



## Minutes from PhD Programme Committee meeting

**Time:** Thursday 21 November 2024

### Schedule:

13.00 – 14.00: Meeting with GSNS and Head of Graduate School

14.00 – 15.00: PhD Programme Committee meeting

15.00 – 16.00: PhD Admission meeting – November Call

**Place:** Universitetsbyen 81, 1872-547

### Participants:

Ditlev Egeskov Brodersen, Head of Programme, Daan van Aalten, Lotte Bjergbæk, Jan Trige Rasmussen, Kasper Munch and Helle Homann (minute taker).

*At meeting with GSNS and Head of Graduate School, in addition:* Ole Bækgaard Nielsen, Head of Graduate School; PhD Partner Mie Meulengracht Christensen, PhD Partner Iben Bremer Schmidt, Rikke J. Ljungmann, Head of PhD Administration, NAT and TECH, and Magdalena Pyrz, Head of Mol-X-Lab.

*At meeting with GSNS and Head of Graduate School and PhD Programme Committee meeting, in addition:* Anna Hvarregaard Christensen, Rajlakshmi Sawale and Amalie Benfeldt Purup.

*At PhD Programme Committee meeting, in addition:* Camilla Gottlieb Andersen.

**Absent:** Christian Kroun Damgaard, Kasper Røjkjær Andersen.

Item	Minutes
1.	<p><b>Meeting with GSNS and Head of Graduate School</b></p> <p>Head of Graduate School Ole Bækgaard Nielsen and members of the GSNS administration are visiting the individual PhD programmes at NAT in the autumn, including MBG.</p> <p>The Graduate School had put forward some subjects that they would like to discuss and get feedback on during the meeting:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li><i>The program's local procedures for assessing and nominating candidates for admission – current procedures and expected procedures after the new financial model is implemented.</i></li></ol>



In order to create a common starting point, Ole Bækgaard Nielsen initiated the discussion of the first item on the agenda with a brief presentation of how funding and admission of PhD students are handled within the framework of the present financial model. Currently, GSNS has approx. 50 million DKK to divide between the faculty's PhD programmes. In the application process, prospective PhD students are divided into projects that require GSNS support and those who do not. The applicants are assessed by the individual PhD programme committees, and recommendations are sent to the GSNS Admission Committee that ultimately decides on which applicants are qualified for admission to the PhD education at NAT and who should get GSNS support.

In the new financial model, GSNS no longer distributes the 50 million DKK during the application process. Instead, these funds will be distributed across the departments at the faculty in correlation with the number of admitted PhD students two years earlier. This percentage is recalculated each year. More students will yield more money and vice versa.

But how is the money going to be spent at the departments? That is the question. The funds that are distributed to the departments are not earmarked the PhD education. Nor are there any demands that the funds must be spent within the same year as it is awarded. These circumstances create a real need for a detailed consideration of how the funding is handled locally. Guidelines are extremely important.

According to Ole Bækgaard Nielsen, it would be beneficial if the individual programme committees were put in charge of deciding which PhD projects should be supported financially. It is also important that the GSNS Admission Committee is maintained to ensure that only the most qualified students get accepted, and that economy does not dictate how many are admitted.

In conclusion, Ole Bækgaard Nielsen added that because it is now the heads of departments that hold the purse strings after the new financial model is implemented, it is very important that they discuss how they are going to handle financing of the PhD education in future, and that both GSNS and the faculty management are involved in the discussions.

- 2. A discussion of how the students' teaching work is managed locally. This includes whether and how consideration is given to the student's field of study, teaching experience, the progress of their project, and how the teaching load is calculated.*

It is a well-known problem that teaching obligations constitute a challenge for the PhD students. Generally, students are satisfied with the content of their teaching, but not with the extent of it. Ole Bækgaard Nielsen related that the subject of teaching



obligations had recently been discussed in the NAT PhD Committee. It will be difficult to reduce the number of teaching hours, but maybe new ways can be found to make it easier for the PhD students to cope with the workload. In this connection it is also important to ensure that the students can get help with subjects they struggle with.

Magdalena Pyrz was invited to the meeting to shed light on how the distribution of teaching assignments is managed locally at MBG. Magdalena is head of MBG's teaching laboratories and responsible for the distribution of teaching tasks among the PhD students. In her account of the elaborate principles for the delegation of tasks, Magdalena explained that PhD students are asked twice a year to fill out an online form and state their teaching preferences for the coming semester. In the online form it is also possible for the students to indicate if they are unable to teach on the basis of reasons like going on a research stay or taking their time-off semester (frisemester) etc. Magdalena then distributes teaching assignments to the PhD students. If students prefer a course that they have taught previously, Magdalena will prioritise this preference. Magdalena also accommodates special requests from the students, for example in cases where it is not possible to teach a full semester due to a stay abroad or other activities. However, the distribution of tasks has certain limitations. First year courses are for example always conducted in Danish – so are some Bachelor courses, and this means that foreign students often can't teach these courses. Furthermore, in cases where students are unsure of their teaching obligations in some way, Magdalena will talk to them and find a solution. Likewise, Magdalena offers to have meetings with new PhD students before the semester starts in order to tell them about their teaching obligations. According to the executive order, PhD students are in general contractually obliged to teach up to 56 hours per semester which corresponds to 140 salaried working hours.

Ole Bækgaard Nielsen asked the three PhD students present at the meeting what they think about the distribution of teaching assignments. Anna Hvarregaard Christensen stated that they are generally very happy with the way things are done. Magdalena does a great job. However, it is stressful to combine teaching assignments with experiments in the lab. Sometimes students must discontinue the flow of experiments because they have to teach a course at the same time. This is a big problem. There is not enough time to work in the lab. The teaching load is overwhelming at times which seems unreasonable. A possible solution could be to delegate teaching assignments to postdocs. According to Ole Bækgaard Nielsen, changes in this direction are already underway. Possibly, postdocs can be asked to teach up to 15% of their time.



	<p>3. <i>A discussion of how non-project-related part of supervision/personnel management is handled within the program. This could include discussions on sick leave, SDD (MUS), career development talks, workplace environment, etc.</i></p> <p>This item was not discussed.</p>
<p>2.</p>	<p><b>PhD Programme Committee meeting</b></p> <p>0. <i>New members of the MBG PhD Programme Committee:</i></p> <p>Ditlev Egeskov Brodersen welcomed Kasper Munch as a new member of the MBG PhD Programme Committee. Kasper joined the committee 1 November and represents the BiRC section. Ditlev also welcomed Amalie Benfeldt Purup and Camilla Gottlieb Andersen as new members. Amalie and Camilla will represent the MBG PhD students in the programme committee along with current members Anna Hvarregaard Christensen and Rajlakshmi Sawale. Furthermore, Ditlev related that Esben Lorentzen has agreed to become a part of the MBG PhD Programme Committee. Esben replaces Pia Møller Martensen and will join the committee in January 2025. This will bring the programme committee back to full occupancy again.</p> <p>1. <i>Updates from PhD committees at NAT:</i></p> <p>Recent updates from PhD committees at NAT were presented by Ditlev. Currently, Ditlev is chair of the NAT PhD Committee, and as such also chair of the NAT Course Committee which functions as an advisory committee for the NAT PhD Committee and represents both NAT and TECH.</p> <p>Teaching exemption was one of the subjects discussed in the NAT PhD Committee. It has been suggested that research environment change should yield teaching exemption without a reduction in pay for the PhD students no matter which time of the year the research environment change is scheduled.</p> <p>The NAT PhD Committee had also talked about thesis requirements. There is a need for a better set of guidelines for thesis requirements with the objective of making it clearer for the opponents to assess what constitutes a good thesis. For example, publications are not a requirement at GSNS unlike research environment change etc.</p> <p>In addition, Science Teaching had been on the agenda. This course is mandatory for all PhD students at GSNS who have teaching obligations as a part of either their employment as a PhD fellow or as a student teacher. Feedback from students point out</p>



that the course falls between two chairs. It wants to be theoretical and practical at the same time and this doesn't work very well.

Finally, the committee had discussed mobility grants. The rules in this area have changed. PhD students that go abroad can apply for a maximum of 20.000 DKK for the entire stay. The stay must have a duration of at least 90 days, and now the stay can be divided into several periods. The 90 days no longer have to be consecutive days. However, PhD students cannot receive a mobility grant for the first stay(s) but only for the latter stay(s) where the sum of at least 90 days is reached.

In the NAT Course Committee, it was reported that the webpage describing PhD courses has been updated with new guidelines for how to put PhD courses together. Some courses resemble and overlap each other, and the aim of the changes to the webpage is to make it clearer for PhD students to see which courses work well together without overlapping.

After taking a course at GSNS, PhD students are asked to fill out a questionnaire and evaluate the course. Ditlev mentioned that it had been discussed in the NAT Course Committee that unpleasant comments about lecturers sometimes pop up in these questionnaires. This is not acceptable. Therefore, it is important to remind everybody that it is good practice to keep a proper tone in course evaluations.

### *2. Offer of a Career Workshop for PhD students at NAT (AU Career PhD & JR):*

AU Career PhD & JR is once again offering to conduct career workshops for PhD students at NAT. The aim is to increase PhD students' awareness of how to develop their career skills at different stages of their research training.

The latest career workshop at MBG was held in March 2024. According to Anna Hvarregaard Christensen, the PhD students were very satisfied with the workshop and would like it to be an annually recurring event. Preferably in January. Therefore, it was decided that planning of a new workshop should begin immediately.

### *3. Future organization of the PhD Conference:*

The MBG PhD Conference is a three-day event which takes place at Sandbjerg Estate once a year (usually in week 42). The conference is organized by MBG's PhD Association. Generally, the PhD students appreciate the conference. It has a positive impact on their well-being and provides the students with a safe space in which they can share experiences.



	<p>However, according to Ditlev, it is perhaps time to change the format for the conference. Several factors point in this direction. For example, the number of participants is not as high as could be expected. On average, only 50 PhD students attend the conference per year. This year the number was even lower (39) because of the clash between the PhD Conference and the CryoNET Symposium which took place on the same dates in October. Furthermore, the PhD students from the PhD Association find it increasingly strenuous to plan and organize the conference. There is a lot of administration and a lot of practicalities to handle, and the students would like to be relieved of some of the tasks. They have suggested that the secretariat could take over on some tasks.</p> <p>Ditlev mentioned in this connection that simplification might be a solution. Could some tasks or workflows be simplified? Another possibility could be to change the venue to a location closer to Aarhus or to shorten the duration of the conference. Several suggestions aiming at making things easier were debated, and it was decided that the PhD students should consider some of the options and schedule a meeting with Ditlev soon to discuss the subject further.</p> <p>4. <i>A.O.B.</i></p> <p>The subject of chairs for Kjeldgaard Lectures was raised by Anna Hvarregaard Christensen who suggested that the PhD students in the labs hosting the lecturers would be natural choices for this role. She will contact Christian Kroun Damgaard who is chairman of the Seminar Committee to discuss the subject further.</p>
<p>3.</p>	<p><b>PhD Admission meeting – November Call</b></p> <p>1. <i>Assessment of candidates for the November 2024 Call:</i></p> <p>Minutes are not taken in this part of the meeting.</p> <p>2. <i>Revision of guidelines (Part A/defence plus well-being/alignment of expectations meetings) – working groups present their drafts:</i></p> <p>At the latest meeting in the MBG PhD Programme Committee in August, it was decided that the members of the programme committee should form two working groups. The first group should produce a set of guidelines for handling Part A and PhD defences, and the second group should revise the documents for the well-being and alignment of expectations meetings. Draft documents from the working groups were circulated in the programme committee before the meeting on 21 November. After a brief discussion of</p>



the drafts, it was decided to implement the revised guidelines immediately and make them available for all members of the committee to access.

Moreover, it was proposed that some of the more formal and information-heavy items, which are usually discussed at the alignment of expectations meetings, are moved to an introductory meeting that Ditlev as head of programme intends to hold with new PhD students after each application round. Several other programmes practice this with good results. In return, Ditlev will no longer partake in alignment of expectations meetings or regular well-being meetings. Head of programme will still offer ad hoc consultations with all students on well-being or other aspects of their education.

### *3. How to handle supervisors during defences?*

Assistant professors cannot formally act as main supervisors for PhD students at NAT. Therefore, a permanent member of the scientific staff is usually appointed as main supervisor. But how much should these supervisors be involved in the final stages of the PhD education? Should they be asked to attend PhD defences? The answer to this question is no. Supervisors do not have to be present at defences. In fact, it is not even stated in the PhD Act or the GSNS Rules and Regulations that the actual supervisor must participate in the defence.

### *4. A discussion of when to reject a PhD thesis:*

This item on the agenda was postponed to a later meeting.

### *5. A discussion of whether the PhD chair must have specific knowledge about the topic of the thesis:*

By 1 October 2024 the BiRC PhD students were transferred from the Computer Science programme to the Molecular Biology and Genetics programme. This means that MBG scientific staff members from the MBG Programme Committee will be appointed to act as chairs at BiRC PhD defences. However, BiRC's research areas are somewhat different from MBG's research areas. This raises the question of whether it is necessary for the PhD chair to have specific knowledge about the topic of the thesis or not. It will not be possible for the chairs to comprehend the thesis topics to the full extent in all cases.

According to Ditlev, this shouldn't be a problem. It is not the chair's responsibility to gain insight into the subject matter of the thesis. This responsibility lies with the opponents. The chair is responsible for making sure that thesis fulfills the requirements and formal



demands while the opponents are responsible for assessing and criticizing the thesis. Sometimes it can even be an advantage not to know too much about the topic because this allows the chair to view the thesis in a more objective way.

*6. Nominations for the AUFF PhD Prize:*

The AU Research Foundation (AUFF) has made a call for nominations of candidates for AUFF annual PhD prizes. The prizes are conferred in recognition of particularly outstanding PhD projects at AU. There will be five awards in total, and each programme is asked to submit max two prioritised suggestions, preferably one female og one male. Candidates eligible for consideration in 2025 are PhD graduates who defended their PhD degree in the 2024 calendar year. PhD graduates who submitted their dissertation in 2024 and will defend no later than 1 February 2025 can also be nominated.

Ditlev asked the members of the PhD Programme Committee to think back and consider if any of the students who defended during the past year could be forward. Submission deadline is 28 November 2024.