

UiO:Democracy – A proposal for a new interdisciplinary initiative at The University of Oslo

In June 2014 the University Board decided to establish a new interdisciplinary initiative at the University of Oslo, UiO:Nordic. The initiative originated in the humanities and social sciences and was at first named “Unpacking the Nordic Model”. At the launch in 2015, UiO:Nordic was one of three interdisciplinary initiatives at UiO, together with UiO:Energy and UiO:Life Science, and was allocated 80 million NOK in the university budgets over the seven-year period 2015-2022. A model was chosen which required 50% co-financing between the initiative and the hosting institutions, a requirement that was upheld until the final call in the autumn of 2020.

The initiative quickly became the largest environment for research on the Nordics internationally. In the spring of 2021, UiO:Nordic consists of 288 researchers from 11 nations, where 177 have UiO as their base. Most of these belong to the Social Sciences-, Humanities- and Law faculties, with solid representation also from The Faculty of Theology and The Faculty of Educational Sciences. The faculty of Mathematics and Natural Science and the Faculty of Medicine are also involved. In total, the initiative involves researchers from 31 different departments and entities at UiO.

The initiative has granted funding to 13 larger research projects, all cross-faculty. The names of these projects illustrate the broad scope of the research portfolio: Renewing the Nordic Model, The Public Sphere and Freedom of Expression in the Nordic Countries, 1815-1900, Nordic Welfare Developments, Nordic Branding, Nordic Hospitalities in a Context of Migration and Refugee Crisis, Living the Nordic Model, Futuring Sustainable Nordic Business Models, The Nordic Education Model, Nordic Civil Societies, The Ambivalence of Nordic Nature, Collecting Norden, Gendering the Nordic Past, and Experts in Nordic Policy Making. Apart from this, UiO:Nordic has stimulated activity through an open call supporting seminars, workshops, dissemination etc. The initiative has also awarded scholarships for Masters’ theses in collaboration with Foreningen Norden.

By the end of 2020 the initiative had hosted 63 seminars and workshops, and researchers from UiO:Nordic projects had 1037 relevant registrations in Cristin (34% at level 2). The initiative has also stimulated new research applications and lead to substantial external funding. Altogether, affiliated researchers have been awarded over 60 million NOK in external funds for relevant projects, in addition to 40 million NOK through co-funding.

With regards to external funding, ReNEW (Reimagining Norden in an Evolving World: <https://www2.helsinki.fi/en/researchgroups/reimagining-norden-in-an-evolving-world>) deserves special mention. ReNEW is a university consortium of six Nordic universities and is funded by Nordforsk, where UiO:Nordic plays a significant role. Semi-annual ReNEW calls for organizing conferences and seminars, mobility, outreach and Open Access, have been important sources of funding for many researchers at UiO. ReNEW also hosts and runs the webpage nordics.info (<https://nordics.info>).

UiO:Nordic has organized a considerable number of public events, among them seminar series such as “UiO:Norden-samtalen” (The UiO:Nordic Conversation) and “Konstruksjonen av Norden” (Constructing the Nordics, in collaboration with The Norwegian National Library), and numerous contributions in various media . Participants in UiO:Nordic have also been active disseminators individually. Up until last year, affiliated researchers had over 1100 dissemination activities registered in Cristin over the lifespan of UiO:Nordic. There is little doubt that the university has gained much from relatively small means through UiO:Nordic.

For the time being, 31 December 2022 is the expiration date of UiO:Nordic. During spring 2020, the faculty deans asked the board of UiO:Nordic to examine the possibilities of a continuation and

expansion of the initiative. The suggested topic was democracy. A work group with representatives from all Humanities and Social Sciences faculties was constituted, supplied with representatives from the Faculty of Medicine and the museums. The members were as follows: Tore Rem (UiO:Nordic, leader), Ingunn Ikdahl (Law), Cathrine Holst (Social Sciences), Jone Salomonsen (Theology), Eivind Engebretsen (Medicine), Olav Hamran (Cultural History Museum), Åsa Mäkitalo (Education), and Kim Christian Priemel (Humanities). Senior executive officer Andrea Dale Wefring and research advisor Arve Fløystad-Thorsen have acted as the group's secretaries.

Starting with the idea of a new initiative called UiO:Democracy, the work group produced an outline for a new interdisciplinary initiative. This was out for consultation in early January 2021 and by the deadline on 15 February, faculties, departments, and a number of research groups and individuals had given their response. The responses were positive throughout, if not uncritical. Since then, the work group has received responses from the board of UiO:Nordic, and it has undertaken a comprehensive revision of the document. It should be noted that there have been clear signals that UiO:Democracy must be a larger, more inclusive and ambitious initiative than UiO:Nordic.

The motivation – democracy and the university

A growing number of democracies are weakening and turning more autocratic. The trends and driving forces are complex, and while they are partly known, much is still unexplored. In the outline of the first Horizon-programme, the EU has identified challenges and developments which should be given special attention in the coming years. Across the world, many countries are marked by growing nationalism, populism, and polarization. Established political institutions and international relations are under strain, and the autonomy of science and universities are being challenged from several quarters. As a response, the EU has outlined a new programme and frame that encourages a cross-disciplinary, trans-national push towards increased knowledge about democratic institutions, practices, and cultures.

Similar analyses have surfaced within the scientific community. Varieties of Democracy's (V-dem) report of 2020 paints a bleak picture of the international situation¹. The new report points to a wave of autocratization, and the year 2020 is no exception: only 14% of the world's population live in 32 liberal democracies, while 68% live in so-called democratically elected autocracies. The average global citizen has democratic rights comparable to the level of year 1990. V-Dem uses criteria such as free elections, levels of participation, and to what degree the political system is liberal, deliberative, and egalitarian.

In its suggestions to the long-term national research plan, UiO has identified democracy and inequality as prioritized focus areas. Democracy is also a clear priority in the platform of the new EU-collaboration Circle U, where UiO is a central partner, and where democracy is one of four main initiatives. Furthermore, "Democracy and inclusion" has been chosen as one of four gravitational fields in Oslo Science City, and the present rectorate has for the coming period expressed a double motivation: to strive for a continuing development of cross-disciplinary research in the existing research initiatives, and "to be present in the important conversations of our time"².

The discussion of the foundations, challenges and future of democracy is among the most important ones of our time. Society needs a solid knowledge base to solve the coming challenges to democracy.

¹ DR 2021.pdf (v-dem.net)

² <https://www.uio.no/om/organisasjon/valg/rektorvalg/2021/svein-stolen/>

Simultaneously, the question of the conditions of and strains on democracy is closely tied to another important field of focus at UiO. The university's new Strategy 2030 bears the title "For a Sustainable Future", and democracy is key to realizing the sustainability goals of the UN. Democratic institutions must collaborate on the decisions needed to make society sustainable. An initiative that takes democracy, in its wide sense, as its topic, is in line with UiO's traditions as the nation's oldest and most influential university, as well as with the institution's present ambition of contributing with knowledge of high relevance for society, and with the universities' potentially significant and influential role in democratic knowledge societies, as democratic institutions in themselves.

UiO:Democracy is UiO's suggested contribution to EU's call for an international research effort in this field, while the university simultaneously contributes with a heightened awareness of democratic qualities and challenges in the public sphere. The starting point lies in UiO's specific advantages as a research-intensive university, world leading in certain areas of democracy research, while simultaneously in possession of solid competence on several of democracy's societal, cultural, and technological aspects.

Conceptualizing democracy

A common definition of democracy is that of a political regime or mode of governance where citizens have the final word in making collective decisions, and equal weight and opportunity in influencing decision-making processes. A well-functioning democracy has broad and active participation and informed discussions among citizens throughout the political process. Democracy also presupposes the rule of law, and citizens which are guaranteed basic civil and political rights. This definition of democracy builds upon value-based and normative considerations, and a strong conviction that democracy is something desirable, the proper form of good and just governance. But what "equal" opportunities mean, who the citizens are, what rights, freedoms and duties are essential, and how political and civil rights relate to economic and cultural rights, are contested issues, also in countries which consider themselves democratic. These varying premises make democracy both a fleeting and powerful category. This holds diachronically, with strong differences at various points in time, as well as synchronically, between nations, parties, and the citizens themselves. The question of what democracy is, and what should be expected of democracy, is also an object of fierce debate within the scientific community. Democracy, and the origin of democracy as a form of governance, have been the object of strife, contestations, and conflicts.

How we understand and define democracy as a form of governance is thus an ongoing discussion, with deep historical roots. That words like "democracy" and "democratic" have several different usages illustrate the point: A political regime may be democratic, but we may also speak of a democratic work life, or a democratization of family life or of the production of knowledge. Furthermore, one may speak of a broader democratic culture or democracy as a "lifeform" (and not as a form of governance), of everyday democracy, and of the diversity of democratic practices, culturally and historically. The continuing impact of processes of globalization over hundreds of years have made conceptualizations and normative presuppositions more unclear and complex.

The point of departure for this initiative must be to capture this plurality and the wide scope of what democracy *is*, and of how democracy is *practised*. There are different dimensions and understandings of democracy (and of *democracies*), and various usages, which in different ways may stimulate important and interesting research questions. A broad, interdisciplinary exploration of democracy must necessarily commit to a diversity of perspectives, theories, and methods, by which different fields may challenge and enrich each other. The initiative will contribute with the establishment of a

collective ownership of our knowledge of democracy, crossing the boundaries of faculties and disciplines.

Not least, UiO:Democracy will stimulate new ideas and innovation. It will have as an ambition and function to initiate the best imaginable research on democracy with foundations in the many different and resourceful scholarly environments at the University of Oslo. The initiative will lay the foundation for ground-breaking research through cross-faculty and cross-disciplinary collaboration, research which would not have arisen without UiO:Democracy.

The initiative will aim to fill gaps of knowledge, and to explore democratic presuppositions, tensions, dilemmas, challenges, and unresolved questions. As such, UiO:Democracy will create the largest space possible for the strongest and most vital interdisciplinary research on democracy. Further, the initiative will build on the experience of 15 years of continually expanding interdisciplinary collaboration at UiO. Since the organizational structure of UiO:Democracy will build on of the preceding initiative UiO:Nordic, the initiative will already have an established position in the university structure, as well as its own administrative resources. UiO:Democracy will at the same time strive to make itself relevant to an even greater number of disciplines and subjects compared to the existing initiative. It will have greater ambitions, both as for scope, disciplinary breadth, potential fields of impact, and as for the opportunities for obtaining external funding. Academically, the initiative will stand on the shoulders of many years of democracy research at UiO, including “Demokratiprogrammet” [The Democracy Programme] (2009-2015).

The new initiative is not thought of as a direct continuation of UiO:Nordic in terms of content. Still, such an initiative, at the foremost university of Norway, will necessarily build on Norwegian and Nordic experiences and perspectives. The Nordic model will naturally be an object of analysis, and several of the projects connected with UiO:Nordic have a clear relevance for democracy research in a wide sense. While the Nordic region of today is the point of departure of UiO:Democracy, the initiative will strive towards global, comparative, and historical approaches which exceed Nordic experiences and concepts of today.

Cross-cutting perspectives and ambitions

The initiative’s five thematic tracks (see below) outline the prioritized areas of research within UiO:Democracy. Simultaneously, the initiative will confront the greatest challenges of our time.

Sustainability must be considered the most important of these challenges. UiO:Democracy has just as broad, inclusive and dynamic an approach to this concept as to democracy. The concept of sustainability may be tied to environmental issues, economy, and to the democratic system itself. The survival and continual development of democracy depend on the sustainability of democratic institutions, the economy, and society. Sustainable growth and fulfilment of the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN require well-functioning democracies. The climate crisis exposes how the consequences of human action are not limited to the here-and-now. Democracy has traditionally been framed by the nation state, but national democracies must also take responsibility for humans elsewhere, non-human lifeforms, and future generations. Further, sustainable development is tied to collaboration, peace, inclusiveness, reduction of inequality, health, and education. An explicit ambition at UiO is to “be a leader in the development of a sustainable society”³. How this is to be done democratically, and how it affects and is affected by democratic institutions, will be important questions for UiO:Democracy. Among the questions are: Is democracy (and in what variation) a part

³ <https://www.uio.no/om/strategi/strategi-2030/strategi-2030.pdf>

of the solution or the problem? How do generational differences lead to different political understandings and legitimizations? And what limitations does democracy as an exclusively human concept entail? Who is in the majority? What rights are to be defended?

Sustainability must be a permeating dimension and chief goal for every activity in UiO:Democracy. All research within the boundaries of UiO:Democracy shall have, in addition to excellent quality, a sustainability component. The projects are required to reflect explicitly on this issue and must through the initiative contribute to UiO being an active and relevant contributor in the fulfilment of the Sustainable development goals of the UN.

The initiative's point of departure is democracy as it exists in different forms across a **globalized** world. Through a global economy, modern transportation and communication technologies, international regulations, everyday culture and consumption, the world is more tightly knit together than ever before. Multinational companies run their business across borders, shaping our lives and impacting our democracies. Knowingly or not, local authorities and taxpayers participate in cash flows and investment patterns across the globe. Consumers are global actors who are also local participants and producers of information. Most of the world's central democratic institutions are still based in nation states but can neither alone nor each by themselves solve the problems facing the global community. The balance of power between private and public, and between capital and democracy, has been the object of continual negotiation and renegotiation over centuries, and the challenge for democracy is, among others, to keep up with the pace of an economy which not only have been partly dis-embedded from democratic governance, but which is also a result of other structures and dynamics. Relating to globalization in its different dimensions and manifestations, and exploring the tensions created, also in the shape of different conceptualizations of democracy, will be a cross-cutting ambition for UiO:Democracy.

Technological developments and digitalization may be among democracy's most important tools, as well as threats. Digital platforms may create new arenas for democratic citizenship, but they may also facilitate echo chambers and parallel perceptions of reality. Artificial intelligence (AI) is a central part of the ongoing technological evolution and faces us with several societal and ethical challenges. The evolvement of ethical and purposeful AI contributing to a more, and not less, democratic society, is a great challenge, and demands expansive and radically interdisciplinary research.

In a similar way, the spreading of fake news, disinformation, and conspiracy theories via social media, contribute to increasing polarization, thus undermining trust between citizens. And how do digital solutions impact the relationship and trust between state and public? Digitalization and AI are important to data-driven value performance, and data may become a resource in solving major societal issues. Good use of data, and more expansive and just use of data-sharing, may allow for a better fit between public and private services and ease the transition to a green economy. But it also makes great demands on international collaboration, protection of privacy, and competence, and raises several questions regarding the relations between citizens, publics, national democracies, and the global digital economy.

An increasingly digitalized public sphere also requires new competence from citizens and creates dangers of digital exclusion. Alongside an ongoing digitalization one must strive to develop the population's abilities in using, comprehending, and reflecting critically with digital tools and arenas. If everyone is to have equal opportunities of participating and establishing a critical user-perspective within a digitalized society, we will need arenas of learning and research on the acquisition and continual development of digital competence. UiO:Democracy will have digitalization and AI as a cross-cutting dimension, through research on subjects such as cyber security, digital democratic citizenship, ethical AI, training in digital proficiency, and through the utilization of digital methods of research.

These three cross-cutting ambitions, sustainability, globalization and digitalization, will be reflected in the scientific activity of UiO:Democracy. Projects which include one or more of these dimensions should be prioritized for funding.

In the ambition of being as relevant and significant for the scientific community as possible, the initiative should from the onset have high ambitions in developing theory and methods. As such, the conceptualizations of democracy will themselves be in development, and the projects are to actively contribute to theoretical debates, across disciplines and in more specialized fields. If one is to accomplish this, it will be necessary that projects are conscious of comparative and historical perspectives. An important ambition of the initiative will be to increase the understanding of democracy as a dynamic concept that takes varying shapes in different parts of the world. While the initiative is to be conscious of historical experiences, it should simultaneously avoid methodological nationalism and eurocentrism. An understanding of how democracy and its institutions have always been changing and evolving will prevent simple, teleological, and exclusionary perspectives. This will also contribute to identifying a common democratic frame of reference, democracy's core as idea, practice, and norm.

Five main tracks

The initiative will move along five main thematic tracks. These may be changed or adjusted during the lifespan of the initiative. The tracks will have a strong foundation in the scientific fields of every faculty and have potential for acquiring external funding both nationally and internationally. Not least, the initiative's interdisciplinary profile may stimulate new work in a variety of fields and disciplines and make UiO visible as an active and relevant agent in the wider society.

Track 1: Democracy as a form of governance and the institutions of democracy

A central topic for democracy research is democracy as a political regime and the study of the different institutions of democratic governance, from parliament to parties, courts and public administration, to the public sphere, media, civil society and organizations, nationally and internationally. UiO:Democracy will contribute to the extension, strengthening and renewal of the study of democracy as a form of governance. This includes social science, historical research, and law, but also philosophical explorations of fundamental issues, such as what a democracy is, presuppositions of democracy, what democracy is good for, and what conditions must be fulfilled if procedures and institutions are to be labelled as democratic.

Democracy research has produced knowledge on how processes of democratization and autocratization happen and are caused. Still, we need greater insight into the role institutions play in the consolidation of democracy in some places, and what makes others break down, as well as more research on how democratization and autocratization are affected by cultural and historical developments.

Other well-researched topics include the democratic effects on other measures and variables, from economic growth and social equality, to health, happiness and climate. But we still need research on the more precise causes of such correlations.

It is solidly established that the legitimacy and stability of democracy depend on the levels of trust in the population. However, further and more multifaceted explorations of the citizens' relationship to and view of democracy as a form of governance is needed.

Democratic participation, politics and governance have primarily worked within the boundaries of states, but during the last few decades research on democracy has paid more attention to transnational processes, international organizations and courts, and developments in the relations between public policy and private agents. We need more knowledge on globalization and privatization, responses to such processes, and their consequences for democracy as a form of governance.

Possible topics for research will be:

The structures and institutions of democracy. Here, the role of parliaments, electoral systems, parties, media, and civil societies in democracy, should be studied. What role do independent courts, universities, organization and quality in public administration, organization of business and labour, other states and international organizations play? What lifeforms and everyday practices contribute to the consolidation of democracy as a form of governance? What do historical paths and traditions mean?

The functions of democracy. What mechanisms contribute to the positive effects of democracy? What conditions must be fulfilled for democracy to realize other societal goals? What are the actual limits of democracy?

The citizens' perspectives on the democratic system. What do citizens associate with democracy, and what do they expect of it? How do people define and argue in relation to what they see as good democratic government, what emotions and engagements do they have for their democracies, and what aspects of democracy facilitate trust and support? How do people in different societies and times perceive, and how have they perceived, democracy? What role do economic, cultural, generational, religious and gender-based differences make? What is the relationship between the values and views of the elites and the rest of the population? The effects of digitalization and social media as new channels for participation, inclusion and argument are obvious subjects of interest. Here, the study of the administration and bureaucracy may also be central. What role does the public administration play to foster effective and just decisions, and for the legitimacy of democracy?

The significance of transnational processes and international organizations and courts for democracy. The last decades have set the scene for an ever closer cooperation between institutions on the national and international level. Human rights and European integration are examples of how law and politics produced outside the state give directions for national law and politics. Political governance, the evolvement of legal frameworks, the situation for citizens and democracy's presuppositions and frameworks, are all thus shaped in the interaction between different levels and arenas. This triggers several new research questions and amounts to an underexplored field of great societal importance. Internationalization and transnational processes have also been developing over a long time span, and historical developments should also be explored.

The role of private actors in democracy. Democracy creates the frameworks for politics. Democracy is at the same time shaped by what happens in the interfaces between public and private, politics and the market. How do private actors shape public debate and social movements, from international technology firms to local pressure groups? What influence do interest groups in business and labour, lobbyists, consultancy firms, and the communication business have on the production of policy and public service? Such questions are of current interest but may also be explored over longer time spans of time and in different periods. How has democracy been interpreted across time and in different societies? We also need more knowledge about how the relationship between public and private is shaped by globalization processes, and by the different responses both in national political systems and on the ground.

Why democracy? UiO: Democracy will actively contribute to innovation, theorization and philosophical discussion of what we understand by and should think of when we think of democracy

and a democratic form of governance. Why should we have democracy – what are the reasons for democracy? How should we understand the relationship between democracy and rule of law, between liberal views and other perspectives? Which and what kinds of rights should democracy secure for its citizens, what are the duties and democratic virtues of citizens, and who is to be given the status of citizen? What is the relationship between national democracy, supranational and transnational processes? What role should science, expertise and universities play in democracy? How do societal developments challenge democracy, from populism to virus- and climate crises, to digitalization and new forms of participation, to philosophical discussions of democracy: what ought to be considered good democratic governance?

Track 2: Citizens, diversity, and inequality

The role of citizens in democracy have in practice always been more unclear than classical definitions of democracy (as “people’s rule”) may signal. The Athenian democracy which gave name to the system only included a minority of the city’s population. Democracy and slavery were compatible for centuries. In other words, democracy is both a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion, and the question of who is to be included, and who is to be kept outside the democratic community, have been relevant throughout the history of democracy. Later developments, not least through technology, globalization and migration, have created new realities and issues which UiO:Democracy must contribute to understanding. This includes both different and new forms of inequality, the prerequisites of democratic participation and who the welfare state – as it is today – is for. The relations between individuals, groups and institutions are continually being renegotiated. The consequences may be detected in economic inequality, vulnerability in health and social matters, gender discrimination, digital exclusion, and marginalization. How is this being handled? What is the status of indigenous peoples in democracies? How do we manage the tensions between majorities and minorities in a multicultural society?

Possible topics for research could be:

The social, economic, and legal conditions of citizenship. This includes how inequalities in health affect opportunities of inclusion, public health and the social dimensions of health, the potential and limits of public welfare, and inclusion and exclusion in education and work life.

The formal and informal boundaries of the community. Possible research questions may be what role gender, language, age, ableness, level of functionality, religion, ethnicity, and literacy have for participation, inclusion, and exclusion in democratic communities. This includes how national and international rights play a part when the interests of the community are balanced against the interests of groups and individuals. Opposition to an inclusive democratic community may also provide a democratic challenge, either in the form of anti-globalisation, anti-elitism, elitism, racism, xenophobia, gender discrimination or other forms of discrimination against individuals and groups.

Changes in the *content and meaning of citizenship*, including rights both to participate and abstain, and the entitlement to individual facilitation and universal design. The relationships and tensions between equality and diversity pose important questions. How is the participation of minorities secured and regulated, including indigenous peoples’ rights and participation? Are there limits to the levels of inequality that the democratic processes can cope with? Another important question regards the position of feminism in democratic thinking and public conversation. The same is true of the role of international law and institutions. Ethical and social challenges and possibilities related to modern technology, not least as these pertain to different social classes and the relationship between elites and the general populace, are also covered by this track.

Track 3: The role and function of knowledge

Across the world, democracy continually interacts with science, basic research, and the production of evidence-based knowledge, together with other and more informal types of knowledge and knowledge developments. Historically speaking, modern democracies have profited from a well-established educational sector that, accompanied by expertise and evidence-based knowledge, has laid the foundations for the transmittance of knowledge, as well as for political deliberations and decisions. In other words, democracy is closely associated with public enlightenment. But there is also a tension between knowledge and democracy. Different forms of knowledge production may, furthermore, be utilized to establish and legitimize undemocratic regimes, categories, and procedures.

Numerous tendencies challenge the position of science and knowledge, and contribute to a changing relationship between expertise, citizens, and elected officials. Technological developments have altered the conditions for research, dissemination, and informational practices. Both the products and processes of research are more accessible to the public. Simultaneously, technological development has brought societal debates into channels controlled by new actors, among others private platform businesses like Twitter, Facebook, and other social media. These platforms are shaped by algorithmically governed content, and this may create and sustain echo chambers and hinder genuine sharing of knowledge and opinions. Private actors have attained positions of power which may challenge democracy, and this demands new forms of regulation. Simultaneously, new arenas and new availability of information carry a potential for a democratization of the public conversation.

There is considerable uncertainty around what counts as evidence, and what is trustworthy information in different contexts. On the one hand, the stronger demands for evidence-based knowledge in, among others, health-, education-, and social sectors, result in increasing standardization and requirements for systematic evaluations in all kinds of public services. On the other hand, the speed of knowledge production and the large amounts of accessible information have created uncertainty as to the valid knowledge in each field. The Coronavirus crisis and the ensuing debate on the effects of different infection prevention measures provide a good illustration of this problematic. This uncertainty has led to scepticism towards traditional institutions of knowledge and expertise, and to alternative explanatory models and world-images circulating, not least in social media.

Possible topics for research could be:

The possibilities and potential of knowledge societies and public enlightenment. What role does proficiency in reading and writing, language, different forms of literacy (linguistic, technological, health-based), multimodal abilities, user-knowledge and the relations between expertise, citizens and elected officials play as premises for participation? The societal and legal prerequisites of knowledge, and the relation between knowledge production and forms of governance, as well as between educational level and the general democratic level, are also relevant topics for research, together with studies of the means of knowledge dissemination and the distribution of power. The role of cultural heritage is also relevant in this context. The programme will be open for projects exploring different conditions related to democracy, society, and cultural heritage, today and in the past.

Threats to the knowledge society. The significance of “fake news”, alternative perceptions of reality and relativization of facts will be central questions here. What tools enabling openness and containment of disinformation exist, and how are we to utilize these? It will be important to shed light on the functions of new echo chambers. Another important field covers regulatory obstacles towards

pluralistic production and dissemination of information and disinformation. We are also in need of more research on digital exclusion and social differences in the accessibility of information and updated knowledge.

The opportunities and challenges of *new technology*. This includes the production and dissemination of knowledge to both citizens and the public sphere, and from citizens and the public sphere to knowledge-intensive environments. The potential of influence on technological development and use, especially in democratic fora, should be explored, together with globalized technology's influence on the dissemination of democratic practices in education. Interactions between rules of law which incentivize knowledge production and dissemination should be explored, together with different means of facilitation and control of new technology. Analysis of big data, AI, and data sharing between public and private sectors, and across national borders, may produce new and important knowledge, while the use and sharing of data simultaneously raise questions of privacy, international regulation, public participation, and rights.

Other questions covered by this track are the possibilities of regulating nationally, regionally, and internationally, the power of private actors in controlling public debate and thus conditions for democracy, and how new technology and new forms of data gathering and screening open for novel ways of electoral manipulation.

Track 4: Democracy and crisis management

Our time is characterized by several parallel and intertwined crises, all with consequences for democracy. From the year 2020 an overarching sustainability and climate crisis has been followed by a pandemic, which also has contributed to a third crisis, an extensive economic and social crisis we do not yet know the scope or consequences of. The western world has made the declaration of crises their foremost strategy for handling threats against the post-war ideology of growth and progress. In other parts of the world, crises tied to lack of food and water or exposedness to war and illness have become seemingly permanent conditions.

Given these interconnected crises, the democratic system's ability to manage crises is facing its most complex tests yet. Climate, financial, migration and corona crises presuppose global cooperation in the production of knowledge, decision and regulation making, and they expose how action on the national level is shaped by and challenged through democratic processes. The concept of sustainability and the sustainability goals of the UN have created awareness of how present decisions affect future generations' democratic room for manoeuvre. Today's handling of crises shows how both global agreements and private rights influence democratic decision-making processes, such as the distribution of vaccines in the battle against Covid-19.

One crisis stands above all others, as it is tied to the survival of our species. The processes that we must go through to solve the ongoing ecological crisis and reach the goals of sustainability, such as clean water, green energy, and a reversal of climate changes, activate certain foundational dilemmas of democracy: who are to decide, and on behalf of whom? The democratic arenas of decision are largely restricted to nation states but deal with questions which transcend national borders and particular interests. And who is to represent nature and the future generations in these decision-making processes? How we, in our time, should take responsibility for issue of sustainability, is perhaps the greatest challenge for democracy.

Perhaps the processes and consequences of the ongoing crises will reshape democracy in the long run. In the time that lies ahead, it will be important to understand these processes both individually and through their various interactions. This includes whether there are opportunities for influence and time for well-founded decisions when resolute political action seems to be required, and the role of media in both providing trustworthy information and critical examination. Do crises generate real change, or

do they revive old practices? Relevant research includes both specific crises and foundational, theoretical questions.

Possible topics of research could be:

Dimensions of *democratic crisis management*. How does democracy identify, define and construct democratic crises? Why was the pandemic immediately addressed and treated as an acute global crisis, while many still do not view the climate crisis as such? What strengths and weaknesses characterize the crisis management of different forms of government? The functions of knowledge and expertise, and the relations between states of emergency, crisis management and preparedness for emergencies should also be studied. Developments of trust and distrust between the population and knowledge producers, professions, and elites, for instance different groups' trust in the state's preparation for emergencies, will be other important perspectives, together with international organizations and the role of supranational entities in preparing for and managing crises.

The climate crisis. How suitable are traditional democratic processes for making critical decisions in favour of humanity and its future? What democratic systems and practices are needed when conflicts arise between local workplaces and global warming? How do we secure a just transition to a greener society? The transition to a green economy has cultural and societal dimensions and consequences which should be shed light on, in addition to questions of representation, legitimacy and different lines of conflict in the climate debate. The interaction between legal measures for a green transition, climate debate and the consequences of the green shift will paint a complex picture which must be studied, together with the relationship between the climate crisis and other crises.

The relation between *citizens' health and the democratic system*. In the future we must expect exposedness to new health crises like Covid-19. How do such crises function as catalyst for change in social and governmental matters? Here, relevant questions will be the cultural, economic, and social dimensions of health, as well as the new prominence of health policy and epidemiological knowledge in the public sphere. The relationship between public health and democracy is closely tied to economic inequality. There is an undeniable connection between life expectancy and social status/economic capital. Simultaneously, we observe how politicians' treatment of the pandemic has created both trust and distrust among different parts of the population. What role does personal health play in citizens' support of governments and regimes? How should we understand public health in such a perspective? It would be interesting to compare how restrictions on freedom in favour of security are treated in different parts of the world and parts of the population, and to what degree this has consequences for the population's democratic outlook, as well as support for binding international health cooperation through WHO, among others.

How do *economic factors* influence democracy? In the last few decades, the notion of a crisis has often been mobilised in connection with financial crises. How do these crises differ from other types of crises? What strains do they put on democracy? How should one negotiate between national governance and democracy on the one hand, and international regulations and arrangements on the other? Other important questions relate to the impact of the coronavirus disease on the world economy, as well as the economic sustainability and role of the welfare state. An increase in different forms of economic inequality may have great consequences for democracy. Among others, this includes a growing concern about the power of elites, not only in business, but also in politics, in tandem with an increasing accumulation of society's economic resources among the wealthy. Economic distribution may also impact democracy as people of lower-class backgrounds or weaker economy to a lesser degree vote in elections and express their political opinion; they are also less represented in political bodies. An important task will be to gather knowledge of such patterns,

thereby clarifying the prerequisites of democracy as based on wide participation. Different crises may directly affect levels of economic inequality. According to the UN, the coronavirus pandemic has been accompanied by a rise of extreme poverty, particularly in southern Asia and Africa south of Sahara, which in turn may have an impact on democracy and on opportunities for participation. Furthermore, the relation between public and private actors in the management of crises, and the development of new solutions, as well as the place of economy in how we conceptualize the environmental and health crisis will be important topics of research.

Track 5: *Democracy in everyday life*

The plurality of democratic practices, expressions, arenas, and agents in society will be an important subject for UiO:Democracy, with the potential of including numerous scholarly fields in UiO's democracy research. In this final track, democracy will be examined not only as it functions through commonly known institutions, but also as the experience of everyday life, even exploring spheres which are usually not labelled as democratic. The ambition will be, among others, to capture bottom-up-perspectives on democratic reality. To what extent is democracy being restricted, and how is it practiced in everyday life and in societal spheres closest to citizens, such as work life and the institutions of the welfare state, or in media, arts, and culture?

Democracy exists in the shape of numerous and different inclusionary forms of practice. Among the less explored arenas of democratic education and culture, are schools, family, work life, organizational life, and the voluntary sector. School and education play a central role in the teaching of democracy, but also as democratic arenas, while much of the school and educational system lies outside the pupils' and students' space of democratic participation. Both work- and organizational life is in different ways, and to unequal degrees, democratically regulated. There are democratic structures in religious life, but also dimensions that resist democratic subordination.

The bottom-up perspective also allows for a closer examination of less established political agents, such as popular movements, pressure groups, and various other social movements. How have they struggled to gain participation, expanded democracy, and given it new legitimacy? What roles do they play today, in democracies as well as autocracies? This perspective also includes the importance of arenas, movements, and groups which we usually do not label as "political", or as part of the democratic system, as in local communities, fields of art, sub-cultures, or diasporas.

In everyday democratic practice, work, voluntariness, language, art, culture, religion, and cultural heritage play important roles. Cultural forms of expression are important for how democracies are interpreted, lived, applied, and how they have evolved. Democracies are shaped and interpreted through, among others, practices of cultural heritage, transmittance of histories, rituals, texts, and traditions, which contribute to the formation of norms and ethical frameworks, which in turn are tied to the establishment of communities, practices, and aesthetical and rhetorical forms of expression.

Possible topics of research could be

The important and manifold functions of the school system in *democratic education and development*, past and present. What has been the specific contribution of the school system, and what role may school and education play in the consolidation and development of democracy? What is the importance of family, as an ally or an obstacle, in this context? Is school to be viewed as an institution that levels inequality, or does it rather amplify existing differences? What may be done to change the negative effects of the educational system?

The significance of *work- and organizational life* as democratic arenas. There are major contrasts between nations, but there appears to be a trend towards a reduction of democratic participation in the workforce, also in the most democratic countries. How healthy are the representational arrangements and democratic cultures in workplaces, including freedom of speech? How important are such measures for trust in institutions and the state apparatus? Civil society and organizational life are attributed an important role in recent theories of democracy and have been central in narratives about the origin of Nordic nation states and the Nordic model. Seen in this perspective, organizational life may be a democracy-fostering education for citizens. What is the importance of work life and the voluntary sector for citizens' experience and support of democracy? What is the significance of popular movements and other forms of mobilization?

The role of *cultural production and cultural life* in democracy. The evolution and origin of the public sphere has in European history been closely tied to the literary institution. But other art forms and cultural expressions also contribute to and regulate democratic debate. In several ways, cultural life disseminates, administers, and contributes to a changing democratic reality. Through a plethora of cultural expressions, from TV, film, music, visual and stage arts, newspapers, literature, and digital media, to games, sports, and competitions, empathy and understanding are being shaped and regulated, as well as fellowship and community in small and large groups, and a wide spectrum of emotional reactions. These expressions, with the potential of connecting people or tearing them apart, contribute both to the weakening and reinforcement of local, national, international, and transnational communities.

The limitations and limits of democracy. Democratic values and institutionalized arrangements that promote democracy have a strong position in Nordic societies. In other parts of the world, the space for democracy is more restricted. But there are also limits to democracy and to the influence of democratic culture in the societies which are the most democratic. There is no society in which all arenas are democratic. Spheres such as finance, work, religious life, upbringing, and knowledge production are not fundamentally democratically governed. Still, democracy sets the boundaries of the power and influence of these spheres. Here, relevant questions are the ability of democracy to restrict itself, and to go into dialogue with other traditions and cultures. Simultaneously, authoritarian regimes may also have spaces of democratic practice and thought, through family, education, cultural expression, religion, and organizations of various kinds.

Education

Knowledge and education play key roles in the development and maintenance of a well-functioning democracy. "Quality education" is one of the sustainability goals of the UN. Education in democracy and the teaching of democratic citizenship take place on every level, from primary school to higher education. University is also a democratic arena, where students have the opportunity of participating in elections and to be represented in decision-making processes.

Universities emphasize and transmit essential values and competencies of democratic participation, such as reason, rationality, and critical thinking. A rise in the overall educational levels may mean a strengthening of the preconditions of a well-functioning democracy. UiO, as the largest university in Norway, must be conscious of its responsibility and potential in this area. Even though UiO:Democracy primarily is an interdisciplinary research initiative, it will also facilitate and initiate educational projects. UiO:Democracy will be an important participant in the collaboration with Circle U, where democracy is one of three prioritized thematic areas. The two other themes, climate and global health, also have clear democratic dimensions, as discussed in the descriptions of both the cross-cutting dimensions and single tracks of UiO:Democracy.

UiO:Democracy will contribute to the strengthening of democracy education at UiO. An important means towards this ambition is the seed money for the financing of new interdisciplinary courses, grants which may cover the additional costs of developing such courses. These grants will be advertised without requirements of co-payment. Here, the initiative may model itself on the interdisciplinary education in UiO:Energy and UiO:Life Science. One may also offer funding to courses that tie democracy education to the cross-cutting dimensions of UiO:Democracy, as in use of digital tools in studies of democracy, democracy and environmental humanities, and global perspectives in democracy studies, such as global health and democracy or global economy and democracy.

A separate 40-credits course group would make UiO's considerable competence on democracy visible and available to students across study programs. Subject threads are another means of offering interdisciplinary democracy education, and these may also be tied to one or more of the cross-cutting dimensions of UiO:Democracy. UiO's strategy 2030 holds that UiO should "increase the closeness between education and research". Here, the projects of UiO:Democracy may contribute through hiring students as research assistants, advising on the bachelor's and master's levels, and through dissemination of research results in education.

UiO:Democracy and UiO's strategy

If it aims high, UiO:Democracy will be able to play a key role in the realization of several of UiO's most important strategic goals for the coming years, such as the goal of increased societal value and the strengthening of the accessibility, visibility, and relevance of research in the public sphere.

UiO:Democracy will set these goals among the cornerstones of the initiative:

- The initiative will be shaped by the goal of broad engagement also outside the university community, and create new standards of transparency and openness, in line with UiO:Democracy's overarching goal of improving democratic culture.
- From the very start, UiO:Democracy should have an active presence through several different channels of output and series of events.
- Internal structural hindrances at UiO should be overcome through a solid grounding in the research environments, as well as through calls that will facilitate interdisciplinary/-faculty cooperation in both research and education.

In sum, UiO:Democracy should aim at making an imprint on several levels:

Research – broad and ambitious output through publications, stimulating Open Access publication.

Education – Facilitate interdisciplinary education related to the key topics of the initiative and contribute to democratic competence of UiO's candidates.

Dissemination – Take a leading role in developing UiO's contract with the wider society through engagement with the public sphere, communication, and involvement, for all projects.

Society – UiO:Democracy should make a mark on the wider society, not only through new insights and contributions to a more informed and lively public sphere, but also through new

practices and measures to increase levels of inclusion and strengthen democracy both in and between elections.

UiO:Democracy will have the potential for creating partnerships and synergies across the three interdisciplinary initiatives, with clear thematic bridges to both UiO:Energy and UiO:Life Science. Through the sustainability perspective, the initiative will share several ambitions with UiO:Energy. UiO:Democracy also has connections with UiO:Life Science, not least through the health perspective in track 4. The fulfilment of this potential of cooperation depends on what means the initiative is granted. The work group stresses that the initiative should not be considered a competitor to the other two initiatives, but as a way of using resources that will ultimately benefit all three initiatives.

The initiative's opportunities for external funding

A review of existing and planned programmes and calls abroad and in Norway shows that UiO:Democracy, through all five tracks, will have strong possibilities for gathering extensive external funding. This initiative will clearly be able to surpass the potential of UiO:Nordic. The Norwegian Research Council has its own democracy programme which is open to all scientific fields. A revision has been notified after the reorganization to portfolio management in June 2020. As the structure is now, the tracks and potential projects of UiO:Democracy will fall under the following programmes: *Democracy, governance and innovation, Humanities and social science, Enabling technologies, Sami Health, Education and competence, as well as Welfare, culture and society.*

There will also be major opportunities at the Nordic level. Primarily this involves the Nordic programmes for *interdisciplinary research, digitalization of the public sector, societal security, health and welfare, green growth* and the program *Education for tomorrow*. With the Nordic Council's strong initiative for green transition towards 2030, there will be great possibilities in the area of sustainability.

With the next EU Horizon programme Annex 5 (Culture, creativity and inclusive society), there appears to be great prospects for an initiative such as UiO:Democracy. In the outline of the working programme of SSH there are several initiatives and plans for calls. In sum, these appear to cover all five tracks of UiO:Democracy, as spelled out by the work group.

Final comment

First and foremost, UiO:Democracy asks one of the most relevant and burning questions of our time: What now for democracy? But there are also reasons related to research policy for choosing to focus on the topic of democracy. UiO:Democracy does not only hit the marks of UiO's profile and strategy, but clearly contributes towards fulfilling the societal responsibility of the university. It is also in accord with the priorities of Norwegian and European research funding. There are reasons for believing that projects of outstanding quality, through UiO:Democracy's network and supporting functions, will be able to situate themselves at the front in competing for national, Nordic, and European grants. Everything suggests that UiO will gain additional economic value through the initiative, and that it is sensible to invest in all five tracks.

As such, UiO:Democracy will on several levels play a key role for UiO in the coming years. Through the development of new projects of high scientific quality, the initiative will contribute to cooperation across faculties and increased external funding. Through a newfound level of openness and user involvement, the initiative will also contribute to extending the visibility and relevance of UiO within Norwegian society.

Finally, UiO:Democracy will strengthen UiO's international standing, as a university that, with a foundation in groundbreaking, interdisciplinary research, actively contributes to exploring and solving some of the big societal challenges of our time. UiO and the academy more generally will not work on their own in this process but will initiate new partnerships and new forms of involvement. Ultimately, this is not just about changing our research and moving the scientific frontiers, but also about strengthening and renewing democratic culture and practice.

By initiating UiO:Democracy, the University of Oslo will position itself clearly in a scholarly field of great importance. With a broad and inclusive perspective, the initiative will be able to draw on several strong research environments at all faculties, while simultaneously creating a potential for releasing substantial external funding. UiO:Democracy will give Norway's oldest and most important university the chance of leading the way in areas of tremendous importance for society and its future development.