

13th May 2024, Oslo

Dear SAI Staff members,

This letter is an invitation to all SAI staff to think together with us, the temporary staff, about reforming the current policy that bars temporary staff from applying for further funding after the completion of a contract at SAI.

As we understand it, the current policy states that temporary staff at SAI are not allowed to apply for further funding beyond the end of their contract, with some exceptions (see below, III). This decision was made because, due to government policy, any employee who stays longer than four years is required to become a permanent staff member. The term “permanent” here is misleading, however. These “permanent” contracts given in such circumstances are contingent on the staff member locating additional funding to support their own position. If they do not secure funding, they can be fired from their positions. Such positions would be more accurately termed “permanent-temporary,” as they are not quite as stable and secure as a permanent position. However, we are also aware that in practice, such firings are difficult to manage by the departments, and often do not happen, creating more ambiguity in what these positions imply.

Again, as we understand it, the background for the 2021 guidelines (see document: [v-sak-6-kriterier-for-a-soke-om-eksterne-forskningsmidler-for-mva.pdf \(uio.no\)](#)) on supporting applications for PhDs and postdoctoral fellows for external funding was based on a few major concerns. These especially included resistance to the proliferation of temporary positions in academia, a desire to conserve departmental resources, and a desire to prioritize the usual, formal process for permanently hiring staff.

Since 2021, there have been several changes and, we believe, significant reasons to rethink this policy. The sections below address each of these considerations in turn.

I. Academic Precarity and Temporary Positions

We recognize that there is a recent university policy that asks UiO departments to reduce the total number of temporary academic positions ([Synet på midlertidighet splitter UiO-styret - Uniforum](#)). They suggest doing this in two ways: through increased attention to temporary staff’s professional development training, and through a reduction in the overall creation of new temporary staff positions. We appreciate that this university-wide policy is a response to a global trend; academic labour markets are constricting everywhere, and there is an overwhelming shift away from permanent employment for academic workers. As temporary staff, this growing precarity is our lived reality. We have an intimate understanding of the damage caused by growing instability in academia. We wholeheartedly appreciate the ethical stance of the university and SAI to push against this trend. However, this issue of worldwide academic precarity is, unfortunately, going to persist regardless of whether we allow for this one additional pathway toward temporary employment at UiO. While we can ethically protest academic instability, we also need practical support from SAI to help us cope with our current lived reality. Opening up more options, rather than closing them, is one form of support.

In this job market, we need to meet a higher standard of excellence to secure a permanent position. This means that, quite often, a single postdoc position will not be enough. After our time at SAI, many of us will likely need a further temporary contract before securing permanent

employment. This further temporary contract can be understood as time for additional professional development, and for building a more attractive profile for the academic job market.

We want to emphasize that we know that this “temporary-permanence” is not an ideal option. Most postdoctoral fellows would not choose further instability willingly. We can continue to emphasize to new scholars that this should not be a default choice. However, in the face of growing international precarity, this option offers a “safety net” for colleagues who, for many possible reasons, do not have alternatives.

II. Alternative Options

Foreclosing the possibility of applying for further research funding at UiO suggests that temporary staff must seek alternative options. For some SAI temporary staff, moving to a new city or country is impossible. Whether because of child or other family caretaking responsibilities, political and safety concerns in home countries, health limitations, etc., there are many good reasons why an international move (either for an academic contract or otherwise) is not feasible. Many of us will be offered temporary contracts in other countries. If the choice is between a further contract in Oslo or a short-term international relocation, the local option might often be a more productive and sensible one. Giving temporary staff members some form of freedom to balance their personal life demands with their professional career goals is an important form of solidarity and support.

III. On Exceptional Applicants

The 2021 policy document outlines the possibility for exceptions in the case of particularly exceptional applicants. This explicitly includes ERC recipients or other competitive funding sources but also leaves the definition of what would be considered an exceptional applicant, an “excellent” idea, or an “asset” to the department fairly ambiguous.

Since the 2021 decision against allowing temporary staff to apply for funding, there has already been one major consideration of an “exceptional” case. This seems to suggest that, over the years, there will continue to be a departmental impulse to allow *some* temporary staff members to apply for further funding.

Our main concern here is that exceptions carry the potential for unfair treatment. The argument in favour of “exceptional” candidates could further reinforce latent biases in academia, or unfairly privilege some colleagues over others.

Further, in the current state of academic funding, all major grants that fund multiple years of full-time research are incredibly competitive. They usually include several rounds of intensive review by juries of dedicated scholars. These funders are already responsible for identifying which applicants have shown exceptional quality and promise, something that the departmental criteria could, with advantage, more clearly reflect.

IV. SAI Departmental Community

As we understand it, allowing these “permanent-temporary” hiring categories would be self-funding, and not foreclose other, more traditional hiring lines. Therefore, this should not

interfere with the department's ability to determine the future of the departmental makeup. It also does not come with a financial burden to economically support these staff members.

As such, allowing SAI temporary staff to apply for further time in the department offers a way to express support for our temporary staff as valued members of our departmental community. It would also make SAI's temporary staff more competitive in the job market, and increase chances of securing a future permanent position.

V. Proposed improvements to temporary staff training

We are in the process of many reforms at SAI, some of which are directly relevant to this conversation. We propose that part of these reforms should include more thorough preparation for PhDs and postdocs who are trying to secure permanent employment beyond SAI. This might include, for example, the measure proposed by the PhD revision group for increased institutional support for the Career Development Series, which provides training and support for temporary staff on the job market. It might also include more focused mentorship from permanent staff to help temporary staff navigate their options after a postdoctoral fellowship ends. These changes might be considered in tandem with this policy change. In this way, we are opening the door to postdoctoral fellows' grant application efforts, while also strengthening the possibility for securing viable alternatives.

It is important to note that grant writing is a vital skill set for all scholars. Even for those of us who will be working outside of universities in the future, grant writing is central to many post-PhD careers. Therefore, allowing us to try (whether or not we succeed) to secure major grants should be considered an absolute necessity in our professionalization at SAI.

We hope that this letter is the start to an ongoing conversation around this issue in advance of the upcoming vote at the board meeting. We welcome responses, further discussion, questions, and clarifications. The hope is that this department-wide, inclusive conversation will help board members make a more informed decision, with full temporary staff input when the time comes.

Thank you for your time and attention to this crucial issue. We look forward to further conversation.

Sincerely,

SAI Temporary Staff