Principles for assistant professor mentors and assistant professor supervisors at the Faculty of Natural Sciences

On 27 March 2023, the faculty management team at NAT decided to increase familiarity with the assistant professor mentoring scheme for all assistant professors at NAT (with and without tenure track). This decision is a consequence of the ministerial order on job structure for academic staff at universities and the implementation of the ministerial order. NAT has decided to distinguish between the titles "assistant professor mentor" and "assistant professor supervisor". An assistant professor supervisor will refer exclusively to a supervisor for the University Pedagogical Programme. The two functions can be performed by the same person and the duties may overlap, unless otherwise stated in the description below[1]. The principles were prepared by a working group under the faculty management team between May and August 2023.

1. Appointment of an assistant professor mentor

Newly hired assistant professors (with and without tenure track) must be assigned a mentor at senior level. The head of department is responsible for appointing a mentor and should take the points below into consideration. Further reasons for these considerations are described at the end of this document.

1. The assistant professor mentor should not be affiliated with the assistant professor's research grouping,[2] as this can create conflicts of interest. However, this rule can be deviated from if the head of department, assistant professor and mentor consent.
2. Due consideration should be given to whether there should or should not be any overlap between the assistant professor mentor and the assistant professor supervisor in connection with the University Pedagogical Programme. For example, any considerations of academic overlap or staffing resources can result in local variations.
3. The assistant professor mentor should play a key role in onboarding the assistant professor and the assistant professor's career development. This will ensure well-being and a positive work environment. The assistant professor mentor is affiliated with the assistant professor during the entirety of assistant professor's employment. In relation to onboarding, the tasks of the assistant professor mentor and other staff should be clarified locally.

1.1 Role of the assistant professor

It is the assistant professor's own responsibility to be proactive and reach out to the assistant professor mentor. The assistant professor is responsible for:

- Contacting the assistant professor mentor when necessary, for example with any questions or to set up formal meetings.
  - Meetings are convened well in advance and should have a clear purpose.
- Clearly communicating any need for supervision and sparring to the assistant professor mentor.

Appendix 1 contains ideas for topics for conversation.

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[1] Please note that only assistant professors are assigned an assistant professor mentor. All participants on the University Pedagogical Programme, irrespective of their job category, must have a supervisor.

[2] Terminology may vary locally. The point is that, in order to reduce the risk of conflicts of interest, the assistant professor mentor and assistant professor should not work together on a daily basis.

1.2 Role of the assistant professor mentor

The assistant professor mentor and the assistant professor are both responsible for ensuring that the relationship is constructive. The assistant professor mentor is responsible for:

- Allocating the time required for the assistant professor mentor role as agreed with management.
- Providing the assistant professor with help and sparring on any questions they may have.
- Acting as a formal principal supervisor for the assistant professor's PhD students, unless otherwise agreed with the head of department and the assistant professor.
- Taking on the role of supervisor of the assistant professor during their participation in the University Pedagogical Programme. At the start of the assistant professor's employment, it is important to clarify whether supervision on the University Pedagogical Programme is to be undertaken by someone other than the assistant professor mentor.

1.2.1 Role of the assistant professor supervisor

During the University Pedagogical Programme, the supervisor and the CED are responsible for pedagogical onboarding of the assistant professor and for guiding the assistant professor in didactic tasks and questions. The supervisor is responsible for:

- Providing sparring and feedback on the assistant professor's teaching assignments (preparation, supervision, classroom instruction, lectures, exams, course evaluations, course development, etc.).
- Facilitating the assistant professor's relationship with colleagues in the teaching community.
- You can find additional material on the role of the assistant professor supervisor on the CED website[3].

1.3 Role of the head of department

The head of department has overall responsibility for staff and thereby has a key role in the allocation of tasks. With regard to the role of assistant professor mentor, the head of department is responsible for:
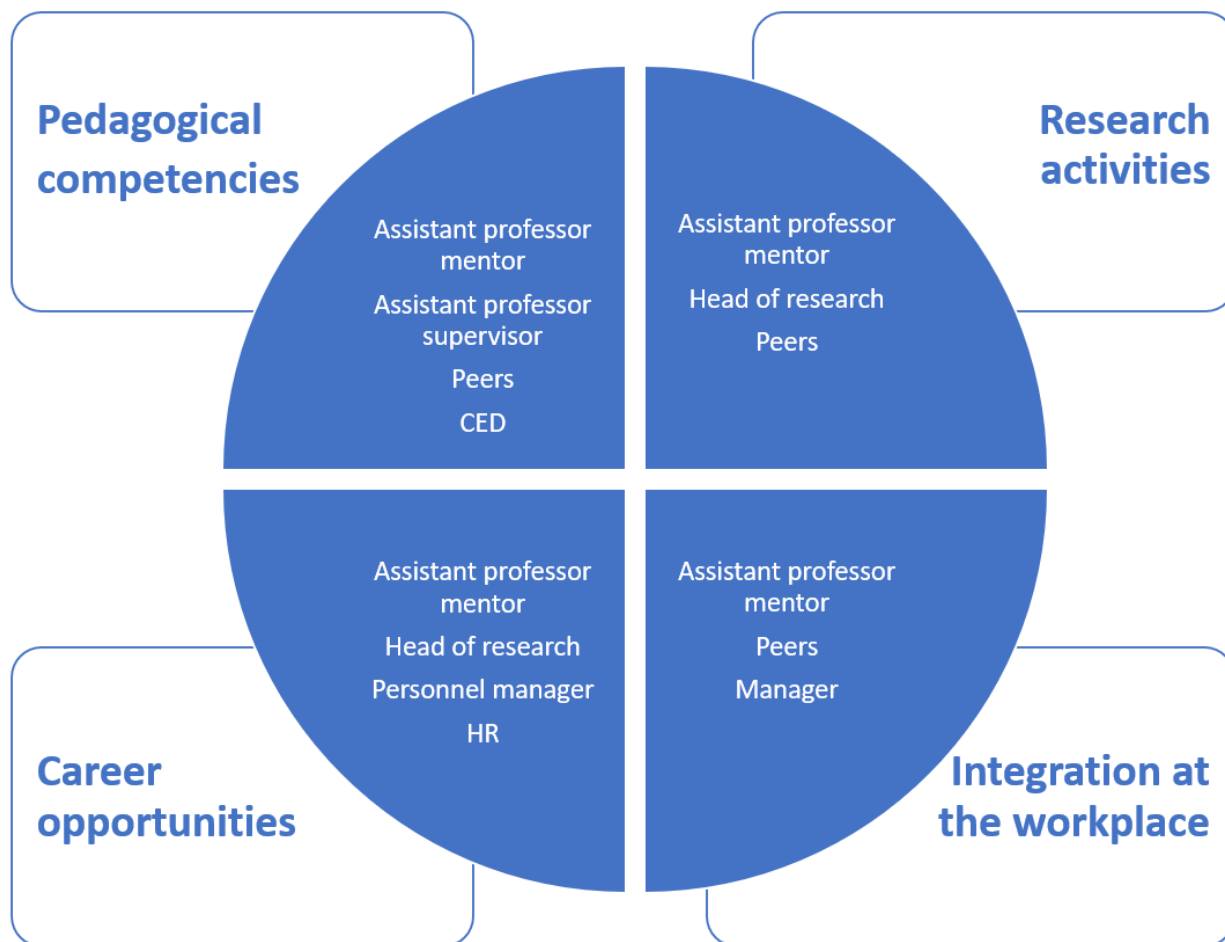
- Preparing a plan for the assistant professor at the start of employment, including a plan for teaching assignments and participation in the University Pedagogical Programme. For assistant professors on tenure-track programmes, this can be done in connection with the meeting on gauging and matching expectations between the assistant professor and the head of department. This meeting should take place no later than three months after the start date.
- Ensuring that all assistant professors are assigned a mentor at the start of their employment, and it is recommended that this be done prior to arrival in Aarhus.
- Ensuring that the assistant professor receives the right onboarding, and that the various responsibilities for onboarding are clear to the assistant professor mentor, a possible assistant professor supervisor, and the rest of the staff.
- Ensuring that the assistant professor mentor and any other assistant professor supervisor have the necessary time and insight to carry out their responsibilities.

2. Reasons for using assistant professor mentors

On the basis of a practice analysis at the five faculties, the CED has defined four areas that can contribute to a positive assistant professor programme and in which an assistant professor mentor can play an important role. At NAT, there are a number of challenges within each area, and these challenges can be alleviated by appointing an assistant professor mentor. Below is a description of who has an active role under each area.

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[3] https://ced.au.dk/hjaelp-og-vejledning/adjunktvejledning

Pedagogical competencies

Assistant professor mentor
Assistant professor supervisor
Peers
CED

Research activities

Assistant professor mentor
Head of research
Peers

Career opportunities

Assistant professor mentor
Head of research
Personnel manager
HR

Integration at the workplace

Assistant professor mentor
Peers
Manager

2.1 Pedagogical competencies

During their employment, assistant professors must acquire the requisite pedagogical competencies and teaching experience to qualify them for an associate professorship. The job of the assistant professor mentor is to provide sparring and feedback on the assistant professor's teaching duties throughout the assistant professor's employment. The assistant professor mentor is also responsible for facilitating the assistant professor's relationship with their colleagues in the teaching community. The assistant professor supervisor supervises the assistant professor during the University Pedagogical Programme, which includes a number of set supervision tasks totalling approx. 15 hours. The supervisor must also ensure that the pedagogical competencies acquired by the assistant professor are brought into play during the assistant professor's teaching and within the collegial teaching community. For example, the assistant professor could present a development project from the University Pedagogical Programme to teaching colleagues. The assistant professor mentor/supervisor also contributes to the written evaluation of the assistant professor's teaching qualifications, which must be prepared no later than three months before the end of the assistant professorship in accordance with Ministerial Order on Job Structure for Academic Staff at Universities.

2.2 Research activities

According to the [guidelines on the PhD Order (section 8(1))](#) the principal supervisor of a PhD student must be an associate professor or senior researcher as a minimum. This can create problems in cases where an assistant professor has primary academic responsibility for a PhD student, as the division of roles between the assistant professor and the senior researcher (principal supervisor) can then be unclear. Uncertainties about who is responsible for academic supervision have previously proven frustrating for the PhD student, the assistant professor and the principal supervisor. Furthermore, the assistant professor might not be recognised for the work they do, as credit is often given to the principal supervisor. It is therefore recommended that the assistant professor mentor act as the formal principal supervisor.

2.3 Career opportunities

As part of the faculty's increased focus on the career development of academic staff, it can be a good idea to incorporate the assistant professor mentor as an active part of the assistant professor's career development. The assistant professor mentor can contribute with their experience and knowledge, which can be used to shape the assistant professor's career plan or for sparring about grant proposals that can further the assistant professor's future career. Furthermore, the departments have different cultures regarding a number of factors, e.g. research abroad and change of environment, which can further the assistant professor's career. The assistant professor mentor can provide important sparring in relation to these factors and thereby contribute to the assistant professor's career development (see additional themes that can be discussed by the assistant professor and the assistant professor mentor in Appendix 1).

2.4 Integration at the workplace

According to the CED's practice analysis, assistant professors generally need sparring. The analysis also highlighted the fact that assistant professor mentors from outside the assistant professor's immediate research grouping can also be used, as what the assistant professor needs is not academic sparring, but rather sparring in relation to important milestones in their professorship, research strategies, funding applications and overall well-being, etc. A relationship with a mentor is also expected to contribute to the assistant professor's general well-being and work environment. This is particularly relevant if the assistant professor has not previously been employed at AU and is thereby not familiar with AU's workplace culture or Danish funding application practice. If the assistant professor is on a tenure track programme, the assistant professor mentor can also contribute with sparring and supervision to ensure that milestones of the tenure track programme are reached. In autumn 2023, and as part of implementing the new job structure, the faculty management team developed principles and guidelines for onboarding academic staff. It is strongly recommended that assistant professor mentors be involved in onboarding assistant professors. With good onboarding, the right career development and, not least, communication about the latter, departments will become even more attractive to future research talents.

Appendix 1
Suggested discussion topics for meetings between mentor and mentee (assistant professor)

Workplace culture (onboarding stage, year 1)
- Practical issues related to arriving in Denmark and at AU.
- Danish workplace culture and local workplace tradition at the department.
- Explain the "local landscape" within the section, centre, department, faculty etc.
- Occupational Health and Safety at AU, safety regulations for lab work at the department.

Teaching (year 2-3)
- Introduction to Danish teaching tradition, exam styles and semester structure.
- Identify courses aimed at helping the mentee develop their teaching and supervision skills.
- Identify and discuss ideas/developments of new courses or material.

Funding & Research (onboarding, year 1-3)
- Introduction to the Danish funding landscape.
- Focus and strategy for grant applications (can involve input from local scientific coordinator or research support office). Help the assistant professor find their niche among ongoing research activities in Denmark.
- Discuss and develop new ideas.
- Give feedback on actual applications.
- Help point to possible collaborators to broaden scope, strengthen the research network.
- Supervision – how to tackle issues & how to organise and lead a research group as it builds up.

Career (onboarding + throughout)
- Align expectations with Head of Department, including overall criteria for mid-term and final evaluation for tenure-track assistant professor.
- Career plan for the mentee; future career (AU/non-AU), building network, expanding collaborations etc.
- AU tools and courses for career development (e.g. course on mentoring PhD students and research group leader), and how to use these in building your own research group.
- Potential opportunities in entrepreneurship and spin outs
- How to balance travel/conferences/etc.
- How to choose "good collaborators" in the Danish research environment.
- How to balance career and family in practice.

Lab management (onboarding, year 1)
- AU systems for purchasing, finance management, EU tenders, travel reimbursement – how much time to spend on this, how often, who can help?
- AU rules for employment of staff, advice for recruitment and leadership.
- PhD students: introduction to the Danish PhD system (short PhD, teaching obligations, requirement for 30 ECTS of courses). May serve as official supervisor for the assistant professor's own PhD students. Share experience in mentoring, managing and motivating PhD students.

Outreach

- Help identify outreach options such as guest lectures and public talks.
- Help identify outreach options in public and private enterprises.
- Help identify potential outreach activities in the recruitment of students and talents.

General recommendation for the meetings:
The mentee is responsible for initiating the meetings; However, it may be helpful to have a relatively fixed set of meetings per year to make sure they happen.