

Copenhagen DCESS and its evolving relationship to host and funding agencies

The initial period

The Danish Center for Earth System Science (DCESS) was founded in December 1997 with support from the Danish National Research Foundation and with branches at the Universities of Copenhagen and Southern Denmark (Odense). Our Copenhagen branch got off to a good start within a Niels Bohr Institute for Astronomy, Physics and Geophysics (NBIfAFG), led by Prof. Ole Hansen (OH), with funding from Danmarks Grundforskningsfond (DGF). OH had been invited in from abroad to objectively chart a course for the newly-formed NBIfAFG above the turbulent waters of its quarreling groups and alliances. And this he did admirably while trying to make the best out of the individual strengths of NBIfAFG members. For example, despite the protests of the glaciology group and some “hard core” physicists at NBIfAFG, he supported the strengthening of the oceanography group whose work he recognized to be of international stature. The choice of DCESS, run by three professors of non-Danish origin, for a DGF center was apparently influenced in part by the wish to inject new blood into the Danish research community. The DCESS “experiment” was initially followed with great interest within DGF. For instance, we had many useful exchanges of opinion with Prof. Gisela Sjøgaard, the DCESS contact person on the initial DGF steering committee.

The continuation

Alas, all good things come to an end. After his maximum term of 6 years, OH turned over the reigns of NBIfAFG to Nils O. Andersen (NOA) in 1999. It soon became apparent that within NBIfAFG the winds had changed for DCESS and oceanography. While OH was interested in and made time for discussions on the future of Earth System Science and Climate Research, NOA essentially never had time for nor was interested in such discussions. A new top-down culture had taken over whereby a small group around NOA decided what research was worthy of support. Little value was placed in, and little inspiration derived from, bottom-up initiatives like DCESS, even when they were successful in obtaining funding and international recognition. A culmination point was reached at a dinner meeting on May 29, 2001 in the presence of DGF representatives. At that meeting, NOA criticized DCESS for not helping earlier with basic teaching in oceanography. This sent clear signals to DGF that NBIfAFG was not happy with DCESS and was intended to embarrass us since NOA had not conveyed this criticism to us before this meeting. This attack was far off the mark since, by that point in time, DCESS was in fact responsible for all teaching in oceanography, having quickly responded to adjustments suggested by DGF (see below).

We continued our good relationship with DGF after the appointment of a new steering committee and a new director, Ole Fejerskov (OF), in 1999. The regular meetings with DGF went well and we were assured by OF that DGF was very pleased with the scientific advances we were making. OF informed us of other evaluation criteria of importance

to the new steering committee like integration into the mainstream of university life and outreach. Although these were aspects that were not stressed in our contract, we responded quickly and effectively to address them. Other signs from DGF were less encouraging, however. For one thing, we never met our primary contact person on the new board, Lauritz Holm-Nielsen, although we went out of our way to arrange contact meetings such that he could attend (we did however have good contacts with our secondary contact person, Prof. Else-Marie Friis). Also OF alerted us of “rumours” and “mixed signals” coming from within the University of Copenhagen and, in fact, OF asked us several times if we could identify another research environment at which we could better develop our research activities. At that time we still felt that the best place for us was NBIfAFG but, in retrospect, we should have looked into alternatives then.

DCESS evaluation

After we sent in our proposal in August 2001 for a second five-year period, most DCESS members were feeling very optimistic about our renewal chances. After all, we had had great scientific success, for example, six publications in Nature or Science by then, and had made a name for ourselves internationally in a very short time as evidenced, for example, by the lead editorial in Science magazine on June 15, 2001.

When the composition of our international evaluation committee was announced we were surprised to find Prof. Erland Källen (EK) of Stockholm University on the committee: EK has dedicated himself more to administration than to basic research in the last decade; for example, he was Head of Research at the Danish Meteorological Institute (DMI) during part of the 1990's. Also, in 1994/95 EK was unsuccessful in his application for the Professorship in Meteorology in Copenhagen, which was awarded to Ray Bates, now associate director of DCESS, and, at the beginning of the 1990's in Sweden, EK and I stood on opposite sides of a very heated issue. If EK did arrive with a negative predisposition toward DCESS, then he would have magnified any perceived criticism of DCESS in the briefings at DGF before and after the committee visit to our center. From the comments of the committee members during their meeting with us, I conclude that most of the uneven, negative comments in the report - all of organizational or political nature - flowed from EK's pen. In our response of January 10, 2002 to the evaluation report we defended ourselves on these points. However, despite EK's efforts, the overall tone of the evaluation report was very positive. The committee underscored the quality and importance of our research (“first-rate group of researchers”, “cutting edge of earth science”, “pioneering work”, “measurements are unique” in “an important, unexplored area”) and were impressed with our “exceptionally talented and energetic students and post-doctoral fellows” and with “the center as a research training environment”.

Thus we were deeply disappointed by the DGF decision from February 7, 2002 not to offer a new five year grant to DCESS. In the DGF letter to me of February 15, organizational, formal but not scientific, motivations are offered for this decision. It is stated that DCESS has not to a sufficient degree become a coherent center construction. We presented arguments against this interpretation in our January 10 response to the evaluation report. Several of our joint publications provide proof that DCESS is a coherent center.

DGF states that a unified focus for research in the new project plan was missing. The evaluation committee did not find such focus to be “missing” but rather suggested that we coordinate “some of the proposed research efforts more closely” and collaborate “with researchers, in Copenhagen, whose strengths compliment those of DCESS”. In our response from January 10 we addressed this by (re)formulating three priority, cross-cutting themes and by taking initiatives to bring DMI and the Glaciology group into this research effort. DGF states that there was not sufficient motivation for the funds sought. We submitted our renewal application materials in August 2001 according to the instructions provided to us by DGF. Part of the requested material was a budget stating what the requested funds would be used for. The instructions did not state a need to present extensive motivations for the funds sought; in the end, such motivations are implicit in the research proposed.

By all reasonable criteria, I feel that DCESS should have been renewed for another five year term. There was only praise in the evaluation report for the quality and quantity of our scientific production. I do not doubt that, given this fact, we would have been renewed had we continued to receive support from NBIfAFG as in our initial period.

Embedding fiasco

In the light of the above, a final irony then is that, in the DGF letter of February 15, a modest, three-year grant of 12 million DDK for embedding the research of our Copenhagen branch was offered directly to NBIfAFG and NOA. In April 2002, an initial working group set up by NOA, including Dorthe Dahl-Jensen (DDJ) of the glaciology group and me, prepared a draft of an embedding proposal and sent it to DGF for comments. However, this draft was not to the liking of NOA or DGF and it was sent back to the committee for “improvement”. At this point, NOA took the matter into his own hands and by the middle of May (with input from DDJ and after avoiding my efforts to contact him in this matter) had produced a completely new proposal with a completely new concept and budget. In his vision, DCESS embedding was to be run by a steering committee headed by Nanna Noe-Nygaard (NN; Department of Geology, U. of Copenhagen) and including DDJ, me and an external member. We at DCESS opposed much of this new concept; we wished to retain a strong research unit led by me, in a way similar to the way chosen for the successful DCESS embedding in Odense. Also, whereas the Odense embedding included considerable contributions from the university there for positions and the like, the NOA proposal tapped DGF funds for NBIfAFG running costs. Young DCESS scientists, toward whom the embedding should be directed according to the DGF letter of February 15, tried to set up a meeting with NOA to discuss the situation but NOA rejected such a meeting. By the beginning of June, we were forced to accept a slightly modified version of the NOA proposal in order to secure salaries for young DCESS scientists and other DCESS members.

Since no subsequent initiative was taken by NOA or NN, I sent out in the middle of July draft descriptions of the five post doc positions agreed upon in the embedding proposal, the research areas of which fell under my research competence. If really there had been interest in the situation of the young DCESS scientists, all involved would have wel-

comed this initiative and would have made their suggestions for additions/corrections so that we could have gotten on with our work. Rather, at the end of July, NN and DDJ recommended that the embedding committee be in charge of the wording, but that is just the point of sending my draft around to the committee for their comments. While everyone proclaimed to be in favor of a meeting of the committee as soon as possible, NOA noted at the end of July that, due to travel activities of the committee members, it would be difficult for the committee to meet, decide on announcement, get the formal contract with DG phrased and signed, etc. until mid September. The above shows that the idea of running the embedding grant by committee was not working and that NOA and the other committee members did not feel the same urgency as I felt about solving the future situation of young DCESS scientists whose funding was to stop by November 30.

In the end, no steering committee meeting was ever called. Rather, I learned afterward of a “secret” meeting on DCESS embedding on September 23 between “representatives of NBIfAFG” and DGF. This was followed by a meeting on October 8 with DGF to which NOA and I were invited. By then, as a response to dismal future perspectives at the University of Copenhagen, most of the young DCESS scientists had found jobs elsewhere. This set the stage for the diversion of still more of the embedding funds to other groups favored by NOA. Therefore, in the name of DCESS members, I found the situation untenable and at that meeting suggested that DCESS should rather be embedded in another, more favorable research environment, in the spirit of the question posed to us several times earlier by OF. In the following days and weeks, we contacted several potential hosts for our research activities and identified the Danish National Environmental Research Institute (NERI) as the best alternative for us. Likewise, the leaders of NERI were very positive to the prospects of hosting our Copenhagen branch. In separate letters of October 22 and 23 to DGF, the Director of NERI, Henrik Sandbech, and I proposed that the DGF funds be used to embed our Copenhagen branch into NERI. However, in a decision letter of November 8, DGF rejected this proposal without motivating well this rejection and, finally, retracted the embedding funds offered in the decision letter of February 15.

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February 2003