

To: ILOS Board

From: ENGLABS

Date: 24 October 2023

Re: ENGLABS recommendations for future PhD positions in ILOS

Background:

After a discussion among ENGLABS members concerning the current model (2021-2023) for advertising, selecting, and advising PhD Fellowships in ILOS, we would like to share parts of our discussion and give some feedback on the current process. Most important in what follows are the recommendations at the end of this memo, representing the consensus of ENGLABS at this time. We welcome the possibility of further discussion with the ILOS leadership about these questions and recommendations.

Questions and potential problems discussed related to the current model:

1. Should there be equitable distribution across ILOS research groups and sections?
2. Should there be more involvement from research group leaders/representatives in the process?
3. Should there be more time for thorough review of ALL applications?
4. What are the implications of new research groups apparently being created primarily for the purpose of securing PhD Fellows? Should research groups be more specific and/or should certain kinds of research groups be prioritized over others?

Discussion:

1. In the past two years, certain research groups (e.g., Temporal Experiments) and certain ILOS sections (e.g., *allmenn litteratur*) have received 4 out of 7 research positions. Looked at from the perspective of the department as a whole, it is easy to see how this might be perceived as a problem. There are good reasons to think about equitable distribution and the needs of all ILOS sections in relation to this process, including the opportunity for PhD Fellows to teach introductory courses/seminars within ILOS sections (e.g., a continual need in ENGLABS), as well as the opportunity for associate professors to get experience advising PhDs, which can be an advantage when applying for promotion to professor. Certain ILOS sections are bigger than others, however, so it could make sense for distribution to be proportional in relation to section size. In addition, some research groups are clearly more focused and engaged in collaborative/active research and publications than others, so it could make sense to distinguish between different kinds of groups, rather than distributing according to the overall number of research groups.

2. Research group input is clearly required when assigning PhD Fellows to research groups. In the current model, the input of research groups has been fairly limited (mostly just given the opportunity to scan a proposal and the question of whether proposed PhD projects could be advised by ILOS members of the research group). This input has been sought late in the process, after the committee has already determined which proposals are presumed to be best. This is a problem particularly if members of the relevant research group are not on the

committee, and/or if the research group is so broadly conceived that representatives might not have relevant competencies in relation to the work of other group members (such as in “Area Studies”). Generally speaking, earlier and more thorough input from research groups would address the specific questions of assessing not only plausible advisors but also the quality of proposals in relation to the aims of the research groups. Without representation of the research groups on the selection committees, it becomes difficult for the selection committee to know which proposals might be considered the best matches for the research group, which might be deemed most promising, etc. In order to assess that potential, research groups should be able to see more information from the application files for those proposals aiming to be associated with their group.

3. While pooling searches together (e.g., “literature” encompassing any national literature, any relevant language, any time period, any subject/field, or “area studies” across similarly broad national, linguistic, and temporal contexts) might save time and money, it has often led to very large applicant pools to be assessed (as many as 100) by individual committees. In order to make that kind of assessment feasible, some committees have used a streamlined initial screening process in order to reduce the number of proposals assessed by the full committee. One of the biggest downsides of this method is that it means there is less time and consideration given to applicants who might have more diverse backgrounds, including coming from institutions with different requirements for MA degrees, such as the length of an MA thesis. Exceptions can be made, but they require careful consideration and discussion, which is less possible when the number of applicants is so high. A stated aim of these searches could be to give careful consideration to as diverse an applicant pool as possible, including non-traditional students. Another potential problem is that consolidated search committees mean that applications must be written in English or a Scandinavian language, rather than other languages in which the dissertation itself could be written in (i.e., Spanish, Italian, or any of the other languages in ILOS), if all members of the search committee do not know all languages in ILOS. More generally, there is a problem with consolidated committees which cannot have specific expertise on the wide range of fields, areas, languages, literatures, and time periods encompassed by ILOS that are available as the basis for PhD proposals.

4. Some of the ballooning of research groups in ILOS (currently 19 groups listed) can be seen as a direct result of the current model for filling PhD positions. Some of us are not convinced that this is necessarily a good development, particularly if it leads to more groups that essentially mirror existing sections and teaching units. In ENGLABS, we are not generally inclined, however, to make new research groups such as “American literature” or “British area studies,” even though it could be to our advantage to attract PhD students to our expertise in those areas. We are also concerned about the difference in levels of activity, research and publication outputs, and specific coherence of groups being created. While it might be a laudable aim to encourage more ILOS faculty members to create and join research groups, the kinds of groups that result seems important to consider as well.

Recommendations:

- Give representatives of research groups (preferably research group leaders, if they are from ILOS) access to as much of the application files as is legally possible for proposals aiming to be affiliated with those groups, preferably much earlier in the process. This would allow for better ways of assessing advising capacity in the group

as well as quality, fit, and potential according to the aims of the research group. Even better would be to tailor searches more narrowly, so that representatives of relevant research groups could be on the selection committees (see next point).

- Design separate search criteria for different selection committees that will keep the number of applicants down and that can be matched with search committee members with specific expertise related to the search criteria (preferably from prioritized research groups—see next point). This will allow for better and more thorough assessment of the applicants.
- Select a limited number of research groups to be eligible for PhD Fellowships in any given period (e.g., perhaps for 1 or 2 years), based upon applications from research groups to the ILOS leadership outlining why those research groups should be prioritized. Arguments could include past accomplishments of the group and/or individual members, potential for new groups based upon publication records and qualifications of group members, as well as the project idea, coherence and plans for the group to apply for external research grants, relationships with existing ILOS sections, and potential for PhD teaching and advising within those sections.