24 MESSAGES ON A SUSTAINABLE CAREER IN RESEARCH AT UCPH
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The messages are written by the 24 scholars who completed the UCPH Forward programme in 2019. UCPH Forward is a new talent and elite programme recruiting 24 of the best scholars each year.
When you work in research, you are most likely driven by curiosity, passion and a quest for excellence in a scientific discipline. These are some of the prerequisites for producing excellent scientific results. To follow in the footsteps of great scientists, to work with clever people who inspire and challenge you and to realise that you are adding new layers of insight to the pool of human knowledge are all energy boosters.

Ever since I experienced poverty and disease in India as a young man, it has been important for me to contribute to society. The best way for me to contribute has been to create knowledge. This is what we do at the university. At the start of my career, I mainly did my own research in the lab. But later, I spent much of my time working at the intersection of research, policy and business, translating research into societal changes. More recently, I was given the wonderful opportunity to contribute to the University of Copenhagen as its 259th rector, striving to create the best possible conditions for its faculty to answer challenging research questions and solve important societal problems. It is a great privilege to be part of the university and see the fruits of our joint efforts.

I have encountered adversity, struggles, conflicts and periodically immense workloads throughout my career. I suspect all scientists will recognise this side to their jobs. It is important to find your own personal approach to working as a scientist, combining a demanding career with family responsibilities and an active social life. Seeing how 24 young scientists tackle this challenge, addressing the role of peers, sleep, diet, family, efficiency, prioritising and physical exercise in sustaining a scientific career is truly inspirational.

I hope these 24 messages will inspire others to devise their own personal recipe for a successful career in research and for a harmonious and productive life in general.
I am an Assistant Professor in the Department of Biology. Originally from Germany, I have had the privilege to work in multiple countries: in 2005, I moved to Barcelona for my PhD, and in 2011 to San Francisco for a postdoc. In 2015, I moved with my partner and young daughter to Copenhagen, where I have since established a niche for my research at the intersection of computational modelling and high-throughput protein chemistry at the University of Copenhagen. The overarching goal is to link genomics and biophysics and help interpret the effects of genomic changes on our health.

Research is often considered a passion, a calling. There is always more one could do. Yet I feel that innovative ideas emerge most easily from a rested mind that is able to unwind regularly. Like many peers I aim to juggle work and family, time for deep thought; dialogues with colleagues, collaborators and students; following my many passions and still having enough time for sleep. In the morning, I get up before the rest of the family to meditate and do yoga; both of which help me (re)balance for the day ahead. I share not only scientific insights but also sustainability successes and failures with my mentees, encourage them to explore new ideas and prioritize their own well-being. The UCPH Forward programme was a wonderful reminder to make space for creativity in both my work and life – the portrait photo might not reveal it, but I do love colour.

As an international researcher, I also really appreciate the sense of belonging in the wider context of this university that the UCPH Forward programme has given me. In addition to a circle of trusted friends and colleagues, this makes room for interdisciplinary discussions and proposals, leading to a more sustainable future.
Due to my drive and passion for science, my work naturally takes up a lot of my time. When my efforts lead to meaningful and valuable outcomes – like new knowledge, well-educated students, or a new drug candidate that might help patients one day – I feel energised and rewarded. However, there are many challenges and obstacles involved in doing research. These can be time consuming and place an extra burden on you. I have realised that for me it is important to focus on the tasks that lead to results and give me energy. I have also learned to accept that challenges are inevitable and very often develop my skills further. Outside work, my family builds a strong foundation for me and prioritising leisure time is vital. This allows me to recharge my batteries in order to retain robustness and perseverance. Overall, I believe that focusing on the elements that give me energy and accepting the challenges that occur along the way is essential for maintaining positive mental health and ensuring a sustainable career.

I am a research group leader working within the field of medicinal chemistry at the Department of Drug Design and Pharmacology. I graduated from the University of Copenhagen, where I also obtained my PhD. After a postdoc position in Italy, I returned to Denmark and formed my own research group. Our aim is to develop new drug-like small molecules against targets involved in diseases in which oxidative stress plays a role.
The challenges of a scientific career are familiar to many. There is a constant struggle for research funding and pressure to balance many competing tasks. As researchers, we can have a tendency to focus on these negatives, but I never forget what a privilege it is to do science for a living. I always remind myself why I became a scientist – to explore the world around us and, at the same time, to make a small contribution to building a better society. Enjoying the ride is the key to sustainability – do your best, work hard and at the end of the day go home and spend time with family, friends, pets – and remember how lucky we all are.

I am an Associate Professor in the Department of Veterinary and Animal Sciences. My research field is infectious disease. My group studies how pathogens interact with the host immune system, diet and gut microbiome. We have a particular interest in parasitic worms, which infect more than a billion people worldwide, as well as being a large problem in livestock and pets. We collaborate with many different international groups in diverse fields such as chemistry, immunology and food science. My scientific career has taken me all over the world – I have lived and worked in Australia, the UK, Ireland and Denmark with shorter stays in the Netherlands and the US.
Astrophysics is a fast-paced, highly competitive research field. This comes with many consequences such as stereotypical mindsets, unclear career prospects, and high pressure to deliver paired with low success rates in obtaining funding, to just name a few. All these aspects impact on our careers, and sustaining a career in astrophysics is by no means trivial. For me, it is important never to lose sight of my dreams, goals and values: I am visionary, rebellious, confrontational, innovative and ambitious. These traits help me overcome tough periods and allow me to enjoy my successes. I think it is important never to stop developing, as a scientist or as a person, and to always stay true to oneself. I pay attention to my mental and physical health, which are important to sustain the necessary energy for the hard work. Despite this, keeping the right balance is not always easy. What helps me thrive is the support of great colleagues, family and friends and the opportunity to work in a diverse, innovative and creative research section.
My research all boils down to the trade-off between doing something difficult or unpleasant now for significant benefits in the future — the same situation every researcher faces. Our work is often slow and frustrating. Criticism, setbacks and failures outweigh success and positive feedback. Every time a journal submission or grant application is rejected it hurts, and it is hard not to take it personally. We need a lot of grit — perseverance in the face of challenges — which is also one of my research topics.

Despite the drawbacks, why am I still here? I can’t imagine another career that allows me to ask the questions that matter and explore them in depth. I love working with brilliant, dedicated, and creative people from all over the world — many of whom have become close friends. I enjoy teaching students about the topics I am passionate about and seeing them develop. Most importantly, I feel that my work has a meaningful impact. To accelerate this impact I also teach and consult on implementing behavioral science in policymaking. Seeing that my work makes a difference motivates me to keep going and gives me confidence that what I do is “good enough.” And on the unavoidable bad days, I like to remind myself of this Banksy quote: “When you get tired, learn to rest, not quit.”

I am a tenure-track Assistant Professor at the Department of Economics. I am a behavioral and experimental economist, and my research centers around the question of how we can design policies, such as nudges, that help individuals sustain long-term, healthy and sustainable habits. Born in Germany, my career has taken me to the US where I was a visiting scholar at the University of Chicago and UCSD, Sweden, Norway and Australia. Still, I keep coming back to Denmark, where I also did my PhD at Aarhus University in 2014. In 2017, I founded Impactually, a behavioral science management consultancy.
What matters most to me is a sense of meaningfulness, spanning over findings and ideas, and lifelong learning, for myself as well as for others whose work and careers I can nurture. Work-life balance can mean very different activities and timetabling for different people and goes beyond the basic needs of sleep, physical activity and social interaction. I work more than full-time, but often have more fun inspecting the latest research results and discussing work-related ideas than pursuing conventional hobbies. I also need the quiet time where I can focus and get important things done.

To work well one needs to rest well. Having kids helps me not to think about work, especially on days when they get to decide what to do and I find myself climbing a tree or painting a unicorn. Since my theoretical research can take years to finish, I also feel a need to do something practical and visible: I enjoy woodcraft and building furniture.

Research is like a rollercoaster and challenging times have been much easier to overcome with colleagues and a spouse with whom I can share anything. To avoid stress, I try to practise positive thinking, have a helicopter view ("it is not so bad or will pass") and make realistic demands.

I am a ‘protein engineer’ and ‘drug designer’ using the computer as a tool to inspire experiments on the function and therapeutic potential of receptors present at the surface of our cells. I am originally from Sweden but have been working at the University of Copenhagen since 2008. I moved to Denmark with my wife and two kids in 2015 when I got a permanent position. In 2019, I realised my personal and professional dream of becoming a Professor.

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It is easy to lose yourself in academia. Competition is fierce: for grants, positions and impact. Like an all-you-can-eat buffet, this rarely brings out the best in anyone. You can work yourself to the bone yet never be done; there will always be more papers to read, manuscripts to write, grants to apply for. However, the thrill of doing cutting-edge research and providing novel insights that matter is a powerful motivator for me. I feel very privileged to do what I do, and am fortunate to have had good mentors along the way, colleagues whose company I very much enjoyed, and a supportive network when it mattered most. To keep my career sustainable I force myself to take both time off work and time offline, which I never used to do. In that respect, having small kids certainly helps. They make me be present and appreciate all the little things.

I am Associate Professor at the GLOBE Institute. The focus of my work is molecular ecology and palaeoecology; in my group, we use genomics and insights from the fossil record to open a window directly into the past and investigate how previous periods of climate change affected mammal species and their environments. Although our research explores timescales of tens to hundreds of thousands of years, our goal is to use these insights to improve our understanding of how species and ecosystems will fare in the increasingly uncertain near future of global climate change. Most of our current work focuses on Arctic marine mammals, and involves close synergies with public partner collaborators across the Arctic region.
I am still at the beginning of my career: fresh out of my first postdoc with no permanent position in view and several grant applications pending. At this critical juncture, “sustainable research” could very easily become “survive in academia”. Anything would do as long as I can continue my research. Because my research is so much a part of me, there could be no me without it. These thoughts often loop in the background of my mind. Such extreme dedication is essential for scientific growth but it does not leave much space for a balanced life. I try to be very mindful of small and simple everyday things: my bike-ride from work to pick up my son from school, a good home-cooked meal shared with my family, strolling into a bookshop; all become tiny nurturing pockets of air where I can reset. I often take a step back to assess how each piece – my research, my family, and my personal growth – fits into the bigger picture, right now and in the future. Doing research is a privilege that often comes with an insecure lifestyle and considerable anxiety at the start of one’s career. To make it sustainable, we should be entirely aware of the systemic limits while managing to see beyond them. When I close my eyes, I can still walk along the Nile with unbound curiosity for its past and its people. I will do research as long as this image rings true.

I am an archaeologist specialised in the history of ancient Sudan and Nubia. I grew up in France where I studied Egyptology in Paris, then pursued my studies in the UK where I discovered the potential of ancient textiles to understand past societies, from the intimately woven connections between people and their clothing to the macro-economic aspects that tie together faraway lands and cultures. Archaeological textiles brought me to live in Sudan, France, and the US. In 2018, I moved to Copenhagen with my family to pursue a Marie Skłodowska-Curie fellowship at the Centre for Textile Research.
Based on my experience, the elements that contribute most to a sustainable career in research are vision, impact and focus. In the early career stages as an independent researcher, you usually have a direct perception of the real potential, and the current limits, of the experimental workflow you are competent in because you are a hands-on user and sometimes a developer of that approach. From this favourable position, you can foresee new applications and advancements of the techniques you master. Next, among the multiple opportunities you foresee, you should choose those leading to the highest impacts, otherwise someone else will do it instead and you will miss an opportunity to maximise the rewards for your efforts. When starting out as an independent researcher, you may not have a clear perception of the research applications with the highest impacts because this awareness develops with experience. This is when the advice of a senior colleague you trust is extremely useful. Reading which research lines make it to the peer-reviewed journals with the highest impact factors can also be inspiring. Similarly, it can be helpful to understand which features in a grant application are listed as ‘appealing’ in the guidelines many public and private funding bodies release for applicants. Finally, once it is time to move from design to execution, focus on pursuing your objectives. Chances are you will have difficulties; probably things will not work straight away. Trust yourself and persevere. Reconsider every step of your approach; maybe a paradigm shift is necessary. Ultimately, to make all this sustainable it is necessary to maintain your personal well-being. If you have doubts, talking to a senior colleague or attending a lifelong learning course can help you figure out how to achieve this.

I am an Associate Professor in palaeoproteomics at the GLOBE Institute. I am originally from Italy and I was working in the UK before moving to Denmark. I use palaeoproteomics – mass spectrometry-based proteomic methods – to identify protein remains extracted from hominid fossils up to two million years old. I then use the genetic information I retrieve to reconstruct the evolutionary relations between long-extinct and extant hominid species. I also use palaeoproteomics to characterise proteinaceous residues present in archaeological and artistic objects, for diagnostic and conservation purposes.

ENRICO CAPPELLINI
Ever since I learned biblical Hebrew, I have been fascinated by the literary world of the Old Testament and I have shared my passion for reading and interpreting ancient texts in various forums. To me, a sustainable research career is a life-long engagement with this treasure of the past that allows me to maintain my curiosity and commitment.

Three key factors are vital for sustainability: freedom to explore unexpected observations; a strong international network for testing ideas and receiving critical feedback; and undisturbed time for thinking and writing. However, given the growing number of short-term appointments and an increasing focus on applied research, even in my field, circumstances could be better. On a personal level, I am never afraid to say no. As a rule of thumb, I do not work nights and weekends, but spend the time with my family. Being with them gives me energy to stay focused and efficient during the day.

I am an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Theology, working on the Bible and its rich and diverse reception from antiquity to the present. My PhD thesis examines a classic problem regarding the Old Testament in Christian theology, and my doctoral dissertation (2019) deals with exile in the Book of Isaiah, one of the most important books of the Bible. My current research, “Stories in a Strange Land,” focuses on issues of assimilation and religious identity in biblical stories about Jews living among foreigners. I have worked as a visiting researcher in Oxford, Jerusalem, Bonn, and at Yale University. In 2020, I was selected as the winner of the prestigious Nils Klim Prize.

FREDERIK POULSEN

I am an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Theology, working on the Bible and its rich and diverse reception from antiquity to the present. My PhD thesis examines a classic problem regarding the Old Testament in Christian theology, and my doctoral dissertation (2019) deals with exile in the Book of Isaiah, one of the most important books of the Bible. My current research, “Stories in a Strange Land,” focuses on issues of assimilation and religious identity in biblical stories about Jews living among foreigners. I have worked as a visiting researcher in Oxford, Jerusalem, Bonn, and at Yale University. In 2020, I was selected as the winner of the prestigious Nils Klim Prize.
In my experience, life as a modern-day scholar is filled with paradoxes. You have to be pretty smart but also a little bit stupid to pursue a career in research. Smart because the competition for jobs and opportunities is fierce at all levels, a little bit stupid because life as a researcher, even when you manage to get the job, is not necessarily a bed of roses. I consider myself extremely privileged to be in the position that I am in, working with inspiring colleagues and students on projects that have the potential to make a real difference. Yet, I often struggle to feel fully satisfied with what I do, simply because there is always more that needs to be done. Being part of UCPH Forward has made me realise that I have to do less to do more. I am still learning how to live by that dictum.

I am an Associate Professor at the Centre for Internationalisation and Parallel Language Use. As a sociolinguist, I explore how the social world is shaped by and at the same time reflected in language and the way we use it. My main research areas include the use of English as a global lingua franca, language policy in the context of university internationalisation, theories of social and linguistic change, and the sociolinguistics of transient communities. Before coming to the University of Copenhagen in 2015 I was an Associate Professor of English at Roskilde University. I have also been a visiting scholar at the Centre for Language and Communication Research at Cardiff University, Wales, and spent shorter periods of time at the Hong Kong Institute of Education and the University of Hong Kong.
Travelling is a large part of my life as a researcher. These travels are demanding with a family back home, but I use them to energise myself and work like crazy in order to work shorter days when I am back with my family. I enjoy the various cities as a backdrop for my computer screen and as new scenes for my daily runs. These backdrops can make exam corrections into a joy and leave me with time for my family when I return home. I have various routines to increase the quality of my research without interrupting my time at home, such as specific times for checking emails, strict timekeeping, shifting between tasks, planning and prioritising. UCPH Forward taught me how to improve these routines, but even more importantly, how I can add more joy to them without reducing the quality of my research. I have even seen increased research quality as a result. Adding more satisfaction to my work life makes me more efficient, productive, and able to formulate brilliant new ideas while also appreciating time with my two boys and my husband.

Jeanet Sinding Bentzen

I am an Associate Professor at the Department of Economics. I investigate the causes and consequences of religion for society using econometric methods: the field is called Economics of Religion. I am the executive director of an international network based in California (ASREC), organising annual conferences to engage scholars studying religion, economics, and culture. I work with co-authors from Denmark, the US, Switzerland, Russia, Australia, and Sweden. I have given talks abroad about my research at universities in the US, UK, Italy, Russia, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Luxembourg, and Scotland. Most invitations come from economics, but also from evolutionary biology, psychology, and religious studies.
I am an early career researcher juggling the professional demands of managing a lab, staying at the cutting edge of my field, teaching, and being a good university employee and co-worker. I also have a one-year-old daughter at home and am trying to find a new balance between work and family life. I have taken time this past year to reflect on my true goals and ambitions, and have worked on building strategies for long-term sustainability. This has been somewhat akin to learning a new language of mindfulness as well as emotional and physical well-being. I have learned that it is OK to need certain things (for example, unbroken time to think about science) and tried to foster the self-awareness to identify and constructively communicate when those needs are not being met. In the past months, I have been overcoming the challenge of getting things done from my kitchen table while full-time parenting. I have been teaching a course, and am particularly proud of myself for rapidly mastering the tools needed to reconfigure my teaching across multiple online platforms. I have been trying to meet the students where they are, while still maintaining high standards. Though still a work in progress, it has been an opportunity to put all the skills gained this past year to the test.

I am an Assistant Professor in the Section of Ecology and Evolution in the Department of Biology and a Research Associate at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute. I am a community ecologist and evolutionary biologist exploring the physiological adaptations enabling organisms to cope with environmental stress in light of climate change. I have a special fondness for ants — especially those inhabiting tropical rainforests. I am from the US.
To me, a sustainable research career has three key ingredients: passion, planning and outsourcing. Passion is the fuel without which a research career results in more sacrifices than gains. However, if you simply cannot live without research, you will enjoy the journey through its ups and downs. Planning is the second ingredient: if/when you start a family, you need to be extremely efficient and structured around what you do (and don’t do). Planning helps me steer my research in the right direction and ensures time for both my work and my family – this has certainly helped me as a mother of four! The final ingredient is outsourcing. Prioritising getting help with cleaning is money well spent – it maximises time for my research and family, which is pivotal for a sustainable and rewarding life.

UCPH Forward has been an extremely inspiring journey. It has given me deeper insights into myself as a person, researcher and leader through personality tests and measurements of decision and leadership styles. It has also given me a sense of belonging to a larger research community through interactions with the other fellows, members of funding bodies and prominent researchers across academia.

KAMILLA MISKOWIAK

I am a Professor (mso) at the Department of Psychology, and at Mental Health Services, Capital Region of Denmark. I lead a research group, the Neurocognition and Emotion in Affective Disorders (NEAD) Group, which conducts multi-disciplinary research into depression and bipolar disorder (mania and depression). My research aims to identify the brain abnormalities that underlie the common and debilitating cognitive impairments in patients with mental disorders and – based on this – to develop innovative cognition treatments. My dream is to grow my group into a multidisciplinary centre for research and treatment of cognitive impairments across mental disorders.
Being part of highly specialized and competitive business and research environments where constant drive, dynamics, development and innovative thinking play the key roles is an integral part of a sustainable research career for me. I am curious, determined, hard-working and always looking for new challenges, so these environments motivate and inspire me, bring out the best in me, and make me walk that extra mile. Consequently, a prerequisite for a sustainable research career is to be part of an optimal organisational structure that supports this.

To me, a sustainable research career is somehow to be in the right place at the right time; if it feels right, then it is right. Pursuing a successful research career is an active and deliberate choice made both by the mind and the heart, because it is a total embodiment of “who you are” as a private person and a professional. It is my most beloved hobby to do research, thus, the usual boundaries between work and free time are simply not there, so there is a risk of becoming fully absorbed or consumed by academia. In order to make this relationship sustainable, it is important to realise and manage the various risks of academia – regardless how incentivising they may be.
I do fieldwork for a month every year, which is a challenge when you have a family. Other challenges in academia involve a rather loose job description with a lot of freedom but with few clear-cut assignments. Instead, there are high expectations to deliver large amounts of high-quality publications, teaching, supervision and outreach as well as taking on a number of departmental assignments. Nobody says how much you need to do, but it is clear that enough is rarely enough. So, how does one maintain a sustainable research career when you need to be constantly available to students, always work on one of your many projects, continuously move between institutions and spend time away from home while knowing that you may be unemployed in a year or two? Well, most researchers have known this from the outset of their academic careers. The PhD student knows that getting a postdoc is difficult, and even when one has secured a few postdoc positions and individual funding, permanent jobs are few and far between. Facing this reality at a very early stage is imperative and it has personally helped me through my career. I usually say, somewhat jokingly, that it is similar to accepting death. We have to know and accept the name of the game, or we will face constant anxiety. This is in my opinion key to maintaining a sustainable research career. Work hard and have fun. Do not forget about exercise, family and friends and know that soon, it might be all over.

I am an Associate Professor at the Natural History Museum of Denmark working on systematics, biogeography and evolution of birds in the Indo-Pacific island world. I did my PhD at the Natural History Museum of Denmark and at UC Berkeley and a postdoc at Imperial College, London, which involved moving and setting up a daily life with my partner and two small children in the UK.
Throughout this journey, I have challenged myself across various academic topics and different countries. I learned machine learning and artificial intelligence for my PhD. I learned genomics and epigenomics during my postdoc. I learned metabolic biology for my first academic job at the University of Pennsylvania. Now my research focuses on developmental biology and cancer biology. I have tried saying “yes” to new challenges as long as I can associate it with what I have done. At the same time, I have tried to find my inner motivation, which was possible for me because I enjoyed embracing new thoughts. I feel like I was walking a new path, but I have never reached the end. I do not know what will come next for me and I have to admit there are some things I done because I thought I had to. I will try to listen to my heart more during my next journey.

I am an Associate Professor at the Biotech Research & Innovation Centre (BRIC). As a computational biologist, I perform genomic data analysis and develop computational tools. I started working at BRIC in 2018 and before then I travelled through diverse research topics. I majored in electronics for my BSc and MSc and in computer science for my PhD. Soon after I became fascinated by biology and tried to become a biologist.
For me, a sustainable career is a complicated matter. Different things at different times make life as a researcher not just sustainable but desirable. My studies at the Faculty of Theology have given me a strong sense of academic citizenship: my individual research findings fit into a larger context. This sense of citizenship sustains identity when pressure mounts. Having a strong and international network, communicating with researchers outside Denmark, being invited to international conferences and creating joint publications foster another sense of belonging: the “Republic of Letters” still exists, although in a different form than before. I am motivated by experiencing how our research resonates globally: this inspires me to push the limits of what we know about our shared past. Publishing within other fields and engaging in collaborations across disciplines are, for me, another great source of motivation: to a fault, I stay open to new ideas and collaborations. Teaching is an avenue to disseminate research results, to test new ideas, and to formulate hypotheses while rehearsing classical approaches. Work-life balance is a constant but also elusive goal: I have three kids, and my wife has a job that is, if not more, demanding than my research. We make it work, but it is never easy and involves both long nights and early mornings. At times, it is frustrating to live under foreign skies, never to have a full weekend together, to constantly check e-mails, struggle to meet deadlines, and plan vacations around an already overburdened schedule. For me, however, I have never experienced anything else. It seems to me that the days are long gone when research was a nine-to-five job and not foremost a lifestyle. It is a vocation. I wonder, was it ever anything else?

I am an Assistant Professor at PRIVACY, a Centre of Excellence funded by the Danish National Research Foundation and housed at the Faculty of Theology. My field of expertise is church history – that is, the historical study of Christianity and its profound impact upon all aspects of society and culture. My PhD thesis investigated the spiritual praxis of the secret wife to Louis XIV, Madame de Maintenon. I have been a visiting fellow at Durham University, associated researcher at the Centre de Recherche du Château de Versailles, at the Centre Roland Mousnier (Sorbonne IV) and at l’École Pratique des Hautes Études, where I lectured on my research.

LARS CYRIL NØRGAARD
The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a need in me to get closer to adolescents living under severe confinement and who have lost relatives or friends. I am doing this through a research initiative that aims at understanding how adolescents are experiencing their new reality, and I use a research method called narrative ethics. This ethically based method has a therapeutic dimension, an aspect that I have found extremely important when conducting research among vulnerable populations, especially during the COVID-19 crisis.

Sustainability in my research career is linked to the feeling that I belong to a community with which I share values, with taking care of my passion, my physical and emotional well-being, and with serving others. What makes me fully enjoy my work as a researcher are the adolescents I work with. I can spend hours listening to them, to their fears, dreams, challenges and hopes. Their well-being, their potential to thrive and their fulfilment is 100% of my motivation, and the research methods that I use allow me to combine this with my academic curiosity.

I have been challenged by the concept of what a perfect researcher is, but I was lucky enough to find senior colleagues within UCPH who helped me see that researchers can be quite different from each other and that research talent can take many shapes.

I am an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences doing research on adolescents’ health and well-being. I grew up in Spain and undertook my university studies in Spain, France, Belgium and Denmark. With my PhD thesis, I focused on examining the impact of socioeconomic vulnerability on children and adolescents living with chronic conditions. During my Assistant Professorship, I tested new methods that allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the quality of life of adolescents living with chronic conditions. My current research project, Thrive – Teenage Mental Health Research Inquiries Via E-communities, is taking me into the field of mental health. How do adolescents living with affective disorders find meaning? How are persuasive technologies affecting them? How do they use e-communities for support?
Life as a researcher is often a balancing act. I am driven by passion, curiosity and an ambition to generate impact through science that branches out to and feeds from the surrounding society. However, this inner drive needs to be kept in check. Sustainability is about finding a path, despite detours, that allows ambitions, values and hopes to unfold while making sure that self-awareness safeguards the body, mind and soul along the way. A mentor, a friend or a ‘no-buddy’ – someone who helps you stay on track, say no, prioritize – is an efficient hold against the never-ending demands of academia and my own inner drive. Walking and reading are ways of charging my batteries, and I thrive the most whenever I am in the field, meeting patients, relatives and professionals in healthcare encounters. This boosts my sense of purpose, recalibrates my priorities and inspires me. I am grateful for being able to work with a meaningful topic where I support people in need of kind and compassionate healthcare. When grant applications are rejected, manuscripts returned or administration becomes too much of a hassle, I remind myself of my mission, I go on a writing retreat and return energised.

The ability to flourish as a researcher is not only shaped by individual actions and decisions. For me, it requires good leadership in a transparent and inclusive institution that encourages new ways of doing science, embraces diverse forms of impact, and upholds integrity, critical thinking, and the scientific social responsibility of the university.
Building up a research career requires a wide range of competences and achievements. It also requires the capacity to deal with criticism from our peers, rejections of applications, and a very high work load. If we are unsuccessful, we tend to work more hours in order to achieve our goals, but this is not a very sustainable response. Being a sustainable researcher to me includes many things: a good balance in my life prioritising physical exercise, a healthy diet and sleep is key, since it helps me to stay focused while working, and I recharge my batteries faster after days with high work pressure. Having a network of good colleagues and collaborators, who I trust and who will support me, both in good times and in hard times, is also important. It also includes having the courage to do what I think is right. Expectations from our surroundings can be high. It is important that I stay true to myself and find my own way to create the successes that I define for myself. Making a difference in what I do is key to my motivation, and this includes both research, teaching, supervision and mentoring tasks.

MARIANNE NISSEN LUND

I am a Professor of food chemistry at Department of Food Science and the Department of Biomedical Sciences. My research aims to enhance food quality by understanding complex chemical interactions between food components in sustainable food production and to implement this knowledge in rational and healthy food design. I have a strong collaboration with the Danish food and ingredient industry, a collaboration that I enjoy because of the interesting interaction this fosters between academia and industry.
I am currently working to understand the extinction of species on oceanic islands, as islands were home to 60% of the species humans have driven to extinction over the last 500 years. I want to understand what happened and what is, in fact, still happening. My deepest motivation is to help humanity navigate the multiple crises we are currently in, which I see as crises in the relationship between the global ecological system and us; the very Earth we live on. The role of science is to cut through both arguments of pragmatism as well as fear, in order to provide a clear-headed understanding of our situation that will help us orient ourselves. To me personally, sustainable research is research that keeps me motivated and where the questions I grapple with are aligned with what I would most like to contribute to the world. My biggest fear is to work hard, get grants, publish papers, only to realise at the end of the road that none of this made any real difference to the world. Sustainable research is, for me, also science that nurtures its participants. Science should not consume the people who do it, and I try to engage with my students as whole human beings, in an atmosphere where they can also thrive, be creative and express what they would like to give to the world.

MICHAEL K. BORREGAARD

I am an Associate Professor at the Center for Macroecology, Evolution and Climate at the GLOBE Institute. I try to understand why species are where they are: why does nature in a particular place look the way it does? When I worked at the University of Oxford, I fell in love with oceanic islands, because they represent small isolated ecological worlds in themselves. They are big enough to be self-contained, but small enough to understand as a whole. Islands are also home to some of the most fantastic and improbable species – like giant tortoises – and they are hotspots of the extinction crisis driven by humans.
The academic world is increasingly built on a foundation of short-term grants and is filled with uncertainty. I try not to think about competition, and instead enjoy the beauty of discoveries. To me, a sustainable career includes having fun while developing new ideas, setting myself up for success by planning, and striking a balance between reaching out for new opportunities and saying no.

When returning to Denmark after my postdoc in the US, UCPH Forward helped me gain a sense of companionship, belonging, and a hope for the future. I treasure being a part of a community of ambitious scientists who support and celebrate each other’s failures and accomplishments. Through this programme, I have learned how to work smarter with myself and with others. I also prioritize my sleep because, when I do not sleep enough, I tend to worry and lose my focus. One of my biggest challenges is writing. Now I carve out time for my writing and put myself in an environment that fosters my creativity and writing processes. I have joined the UCPH Forward writing group and I look forward to our bimonthly writing sessions, which include excellent company and copious amounts of good coffee.

I am an Assistant Professor at the Department of Veterinary and Animal Sciences. I uncover how bacteria sense and respond to danger, and I transform this knowledge to develop new strategies to kill multidrug resistant pathogenic bacteria. During my PhD I fell in love with microbes. I developed a research idea and secured funding to move to Princeton University to do my postdoc. It was challenging to move abroad with my husband and son, but we had the most amazing time and we also had our second child there.
Since I was a young boy, I wanted to become an archaeologist and learn about prehistoric cultures and lost civilizations. Regarding my career path, I have always followed my passion. The passion that compelled me to study archaeology in the first place also led me into research and back to the university. In order to maintain a sustainable research career, I think it is very important to be aware of the things that feed one’s scholarly passion and to prioritize these. Constantly pursuing the research questions that evoke my curiosity and passion will, I think, create a solid foundation for a long-lasting and sustainable research career.

I am a tenure-track Assistant Professor in Archaeology at the Saxo Institute. My research interests centre on the European Neolithic and Early Bronze Age with a special focus on Neolithisation processes, socio-cultural change, Neolithic iconography, and archaeo-linguistics. I supervise student theses and teach courses on the Neolithic and Bronze Age in Denmark and northern Europe, in both field archaeology and archaeological documentation and analyses. I started my archaeological career as a curator and was responsible for managing and conducting excavations according to the Danish Museum Act and for curating exhibitions. I have participated in excavations all over Denmark as well as in Italy and Jordan. I am about to start a new research project, Deep Histories of Migration: the Early Neolithic around the North Sea, with international collaborators.
Is well-being compatible with the elite and being talented? Can the highly competitive world of science encompass both mental and physical balance, mindfulness, music and focused thinking?

In this booklet, we illustrate how 24 ambitious and highly talented researchers address the combination of competitive science and work-life balance in their daily lives.
These reflections stem from the UCPH Forward programme, an intensive 10-month talent development scheme with systematic supervision, mentoring and coaching. Its goal is to help talented researchers reach their full potential. Our ambition is to create a coherent talent cultivation scheme for scholars who wish to walk the extra mile to boost their careers, but the wider scope is to foster a new generation of more diverse top scientists with professional achievements across disciplines and experience from, and beyond, academia. In short, in the UCPH Forward programme, we hope to rethink excellence, innovation and talent.

In many other talent development schemes, talent is modelled similarly to sports performance, emphasising early peak performance and the lonely genius. It is implied that key breakthroughs take place during a few early yet crucial years, often after the postdoc and when approaching tenure. Incidentally, this narrow window of opportunity often coincides with the years of forming a family. It makes life difficult and stressful.

However, it is not only in these formative years that careers in research are intense and difficult. Academic life from the PhD to the professor position are marked by major changes and adjustments in responsibilities, occasional troubles with superiors, colleagues and students, highly fluctuating working hours, competition and ever approaching deadlines, paired with a constant quest for outstanding personal achievement.

As in any field of society, demands and competition are ever increasing. Scientists are eager to comply in order to perform world-class research and make important breakthroughs and discoveries for the sake of humanity, curiosity and progress. This drive, however, makes us vulnerable. More than ever the challenge is to balance the quest for high gain exploration and a sustainable career. How do we ensure that scientists optimise their creativity and originality so they can give back to society without burning out or leaving the field? What does life-long learning look like in science?

It seems that in society we are at the end of the strategy of simply working harder and smarter. In research, we realise that it is short-sighted to have this narrow focus on the performance of the few, and during a few years. To produce truly transformative research, we need to make talent flourish throughout the entire professional life and focus on long-term sustainability in addition to peak performance. The next generation of scholars, the millennials, will retire later than previous generations, and this makes it even more crucial to introduce sustainability in research as a driver for talent and originality.

The reflections and praxis presented by the 24 talented, up-and-coming scientists in this booklet represent various strategies for a career that maintains and fosters originality, creativity and sustainability. In their professional lives they are already accomplished scholars with impressive records of achievement. They have contributed significantly to the global pool of science and the ongoing, international dialogue with fellow academics. We hope that these 24 talented scholars will go on to inspire fellow researchers to choose unconventional pathways and to be courageous.

Scientists are neither delicate flowers nor lonely wolves. They thrive with cohesion, a sense of belonging to a community, and with meaning in their work. This booklet testifies to the diversity of approaches and gives a glimpse of how we may proceed in combining sustainable careers with cutting-edge science.

We launched the initiative in 2019 with dedicated support from the Rector and the Associate Deans for Research at the University of Copenhagen (UCPH). Developing and maintaining talent is crucial for enhancing excellence in research, globally and at UCPH. The talent programme was initiated by two top-researchers and leaders of centres of excellence, professors Hjorth and Nosch, who were joined by Viskum, an experienced talent and leadership trainer and psychologist from the Human Resources department. The talent programme caters to a select group of younger and mid-career researchers (advanced postdocs, or young professors at all levels) with extraordinary skills and vision. UCPH Forward participants demonstrate extraordinary scholarly excellence, creativity, talent, motivation and the courage to bridge disciplines.
ALL PORTRAITS IN THE BOOKLET ARE BY ARTIST AND PHOTOGRAPHER SUSTE BONNÉN, AND WE ARE GRATEFUL FOR HER CONTRIBUTION.