

# Recommendations from Peer Review Panel

TrygFonden's Centre for Child Research Extension  
Application



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# 1 Summary: Overall evaluation and recommendations for extension

The panel finds that TrygFonden's Centre for Child Research (from here: the centre) has made a substantial contribution to the well-being of children and young people by demonstrating the potentials of high quality quantitative research in education and “early childhood education and care” (ECEC) in Denmark. The panel also finds that the centre has the potential to increase its contributions in the years to come and could be even more ambitious regarding both research quality and impact for children.

The panel wishes to acknowledge the centre's valuable contributions to the task of carrying out rigorous quantitative research and executing Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) in the Danish education sector, which has been predominantly oriented towards qualitative research. The centre has achieved a unique level of expertise that distinguishes it in the Danish educational and social research community. In addition, the centre is recognized as a unique and highly valuable source of high-quality research with a high level of relevance for educational and ECEC practices by central educational agencies, both at a local and national level.

The panel recommends that TrygFonden consider granting research funding provided the following conditions are met:

- The centre responds appropriately to recommendations 3.1-3.7 below:
- The university management establish a measurable and transparent process for the centre's integration and long-term sustainability;
- Attention is paid to the specific recommendations in sections 2.4, 3.7 and chapter 4 below.

In addition, the panel recommends the university is requested to present a strategy for beyond the period of the Trygfonden centre grant, to ensure a sustainable transition to the post-funding period.

## 2 Evaluation

This section contains the six evaluation questions and the panel's responses to them.

### 2.1 Evaluation question 1: Scientific quality

- Has the centre succeeded in producing research of high scientific quality?
- Among other things, do the researchers affiliated with the centre publish a growing number of papers in the world's leading journals within their disciplines?

The panel notes that the centre has carried out several RCTs, some of which attain a level of state-of-the-art in their fields and are published in leading journals. The panel also notes that the number of publications has been growing since the inception of the centre, and that there are examples of RCTs that are conducted with methodological rigour, e.g. by pre-registering the research protocols, using validated measures and researching the challenges inherent in upscaling effective interventions.

The panel notes that the centre has strong connections to international research communities and increasingly collaborates with relevant researchers and education professionals. The panel also notes that the centre is successful in recruiting talented PhD students.

The panel recognizes that the centre has made a unique contribution to the Danish education research community by demonstrating that it is possible to conduct RCTs and other rigorous controlled research designs in the Danish ECEC and school context.

The panel sees a potential for the centre to develop the scientific quality of the centre's research even further. The panel recommends the centre develops a best practice protocol for conducting RCTs, to be used by all researchers in the centre. Some of the centre's researchers have extensive experience of conducting trials, and the learning from previous years should be made available to all the researchers in the centre to help ensure that all the centre's trials can meet the same high standards of best practice as those of the best current examples.

The panel also sees a potential for the centre to be even more ambitious regarding the depth of its studies. This would most likely make it possible to publish in high impact journals. See sections 3.3, 3.4 and 3.5 for the panel's recommendations.

In addition, the panel finds that the centre could also to a higher degree appreciate the potentials and contributions of systematic reviews and rigorous meta-analyses, as well as improve its shared approach in these fields.

## 2.2 Evaluation question 2: Knowledge culture

- Has the centre succeeded in strengthening the knowledge culture in those fields of practice in which the centre works?
- Are those interventions, which according to the centre's research have a positive effect on the well-being and learning of children and young people, implemented?
- How does the implementation take place, and what barriers to implementation have been encountered?

The panel notes that the centre is working with the Ministry of Education and other central agencies and benefits from high credibility and standing among these. Officials perceive the centre as a significant and important contributor to the continuing work towards more evidence-based policy and practice. The panel has seen examples at national and local levels where results from the centre's research have been used to inform political decision-making processes.

The panel notes that the centre has demonstrated that rigorous quantitative research can contribute to the development of education in Denmark, despite this approach being very under-developed when the centre was initially founded.

The panel notes that the centre has succeeded in taking two effective interventions to scale in collaboration with the ministry and several municipalities, while at the same time continuing their research on the challenges of upscaling. The centre also has a strong relationship with Aarhus municipality, where several of the centre's interventions have become standard practices in municipal schools and ECEC centres.

The panel notes that the centre has met barriers to the dissemination of knowledge in relation to both policy makers and education practitioners. The panel finds that the centre should work to surmount these barriers by extending its strategic relationships with policy makers at both municipal and national levels and by collaborating more closely with the university colleges responsible for teacher training. See specific recommendations in sections 3.2 and 3.6.

## 2.3 Evaluation question 3: Capacity development

- Has the centre succeeded in strengthening its capacity to develop interventions and carry out interdisciplinary research projects?

The panel notes that the centre since its start has developed its capacity to a significant level. The centre has successfully built an efficient support structure for its research with a resourceful secretariat, a staff team with useful knowledge and specialized skills that are essential to the success of the centre. The panel recognizes that the type of research conducted by the centre requires staff with skills that few researchers in Denmark possess. The development of interventions requires the capacity to engage in co-production with the end users (teachers and pedagogical staff in schools and ECEC). Similarly, the actual implementation of RCTs demands highly specialized skills in recruitment of participants, data management, implementation, ensuring fidelity, etc. All these highly specialized skills are present at the centre, and the panel recognizes this capacity as an essential feature in the support of both the centre's established researchers and PhD students.

The researchers currently employed at the centre generally have educational backgrounds in economics and, to a lesser degree, political science and language development. To be precise, of 38

fellows, 21 are from the Department of Economics and Business Economics, 8 are from Political Science, and the remaining 9 are from Psychology, the School of Communication and

Culture and VIVE (the Danish Center for Social Science Research). The panel finds that, in order to understand and develop interventions beyond the 'black box', it is necessary to carefully develop detailed theories of change, and for this purpose, it is essential to work with researchers from all the relevant disciplines. The panel notes that the centre has the potential to recruit more researchers from disciplines such as psychology, education and social work in order to supplement the current research staff.

The panel would have expected to see more strategic measures being taken by Aarhus University to ensure that the capacities and skills developed in the centre benefit the wider research community in the relevant departments (see section 3.7 and chapter 4).

## **2.4 Evaluation question 4: Long-term sustainability**

- To what extent has the centre succeeded in ensuring its long-term sustainability, including attracting external funding and retaining unique skills and competencies?

The panel notes that the centre overall has succeeded in attracting substantial sums in external funding. However, the panel would like to express concern that the centre is very dependent on one source of funding, namely, TrygFonden. Only approximately one third of the centre's total funds come from sources other than TrygFonden. This degree of dependence on a single fund can be a threat to the long-term sustainability of the centre.

The panel notes that, as an interdisciplinary centre, the centre needs to be integrated into and supported by Aarhus University if long-term sustainability is to be attained. The panel would like to express concern that there is no apparent structure at Aarhus University for managing interdisciplinary activities involving multiple departments and faculties. Also, the extent to which Aarhus University sees the centre as an integrated part of the overall university strategy is not apparent to the panel. The panel would expect the centre's leadership to be involved in decisions in the relevant departments regarding faculty recruitment and teaching, and to have a voice in governing structures generally. None of this is apparent to the panel. The panel recommends that TrygFonden seeks further clarification on these matters prior to deciding whether to fund the research plan 2024-30. (see section 3.7 and chapter 4).

Regarding the retainment of unique skills and competencies, the panel expresses concern that Aarhus University benefits very much from having some of Denmark's leading researchers in the field of implementing RCTs in ECEC, but that the positions of these researchers beyond the grant period are not ensured. The panel would expect Aarhus University to be actively involved in securing tenured positions for such researchers. Without tenure for key researchers, it is uncertain whether this highly specialized expertise will be sustainably anchored at Aarhus University in the long-term.

## **2.5 Evaluation question 5: Support of non-academia careers for PhD students**

- Has the centre succeeded in supporting its PhD students in establishing careers outside research, such as within public administration or private consultancy?

The panel finds that the centre has not shown progress in this area, since out of 14 previous fellows only 3 are today employed outside academia, and none of the current PhD students express strong interest in exploring alternative career possibilities. The panel finds that the centre could do more to introduce Ph.D. students to alternative career paths and could work more systematically on models for this exposure. A more systematic effort in this direction would not only benefit the PhD students in question but would also contribute to the goal of transferring knowledge, strengthening the centre's network with stakeholders and furthering the knowledge culture in the Danish education sector. See section 3.4 for full recommendations.

## **2.6 Evaluation question 6: Research plan – relevance and scientific quality**

- Is the centre's 2024-2030 research plan relevant for the improvement of wellbeing for children and young people, and is it of a high scientific quality?

The panel finds that the programmes described in the research plan are all valuable in their own right, but it is not sufficiently clear how they are linked together as a coherent whole. This lack of clear synergies also applies to the projects within each of the programmes. The panel is concerned that the plan may lead to the centre's resources being spread too thinly, standing in the way of real excellence, which might be achieved with fewer and more focused projects. The panel would like to see more clearly stated arguments for the choice of programmes, which should ideally be driven by knowledge gaps in the research frontier, as identified by reviews of the international literature, and/or by needs of key stakeholders, e.g. Danish practitioners in municipalities or national administration. Regarding the planned meta-analysis, the panel recognizes the importance of harnessing lessons from several studies, but it is unclear why the project only suggests including the centre's own studies across very different interventions rather than including studies of similar interventions from different research environments. See recommendations in sections 3.3 and 3.4.

## 3 Recommendations for the centre: Focus on sustainability

The panel recommends that the centre together with the leadership of Aarhus University from now on focus on ensuring sustainability and a lasting anchoring of the centre's research expertise. This is the overarching concern behind the following more specific recommendations from the panel.

### 3.1 Recommendation 1: Focus on the impact for children

The panel recommends that the centre re-evaluates its planned projects in order to focus its project portfolio with projects most likely to have a strong impact on the well-being of children and young people.

This would imply, firstly, an identification of the most important current knowledge gaps identified in the international literature and by stakeholders and, secondly, an even stronger focus on implementation, scaling up and dissemination. The panel recommends that the centre prioritizes projects with a strong theory of change and a coherent implementation framework, which make it possible to not only document effects of interventions, but also to identify the effective mechanisms and provide answers to the questions: for whom and under which conditions can an intervention be expected to work? This will also enable the centre to continue its research on the challenges of scaling up promising interventions, which is of great interest to both the research community and policy makers.

The centre should develop strategic partnerships with the institutions responsible for teacher education in order to maximize the dissemination of the centre's unique knowledge. The centre has already established a strong and exemplary partnership with Aarhus municipality but should also consider developing strategic relationships with one or two other municipalities beyond Aarhus.

### 3.2 Recommendation 2: Focus on a limited number of signature projects

Closely related to the first recommendation, the panel recommends that the centre focuses on a limited number of signature projects. These projects should be identified as described above: by the key knowledge gaps in the research literature and by systematic dialogues with relevant stakeholders in the Danish education sector.

By focusing its considerable resources at the research frontier, the centre will increase the likelihood of producing more high-quality publications and making notable contributions to the international research community. This will also increase the centre's relevance on the Danish national stage by making the relevance of the centre's research more visible to decision makers at all levels.

### **3.3 Recommendation 3: Develop rigorous best practice RCT protocol**

The panel recommends that the centre formalizes its approach to RCTs in the form of a shared protocol or template, which would then be used as the basis for all future RCTs and implementation processes. The centre holds a unique position in the Danish research community because of its past 10 years of experience with RCTs, and developing a best practice protocol would contribute to establishing this position and ensuring that the knowledge and critical methodological reflections gathered are utilized by more researchers. The protocol should ensure that all the RCTs have carefully developed theories of change and implementation frameworks that detail plans for investigating compliance, fidelity and mechanisms, as well as treatment impacts. Moreover, the protocol should ensure that all RCTs include some measures for which the assessor/responder is unaware of treatment. The goal should be that all future RCTs implemented by the centre be state of the art, which is currently the case for some but not all of the centre's projects.

The centre should develop collaborations with other research communities doing RCTs in Denmark and/or internationally. The state of the art for RCTs is not fixed, but develops constantly, and the centre should, therefore, take active steps to ensure that all projects keep pace with developments, and the centre's best practice protocol should be constantly revised.

### **3.4 Recommendation 4: Set ambitious goals for international recruitment and placement**

The panel notes the low number of international researchers at the centre. It is, therefore, strongly recommended that the centre sets a measurable target that at least 50% of PhDs and post docs are recruited internationally and at least 25% of assistant professors are recruited internationally. In other fields, it is not uncommon to set goals of at least 50% recruitment from other institutions, at least from outside Aarhus, but preferably internationally. This applies to all positions at Ph.D., post docs and faculty levels. The centre should also encourage and support junior staff to take employment, such as post doc-positions abroad and at other universities in Denmark. This would enable the centre to learn from other research environments, strengthen the centre's network in the international research community, and be an effective means of transferring knowledge to and from the centre, as well as strengthening the careers of the individual researchers.

Another strategic target could be to work with the ministry, municipalities, etc. to establish shared PhD positions or similar, with researchers spending part of their time in the practice sector and part at the centre. This would both strengthen the effort to establish alternative career paths for the PhD students and support the transfer of knowledge, as well as increase the centre's impact on the well-being of children and young people in Denmark.

### **3.5 Recommendation 5: Professionalize communication strategy**

In order to maximize impact, the centre should develop strategic approaches to communicating research and results. The centre needs an explicit and focused communication strategy, involving a combination of public dissemination and communication with central decision-makers.

As part of a future communication strategy, the centre should further develop its outreach and dialogue with different stakeholders to maximize the likelihood of disseminating knowledge to relevant decision makers at local and national levels.

Ideally, the centre's communication strategy should be developed and implemented in close co-operation with the communication professionals of the university.

### **3.6 Recommendation 6: Increase visibility within Aarhus University**

The panel recommends that the centre works to increase its visibility within Aarhus University. Widespread understanding and acknowledgement of the importance of the type of research that the centre carries out is essential to the long-term sustainability of the centre. One important component in this would be to increase the broader understanding at Aarhus University of the important contributions of the supporting staff members, who represent a unique resource necessary for the research conducted at the centre. The support staff in the secretariat are fundamental to the research projects, and staff members contribute with unique skill-sets developed during their employment at the centre. Essential skills include experience with field studies, approaches to RCT and skills in survey research, data management and literature reviews. The centre works systematically with the professional development of its staff, and these efforts should be made visible to Aarhus University management.

In addition, the centre should take responsibility to ensure that researchers employed at the centre add value to Aarhus University by participating in teaching activities and are included in strategic decision making, including faculty recruitment.

### **3.7 Recommendation 7: Diversify for long-term sustainability**

The panel recommends that the centre, as it develops its signature projects, considers developing within areas that may be of interest to a broader group of funders. This could be social work, child maltreatment, child mental health or similar. The centre might also explore potentials for developing its skills within the field of systematic reviews.

## 4 Recommendations for Aarhus University

The panel has the following observations and recommendations for Aarhus University.

From the site visit, it is not clear to the panel whether Aarhus University sees the centre as integral to the strategy of the university, or how Aarhus University is investing in the sustainability of the centre and its unique research. This is in striking contrast to the acknowledgement and appreciation at the national level towards the centre's unique role and impact in the Danish education sector. The panel is especially concerned at the lack of visible support structures for cross-disciplinary research at Aarhus University. It is not clear how Aarhus University works to engage the centre in strategic decisions at departmental and faculty levels, e.g. involving the centre in future faculty recruitment to ensure anchoring, and in teaching to ensure transfer of knowledge to the next generation.

The panel recommends that the university is requested to make a transparent, operationally implementable plan, indicating:

- criteria for recruiting new faculty at the associate and full professor level that can carry out research across two or more departments, covering:
- cost sharing of these “interdepartmental” faculty between departments;
- how such “interdepartmental” faculty can refer to one or more “heads of departments”;
- how such “interdepartmental” faculty shall engage in teaching.

The panel further recommends that university management acknowledge the essential skills set of the administrative staff at the centre, and initiate efforts to share insights and develop shared approaches to the career development of the administrative staff in collaboration with centre management.

The panel also recommends that Aarhus University consider supporting the centre in a vision of becoming a centre of excellence within the field of RCTs, implementation science and quantitative research in education and ECEC.

## 5 Background

TrygFonden's Centre for Child Research was established in 2013 with a grant of DKK 100 million (€ 13.5 million) from TrygFonden. The centre designs, tests and promotes interventions aimed at improving learning and well-being in kindergarten, primary school and secondary school. The centre cooperates with most of Denmark's municipalities and has initiated more than 50 projects since its foundation. The centre has approximately 60 associated researchers in sciences such as economics, pedagogy, psychology, political science, criminology, child development and language.

In 2017 the centre was evaluated by an international peer review panel, and in 2018, having considered the evaluation results, the board of TrygFonden approved the extension of the grant period from 2019-23. This current evaluation of the centre's activities and planning for further research is taking place with a view to forming a basis for Tryg-Fonden's decision on whether to extend the grant period beyond 2023.

TrygFonden is part of TryghedsGruppen, which is the majority shareholder of the largest insurer in Denmark: Tryg Ltd. TryghedsGruppen is a member-based organization with 1.3 million Danes who collectively own TryghedsGruppen. Each year, TryghedsGruppen supports projects that promote safety, health and well-being in Danish society. In 2020, TryghedsGruppen spent more than DKK 600 million on benevolent activities, both through direct donations and in partnerships with other organizations.

### 5.1 The review panel's remit

A peer review panel was recruited in the autumn of 2021 to conduct a peer review of the work of the Centre for Child Research for the period 2013-2022, as well as to review the centre's extension application for the period 2024-2030.

The panel consisted of the following members:

- Professor Mari Rege, Co-director, Synapse Lab, UiS Business School at the University of Stavanger ([Curriculum Vitae](#))
- Senior Advisor for Social Affairs Knut Sundell, Swedish Agency for Health and Technology Assessment and Assessment of Social Services ([Curriculum Vitae](#))
- Professor Thomas Sinkjær, Department of Health Science and Technology, Aalborg University ([Curriculum Vitae](#))

The agreement between TrygFonden and the centre states that:



The Centre works to design, test and promote effective interventions in the fields of social work, education and crime prevention aimed at improving the well-being of children and young people, with two criteria of success being: (i) contributing to the well-being of Danish children and young people, and (ii) carrying out high-quality research. In addition to the contribution from the centre's own research to the well-being of Danish children and young people, the centre must contribute by furthering a more solid knowledge culture in Danish public services. The centre will further this knowledge culture by establishing effective cooperation and knowledge exchange with those institutions responsible for laying the foundation for decisions in these broadly defined areas.

With this as the starting point, the following evaluation questions were formulated:

1. Has the centre succeeded in producing research of high scientific quality? Among other things, do the researchers affiliated with the centre publish a growing number of papers in the world's leading journals within their disciplines?
2. Has the centre succeeded in strengthening the knowledge culture in those fields of practice in which the centre works? Are those interventions implemented which, according to the centre's research, have a positive effect on the well-being and learning of children and young people? How does the implementation take place, and what barriers to implementation have been encountered?
3. Has the centre succeeded in strengthening its capacity to develop interventions and carry out interdisciplinary research projects?
4. To what extent has the centre succeeded in ensuring its long-term sustainability by, among other things, attracting external funding and retaining unique skills and competencies?
5. Has the centre succeeded in supporting its PhD students in establishing careers outside research, such as within public administration or private consultancy?
6. Is the centre's 2024-2030 research plan relevant to the improvement of wellbeing for children and young people, and is it of high scientific quality?

Sources of information available to the panel were:

1. The centre's self-evaluation and extension application 2021;
2. Site visit at the centre and interviews with the centre's management, researchers and key stakeholders;
3. The centre's response to the review panel's draft report.

## 5.2 Peer review process

The peer review panel conducted a two-day site visit at the Centre for Child Research in Aarhus between 20-22 March 2022. On 23 March the panel interviewed key stakeholders in Copenhagen. The panel received the following materials in advance of the site visit:

1. A description of the review process
2. The extension application from TrygFonden's Centre for Child Research, including the centre's self-evaluation.

The site visit at TrygFonden's Centre for Child research in Aarhus consisted of the following programme:

- Meeting/interviews with the centre's management team: Simon Calmar Andersen, Dorthe Bleses, Michael Rosholm and Søren Munkedal;
- Research presentations: researchers present results from research projects conducted at the centre and explain how new projects in the self-evaluation will build on these results;
- Interview with the Dean at Aarhus School of Business and Social Science, Thomas Pallesen, and Head of Department of School of Communication and Culture, Unni From;
- Group interview with six PhD students;
- Interview with Head of Division in Center for Analysis, at the Ministry of Children and Education, Jannie Kristoffersen;
- Interview with Head of Administration for Prevention and Pedagogy for the city of Aarhus, Ole Kiil Jacobsen;
- Interview with Deputy Director of the Danish Agency for Education and Quality, Cathrine Lindberg Bak.

### 5.2.1 Preparing the report

Following the site visit, EVA prepared a draft report of the panel's recommendations. This draft version was circulated to the peer review panel for them to comment and clarify. After receiving comments from the panel, the report was revised and forwarded to the Centre for Child Research. The centre then had an opportunity to respond to the panel, and the panel then had the chance to revise the preliminary recommendations in light of this response.

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