale, causing a degraded variability of the individual application evaluations.

Phase 1 (pre-proposals):

The Call Committee, comprising of one member from each Nordic country based on nominations from the national university rectors' conferences and a chair representing NordForsk, will assess the following two criteria:

1. Relevance relative to the objectives of the call; *(The aim of the call is to strengthen international competitiveness and facilitate the development of excellent Nordic research environments. The call is initiated to support research-based university cooperation across the Nordic region, to increase researcher mobility, enhance capacity and competence building and thereby the excellence and significance of Nordic research cooperation.)*
2. Nordic added value
    1. The potential of the proposed cooperation to benefit the Nordic research communities in terms of e.g., capacity and competence building, mobility and networking effects, supporting scientific excellence, global positioning, and branding of Nordic research environments.
    2. Complementarity of the participating consortia partners
    3. The potential to create benefits for the Nordic societies (providing a useful knowledge base for citizens, policymakers, and other actors to create societal impact, addressing needs or problems that are of special relevance to the Nordic countries)

    In addition, the call committee will pursue a balanced portfolio of proposals invited to the second phase in terms of research disciplines.

In other words – the application will be assessed according to the research potential and Nordic added value. Despite this being the assessment criteria, both applications mentioned above were rejected. In particular we note in regard each of these respective applications the following:

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Proposal no. 150786:

The call committee states that the application would have been stronger if it had a clearer research research focus. The statement seems only to be supported by an incomplete citation from the application (at the beginning of the assessment) where the words “through research” are left out. We would like to point out that the application explicitly describes the research plan of the consortium as consisting of the following three elements: “i) to develop new QFT methods and applications for realistic and experimentally accessible physical systems, ii) to apply QFT and a dual formulation of gravity to study the short-distance structure of spacetime, and iii) to uncover novel QFT mechanisms that can seed future theoretical and experimental discoveries” and we have subsequently detailed all three points. Only a full proposal would have allowed us to give a complete specification of our targets involving milestones and time plan.

The call committee states that the Nordic added value would have increased with larger geographical scope. We would like to emphasize that the geographical scope of our Nordic Network is the entire Nordic region. As clearly stated at numerous points in our application, the activities created by the three Nordic nodes which would receive funding are specifically designed to benefit theoretical physics in the entire Nordic region.

Proposal no. 148486:

The call committee states that “The application does live up to the formal requirements for the call regarding the inclusion of research institutions in three countries or autonomous, Nordic regions and co-funding. The proposal is not detailed concerning what to achieve and activities for that. It is not clear what mobility and meetings comprise. Almost all sought funding is for postdocs and a particular need for funding for Nordita is mentioned. Among listed participating individual researchers are two from Finland, one from Sweden and eight from Norway, with no justification given for the distribution. It is not clear that the proposed cooperation will contribute significantly to increase researcher mobility.”

The aim of the call was "to strengthen international competitiveness" and to support "cooperation across the Nordic region to increase researcher mobility". Consequently, this consortium assembled a team of strong researchers with "complementary expertise" (see last paragraph of page 3 of the proposal) with *equal* distribution of male and female partners with a broad range of PhD ages from 13 to 33 years. It was explained that Nordita plays the role of a Nordic hub through which the postdocs connect the activities at the three nodes through in-person meetings. It was also mentioned that this would benefit to the whole Nordic scientific community, for example via the Nordita programs, the visiting PhD program, and Nordic network meetings. Corresponding funds for mobility were budgeted (1.6 MNOK from own contributions and 1.1 MNOK requested), and yet, this resulted in a score "C" on what should have been a 1-7 scale on mobility, leaving no chance for making further adjustments in a full proposal.

The emphasis of the panel assessment appears to be solely on enhancing researcher mobility, while other evaluation criteria, such as “The aim of the call is to strengthen international competitiveness and facilitate the development of excellent Nordic research environments“ and “supporting scientific excellence, global positioning, and branding of Nordic research environments: complementarity of

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the participating consortia partners; the potential to create benefits for the Nordic societies" were largely neglected.

In **both applications** we emphasized the role of Nordita as a Nordic Hub for hosting activities promoting mobility and networking, having already established infrastructures and processes for month-long scientific programs, workshops, and winter and summer schools in place. Therefore, there was no need to re-invent the format for such activities, as they already exist at Nordita, but with the help of them our aim was to strengthen the Nordic research environment in theoretical high energy physics on the one hand and computational astro- and space physics on the other hand. All this built on the complementary expertise of the partners, and aimed to position each consortium into a globally leading position.

NMR has previously funded the postdoctoral program at Nordita through NordForsk, but recently the continuation of the funding was redirected to this competitive university co-operation call. For this reason, these two Nordic consortia with Nordita as key partner, were built around the idea to keep this immensely successful postdoctoral program ongoing and increase its Nordic dimension and value. To us it seems that the evaluation panel was not aware of these developments, and rather judged our application for continued funding for Nordita postdocs based on new criteria, as their emphasis was clearly on identifying traditional researcher mobility. We stress that the combination of Nordita as Nordic hub for mobility and networking with the extended postdoctoral programme serves as an important intellectual researcher mobility scheme that is argued to be much more effective than a more traditional visitor scheme between Nordic institutes.

We therefore wish to protest in the strongest possible terms over an erroneous evaluation process and complain about NordForsk's decision to reject these two applications, as the two rejections are not justified in view of the evaluation criteria for the advertisement.

On behalf of the applicants, yours sincerely

Prof. Niels Obers
Director of NORDITA

Prof. Susanne F. Viefers
Head of Department of Physics, Oslo University
Chair of Nordita board