DION Survey on Norwegian Language Courses (2023)

Final Report

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Objectives of the Survey

The objective of the survey is to understand the situation and build statistics regarding the Norwegian language courses at all the campuses of NTNU: what the current offers are, what are the needs of the temporary scientific staff, and whether they are happy with the quality of the offers, and whether the courses are equally accessible to all temporary scientific staff in all three NTNU cities. In this report, we publish the aggregated data, which will help us build a case to ensure equal accessibility to the Norwegian language courses. We first present the quantitative and qualitative data that we collected. Afterward, we discuss the results and propose changes.

It's important to note that the survey was conducted before DION was informed about upcoming government-mandated changes requiring temporary scientific staff with foreign backgrounds to complete 15 ECTS of Norwegian. As such, no questions or data were collected on this matter. The survey focused on NTNU's existing Norwegian language courses and general inquiries about whether and how temporary scientific staff of NTNU study the language.

Method

The anonymous survey was conducted online. Participation was voluntary. The invitation links to the survey were distributed via Innsida and DION's social network channels. NTNU login was required to ensure that all answers were genuine, and each employee could answer only once. The survey was open for six weeks from mid-October to December 1, 2023.

The survey consists of 5 parts:

- 1. Demographics information about participants position, campus, and Norwegian skills.
- 2. Whether or not they have attended Norwegian courses, and if not, why.
- 3. Questions about the Norwegian courses which levels they could and couldn't take.
- 4. Questions about the language courses at NTNU and satisfaction with them.
- 5. Conclusion space for any additional comments or optional contact details if follow up was requested by the respondent.

The list of all questions can be found in the appendix.

Data Processing

The survey was anonymous. We only publish aggregated data, and no raw individual responses that can compromise the safety and privacy of individuals will be ever published. Even though NTNU login was required to fill out the survey, their name and email address was not accessible for DION. Only DION 2023 board members have access to the raw responses. The raw data will not be shared with any third party. The raw data was stored on NTNU servers for analysis purposes and was deleted before this report was made publicly available.

Results

Demographics

144 temporary scientific employees from all 3 NTNU campuses responded to the survey, out of which 117 were PhD candidates, 24 postdocs, and 3 other temporary scientific employees.

109 responses came from Trondheim, 15 from Gjøvik, and 20 from Ålesund – representing more than 20 departments of NTNU (Figure 1). According to NTNU Valg, there are 120 temporary employees in Gjøvik, 84 in Ålesund, and 2394 in Trondheim, which means that 12.5%, 23.8%, and 4.6% of the eligible respondents completed the survey in the three cities, respectively. These figures are comparable with the voter turnout among temporary scientific staff in the NTNU Board elections, which was 14.28% in 2024 and usually ranges between 10 and 20 percent in the last 10 years, according to a report by the election committee. Moreover, it is worth highlighting that a substantial part of the eligible respondents are native Norwegian speakers, which explains their lack of interest in the survey on the language courses. According to the INTMANG (International diversity at NTNU) report¹ published in 2020, approximately 35% of the postdocs and 60% of the PhD candidates are

¹ The report can be found at (accessed on 06.05.2024): <u>https://www.ntnu.edu/web/kult/intmang-international-diversity-at-ntnu</u>

Norwegian. Similarly, a recent statement by HR-HMS division published on April 16th 2024, mentions that 67% of postdocs and 53% of the PhD candidates have "non-Scandinavian background"².

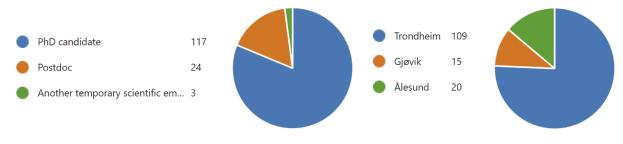
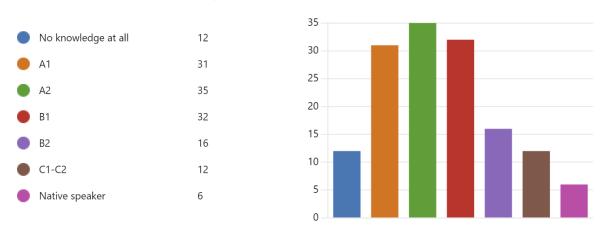


Figure 1. The distribution of respondents by their position and city.

Norwegian Skills and the Role of the Language

The histogram of respondents' Norwegian language skills is positively skewed (Figure 2) indicating the lack of advanced proficiency (B2 and above, which is currently required by DION statutes to be qualified as a Norwegian speaker for representation purposes). However, the overwhelming majority acknowledge that it is necessary to speak Norwegian while living in Norway – either at the workplace, in daily private life, or both (Figure 3). Two thirds of the respondents indicated they will stay in Norway in the future, a quarter are still uncertain, and only 3% responded that they wouldn't stay (Figure 4).



How would you rate your Norwegian skills at the moment?

Figure 2. The histogram of respondents' self-reported Norwegian language skills. The positive skew of the histogram indicates that the majority of the respondents are not confident in their own Norwegian skills.

² The statement can be found at (accessed on 06.05.2024): https://cdn.sanity.io/files/dc7vqrwe/production/3ca2db7eb1ce341fbcbe74e833a9b43a9d65c68f.pdf Do you think it is necessary to speak Norwegian while living in Norway?

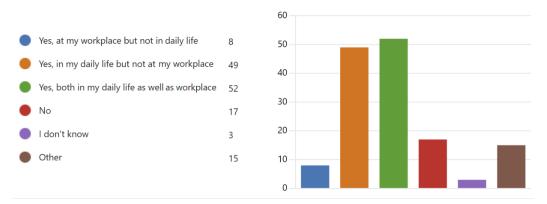


Figure 3. The responses on whether the respondents find it necessary to speak Norwegian while living in Norway. The majority thinks that it is necessary either at the workplace, in daily life, or both. Only 17 (out of 144) responded that it is not necessary to speak Norwegian.

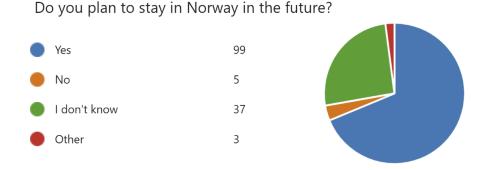


Figure 4. Respondents' plans on staying in Norway. The majority plan to stay, while a substantial group (roughly one fourth of the respondents) are still uncertain. Only 3% responded negatively.

Language Courses

115 out of 144 respondents have attended some level of the Norwegian language courses. This seems promising if we consider that among those who have not are also the native Norwegian speakers (Figure 5).

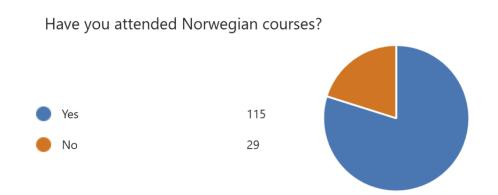


Figure 5. The number of respondents that attended a Norwegian language course. Only 29 out of 144 reported that they had never attended Norwegian language courses, out of which 6 are native speakers.

It is interesting to have a deeper insight into the reasons why some staff have not attended courses (Figure 6). Only 1 person provided the lack of interest as a reason. 13 people mentioned the lack of time, 5 people found the courses too expensive, while 6 couldn't find a suitable course. 16 people provided detailed explanations. A common reason provided in the explanations is the fact that the respondent is a native speaker and hence, they do not need the courses. Others commented about the difficulty of coping with the heavy workload and the language courses at the same time, inconvenient timing and schedules of the courses, the fact that the credits are not counted in their 30 ECTS of mandatory PhD education, and the fact that the courses are not covered for accompanying family, which keeps them longer away from their families.





Figure 6. The summary of the reasons of never taking a Norwegian language course. The question was displayed only to those who responded negatively to the previous question (Figure 5). Selection of more than one option was possible; hence, the number of answers does not sum up to 29 (total number of those who have never taken the course).

The majority have taken the introductory Level 1 course, however, the number of people who took more advanced levels drops drastically (Figure 7). Only 8 people took level 4, which may indicate that it is either not attractive, or not available/accessible.

It is especially alarming that 42% of the temporary employees who took the courses, could not take all levels that they wanted to (Figure 8). This mostly applies to level 2, level 3, but also level 4 for substantial number of the respondents (16 out of 115; see Figure 9). The main reason for this is again the lack of time, but the quality of the previous levels and the scheduling-related reasons have also been mentioned (Figure 10). 4 people mentioned that the level is not offered by NTNU in their city, which primarily refers to level 4 outside of Trondheim. Other reasons mentioned in the "Other" option are difficulty to commute to Dragvoll, poor scheduling, no placement test for level 4 – which means that NTNU assumes it's impossible to attain that level outside the system, and supervisors' opposition to taking the language courses in one case – which is also an issue that is worth highlighting even if it is relatively uncommon.

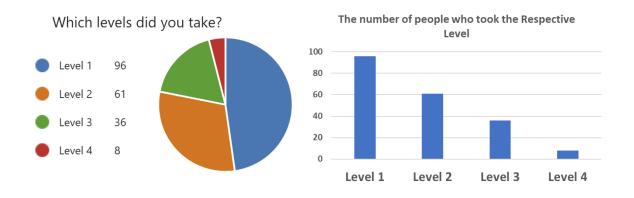


Figure 7. The number of respondents that took courses at each level. It is apparent that the higher the level, the lower the number of people who took courses, which indicates that more advanced level courses are either inaccessible or unattractive.

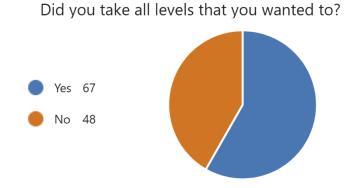


Figure 8. The pie chart shows that 48 out of 115 respondents (approximately 42%) who took the courses couldn't take all levels they wanted to. This reveals a significant problem, and points out that it cannot meet the needs of the significant portion of the temporary scientific staff.

We also asked participants about their preferences for the future if their desired levels are offered. The data shows clear preference in favor of physical courses (Figure 11).

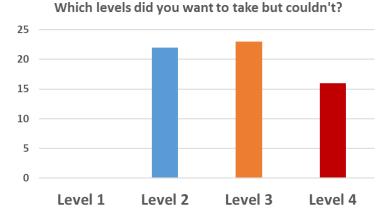


Figure 9. The levels that respondents couldn't take despite their interest. This mostly applies to Level 3 but Level 2 and Level 4 are also common responses.

Why couldn't you take it/them?

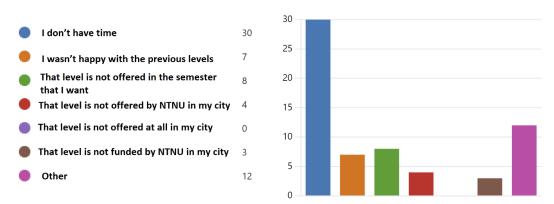


Figure 10. The reason for not taking a desired level of the Norwegian course. By far the most common reason is the lack of time, while the cases where the course is not offered are also reported.

If these levels are offered in the future (the ones that you wanted to take but couldn't), do you prefer it to be physical or online?

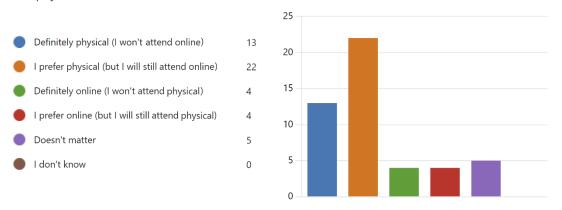


Figure 11. The preferences if the courses are offered. Most respondents prefer physical courses over online ones.

NTNU paid for the courses in 92 cases, while 16 respondents indicated it was covered by their project (Figure 12). However, it was not specified whether the respondents referred to external projects only or PhD working capital (driftsmidler) was also included. 9 respondents had to cover the cost themselves. The clarification provided in "Other" mostly refers to the cases where respondents took the courses before joining NTNU (e.g. during their master's studies, and it was free to them as students).

Who is/was paying for the courses?

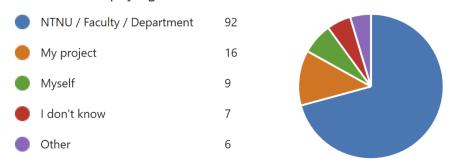


Figure 12. The pie chart shows who paid for the courses. For most respondents, the costs were covered by NTNU (respective faculties or departments). The most respondents who reported covering the costs themselves took the courses before joining NTNU.

Language Courses at NTNU

The majority (107 out of 115) took the courses at NTNU (Figure 13). Those who didn't, provided the lack of funding or the unavailability of the courses as the main reason (Figure 14). 77 took physical course, 13 took online, and 17 hybrid (Figure 15). The satisfaction with the overall course, course design, teacher, and opportunity to practice the language was on average rated as 7.05, 6.64, 8.08, and 6.54, respectively, on a 1-10 scale, where 10 corresponds to the best. Refer to the histograms in Figure 16 below. The strong negative skew indicates that the majority were happy with the teacher. Most of them considered the overall course mediocre, while the opinions are divided on course design and the opportunity to practice the language.

107 respondents provided detailed feedback on the course content and what they would change. This merits a report on its own, but two major takeaways are:

- 1. The course is too intensive and heavy, which makes it difficult to follow in parallel with heavy workload.
- 2. More emphasis on speaking/conversation practice is needed.

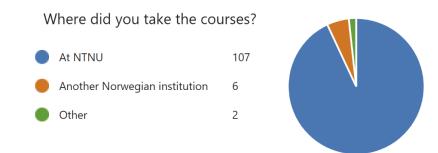


Figure 13. The provider of the courses. The overwhelming majority of the respondents took them at NTNU.

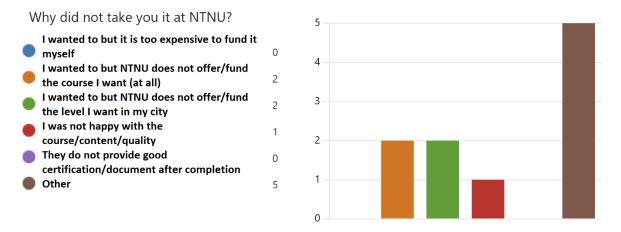


Figure 14. The reason of not taking the courses at NTNU. This question was only displayed to those who did not select NTNU in the previous question.

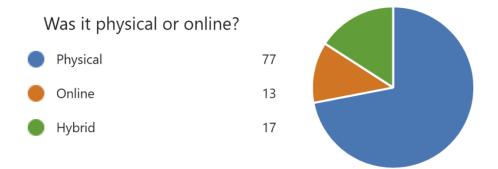
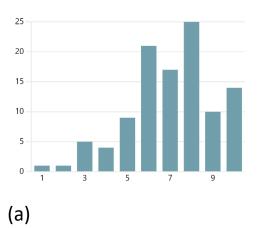


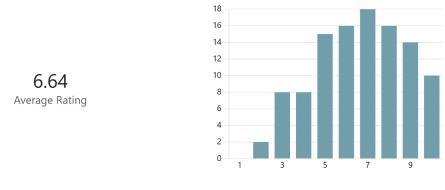
Figure 15. The type of courses that were taken. Most respondents took physical courses, while fully online or hybrid ones were also reported.

To what extent are you satisfied with the course? (10 for the best)



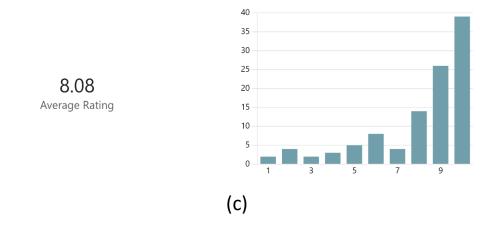


To what level would you evaluate the course design? (10 for the best)



(b)

To what level would you evaluate the teacher? (10 for the best)



To what level would you evaluate the opportunities to practice the language during the course? (10 for the best)

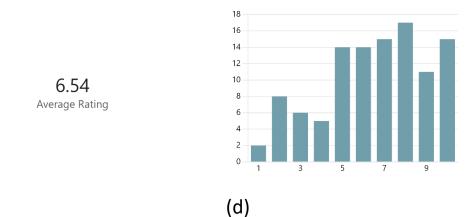


Figure 16. The histograms of the respondents' satisfaction with the overall course (a), course design (b), teacher (c), and opportunity to practice the language. The evaluation was done on a 1-10 scale, where 10 corresponds to high satisfaction. The average scores are reported on the left of a respective histogram. Slight negative skew can be observed in histogram for overall course satisfaction (a), and the most popular answers were 8 and 6, with average rating of 7.05. A strong negative skew is visible in histogram (c), which shows that the respondents were mostly happy with the teacher, 10 – the maximum possible score was used most frequently to evaluate a teacher. The opinions are more divided about course design (b) and the possibility to practice the language (d), but very low scores are still relatively rare.

Other Feedback

In the last two questions, we gave respondents the opportunity to provide any feedback that they felt would be helpful. The detailed qualitative analysis of this freeform feedback is given in the next section, while the brief summary of the major concerns are as follows:

- 1. Workload which leaves little time for research and to make things worse, is counted neither within 30 ECTS nor as duty work (however, some departments do count it as duty work).
- 2. Timing / scheduling / availability issues. Availability is especially problematic on campuses other than Trondheim.
- 3. Course content many feel that there is too much emphasis on grammar and too little on actual practical conversation skills.

Qualitative Analysis of the Freeform Feedback

It is crucial to highlight that many respondents answered these two open questions, and in many cases extensively. Notably, most of the responses reported issues related to the course and gave suggestions for improvement. The thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2021) of the qualitative data showed thematic four topics (1) Reported issues; (2) Suggestions; (3) Worrying topics; (4) Requests for DION.

(1) Reported issues

The data showed three most popular topics (a. intensive course – not related to Ph.D. program, b. cost, c. course quality/no cohesion).

- a. The course is primarily designed for students rather than employees, but it has been deemed "too intensive" and requires significant personal study time, which is challenging for those enrolled in Ph.D. programs. Participants from the Trondheim campus have raised concerns about mandatory in-person meetings during office hours, as they entail additional travel from their workplace to another campus. Moreover, there are difficulties with the admission process, as the course caters more to students than to employees. For instance, it was reported that there is limited availability in the summer semester further hinders access for international employees. It is crucial to mention that only in Trondheim there are summer courses. Another issue is the mandatory attendance, which clashes with the frequent travel obligations of scientific staff for conferences, courses abroad, and data collection. Additionally, some supervisors discourage attendance, further underscoring the course's unsuitability for Ph.D. candidates and postdoctoral researchers at NTNU. Overall, these factors indicate a misalignment with the needs of Ph.D. candidates and postdoctoral researchers.
- b. Another significant topic raised by many participants was the cost of the courses. Numerous respondents highlighted that the fees are high. They argued that this creates discrimination between the colleagues. Moreover, the findings indicated that certain departments reimburse course fees for PhDs and postdocs from project funds. However, participants expressed concerns that such reimbursements could impact project budgets and potentially compromise research quality.
- c. Survey participants provided feedback on the course quality, highlighting the significant impact of the Norwegian teachers. That explains why the quantitative data reflects high teacher ratings; satisfaction with online courses is evident in some instances. However, a

notable challenge arises from the frequent substitution of Norwegian teachers, leading to participant frustration due to disrupted course flow. Another concern raised by participants is the lack of cohesion among students at different levels, resulting in discrepancies in knowledge acquisition. Some participants find they need higher-level knowledge from preceding courses, while others feel they're repeating material. Additionally, certain participants report discouragement from a Norwegian teacher to progress, suggesting a need for sub-levels. Enhancing Norwegian teachers' consistency and addressing level discrepancies are vital areas for improving course quality, as indicated by participant comments.

(2) Suggestions

In this session, the suggestions from the survey's participants are presented by grouping them into two categories: a. Course theoretical design, b. Practical suggestions

- a. Course theoretical design: Several participants expressed a desire for more structured courses tailored to PhD and postdoctoral researchers. They suggested enhancing interactivity and adjusting the syllabus to better suit their needs. Specifically, they recommended a less formal approach with a focus on communication and shorter durations. Additionally, they proposed the introduction of less intensive sub-level courses instead of the traditional levels 1, 2, and 3, as they felt these levels did not accurately represent language competence. Lastly, participants emphasized the importance of designing the course to accommodate varying levels of proficiency among participants. Employees whose native languages are more linguistically distant from Norwegian need more time and effort to master the language, and this factor needs to be accommodated for.
- b. Practical suggestions: Participants suggested scheduling the course after working hours. Additionally, those from the Trondheim campus advocated for more physical courses at the Gløshaugen campus, while participants from Ålesund and Gjøvik emphasized the need for expanded course options and physical offerings. In Ålesund and Gjøvik, only levels 1, 2, and 3 are available in specific semesters, whereas in Trondheim, level 4 is also offered each semester. Because each level is not offered every semester, the respondent pointed out that "failing an exam means waiting a year to retake it". Some participants underscored the importance of allocating more time for personal self-study rather than focusing solely on attendance. Moreover, some participants that considering the time commitment, the language course hours can be considered as duty work for PhD students. Lastly, a few participants proposed a helpful idea for NTNU and foreign PhDs and postdocs: offering intensive Norwegian courses lasting 1-2 months, which could be integrated into the contract time for temporary employees. They argued that this approach would benefit NTNU financially and facilitate communication for newcomers.

(3) Worrying topics

Although a minority of participants (n = 5) expressed clearly dissatisfaction with the current state of Norwegian language instruction at NTNU, it's crucial to consider their viewpoints. These individuals voiced concerns about the rise of nationalism and questioned the necessity of mandating PhDs and postdocs to learn a language they may not use, especially considering the time and effort required. Moreover, they lamented the lack of support for Norwegian language learning during their time at NTNU, noting the absence of funded and tailored programs that align with their schedules. This lack of support, they argued, diminishes their chances of employment and long-term stay, leading to feelings of being undervalued as employees. Additionally, comments highlighted how NTNU's language policy is viewed as discriminatory, contradicting the university's international aspirations. Lastly,

non-European citizens face expensive course fees, limiting their opportunities and fostering a sense of discrimination in the work environment.

(4) Requests for DION

In conclusion, our respondents urged DION to initiate a dialogue with NTNU regarding an extension for international PhDs and postdocs enrolled in language courses. Despite being labelled as "voluntary," there's a perceived implicit pressure from NTNU to learn Norwegian, especially given the new language policy. They contend that expecting adherence to a "Norwegian when possible, English, when needed" policy without accommodating those enrolled in language courses is unjust. Furthermore, they advocate for establishing an agreement with NTNU to ensure equal opportunities for all to learn the Norwegian language.

Discussion, Proposed Changes, and Conclusions

The results show that majority of the temporary employees plan to live in Norway in the years to come. They find Norwegian language skills very important both for professional as well as private life, and hence, are highly motivated to master the language. While NTNU offers and funds introductory levels, the attendance numbers for more advanced level courses drops dramatically.

There are two primary reasons mentioned by the respondents:

- Workload and lack of time PhD candidates invest massive amounts of time and energy in research activities to successfully graduate, which makes it difficult for them to find time for the language courses without negatively affecting their academic performance, work-life balance, and mental health.
- Availability Not all levels are available on all campuses, and wherever they are, their timing
 is often not adjusted for PhD candidates schedules. The course designs are tailored more to
 students than to employees and often physical attendance is not possible due to schedules
 of the temporary scientific staff.

To overcome or at least mitigate these problems, DION suggests that completion of the Norwegian language courses should receive adequate recognition and appreciation. It can be either counted as duty work, or the contract can be extended with the respective amount of time. Counting Norwegian language courses as a duty work is already a practice at some departments, for example, at the Department of Electronic Systems (IES)³. The language skills increase the value of the employee to NTNU, and better prepares the candidates for their future career in the country and in the Norwegian society. Different practices in different departments create unequal opportunities for the staff. We strongly encourage to have a unified approach throughout NTNU on how to make sure that the temporary scientific staff have enough time for the Norwegian language tuition without compromising the research effort and quality.

Respondents' preferences show that online courses are not adequate substitute to in person classes. However, the majority still prefers having at least an online option in comparison with having nothing. Online courses can be a backup option where in person courses are infeasible. NTNU should do their best to offer equal opportunities on all 3 campuses, and especially, make level 4 available

³ The definition of the duty work at IES can be found at: <u>https://www.ntnu.no/wiki/display/iet/Pliktarbeid+-</u> +Duty+work

both in Gjøvik and Ålesund. More flexibility is needed both in terms of timing and location. The courses should be scheduled with the daily routine and frequent travel or data acquisition obligations of the scientific staff in mind, where mandatory physical attendance often creates obstacles for participation. Although the physical courses are preferred by the respondents, it will help if there are exemptions from the mandatory attendance requirement in specific cases, for example, when attending a conference.

Finally, the respondents are happy with the teachers, but not with the way the courses are designed and executed. Often courses are not efficient due to discrepancies in students' proficiencies – therefore, several respondents suggest shorter duration and more sub-levels. An interesting solution proposed in the data is offering short-duration but intensive courses, which can be integrated into the contract time for temporary employees. On the other hand, a less formal approach with a focus on communication and more time for self-learning has been also proposed to increase flexibility and accessibility of the courses.

There is a clear demand on more opportunities to practice the language. In addition to adapting course contents accordingly, NTNU should encourage and facilitate organization of language cafes. If sufficient resources are provided, DION will, in its part, consider contributing to this endeavor.

It is also worth mentioning that after the survey was completed, from spring 2024 semester, NTNU Gjøvik has organized weekly language lunch meetings, where the staff can practice Norwegian in an informal setting. Several departments offer additional meetings for their employees. This is a positive sign that the concerns raised by the respondents are partially being addressed, and we hope that other campuses will follow this trend. However, we also want to highlight that informal language cafes only complement to formal courses and cannot be deemed a decent substitute for professional language instruction. Therefore, it remains important to make the courses more accessible to Trondheim, Gjøvik, and Ålesund campuses, and to tailor the courses to temporary staff's schedules and needs.

Finally, although it can be only several cases, it is still alarming that some supervisors bar their PhD candidates from taking the language courses. This problem should be taken seriously and addressed by NTNU and DION. Clear guidance about how language courses can be funded from NTNU administration is needed so the ability for temporary scientific staff to take language courses is not at the discretion of individual supervisors or department administration. This clarified guidance should also include explicit information around the practice of counting language courses as duty work. The creation of an Ombudsperson position could be of additional help with such cases when there is a conflict between the temporary employee and the supervisor or the department regarding accessibility of the language courses and counting them as duty work.

To conclude, a comment on the forthcoming legislation concerning Norwegian proficiency requirements for temporary scientific staff maybe is essential. As the largest university in the country, NTNU values and actively promotes internationalization. It's heartening to note the keen interest of temporary scientific staff in learning the language and actively contributing to the country's progress. The primary challenge lies in ensuring that language courses are both accessible and accommodating for them, considering their busy schedules and financial constraints.

Ensuring equality among temporary scientific staff is paramount to fostering a nurturing and inclusive work environment. By facilitating access to tailored language courses, it is possible to create a supportive atmosphere where every member can play a meaningful role in NTNU's scientific advancements and global outreach.

Appendix 1

The file appended below lists all questions asked in the survey in the same form as they were presented to the respondents.

DION Survey: Norwegian Langauge Course (2023) APPENDIX 1

* Required

Demographic Information

1. I have read the information provided above about the objectives and anonymity of the survey, I agree to them and understand that participation is voluntary. *

O I agree

2. You are a *

- O PhD candidate
- Postdoc
- O Another temporary scientific employee

3. Where are you based? *

- Trondheim
- 🔘 Gjøvik
- Alesund

4. Which department are you employed at? *

- 5. How would you rate your Norwegian skills at the moment? *
 - O No knowledge at all
 - A1
 - () A2
 - O B1
 - О В2
 - O C1-C2
 - O Native speaker

6. Do you think it is necessary to speak Norwegian while living in Norway? *

- O Yes, at my workplace but not in daily life
- O Yes, in my daily life but not at my workplace
- Yes, both in my daily life as well as at my workplace
- O No
- O I don't know
- O Other

7. Do you plan to stay in Norway in the future? *

- O Yes
- O No
- O I don't know
- O Other

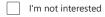
Theme 2

8. Have you attended Norwegian courses? *

O Yes

O No

9. Why not? *



I don't have time

It's too expensive

I couldn't find a suitable course

Other

Theme 3

- 10. Which levels did you take? *
 - Level 1
 - Level 2
 - Level 3
 - Level 4

11. Did you take all levels that you wanted to? *

- YesNo
- 12. Which levels did you want to take but couldn't? *
 - Level 1
 Level 2
 Level 3
 Level 4

13. Why couldn't you take it/them? *

I don't have time
I wasn't happy with the previous levels
That level is not offered in the semester that I want
That level is not offered by NTNU in my city
That level is not offered at all in my city
That level is not funded by NTNU in my city
Other

- 14. If these levels are offered in the future (the ones that you wanted to take but couldn't), do you prefer it to be physical or online? *
 - O Definitely physical (I won't attend online)
 - I prefer physical (but I will still attend online)
 - O Definitely online (I won't attend physical)
 - I prefer online (but I will still attend physical)
 - O Doesn't matter
 - I don't know
- 15. Who is/was paying for the courses? *
 - NTNU / Faculty / Department
 - My project
 - Myself
 - l don't know
 - Other
- 16. Where did you take the courses? *
 - At NTNU
 - Another Norwegian institution
 - O Other

17. Why did not take you it at NTNU? *

I wanted to but it is too expensive to fund it myself
I wanted to but NTNU does not offer/fund the course I want (at all)
I wanted to but NTNU does not offer/fund the level I want in my city
I was not happy with the course/content/quality
They do not provide good certification/document after completion

Other

Courses at NTNU

18. Was it physical or online? *

- O Physical
- Online
- Hybrid

19. To what extent are you satisfied with the course? (10 for the best) *

20. To what level would you evaluate the course design? (10 for the best) *

21. To what level would you evaluate the teacher? (10 for the best) *

22. To what level would you evaluate the opportunities to practice the language during the course? (10 for the best) *

23. What would you change related to the course/lecture?

Conclusion

24. Any other comments? Feel free to add anything that you think we should know

25. Feel free to leave your email if you want DION to follow up with you on this