

## **Nurturing talent – research-based teaching in “Ecclesiastical and theological history during the Enlightenment in Denmark-Norway”**

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### **Programme, course/other context, programme level and number of students:**

Ten students participated in a course that was, in formal terms, a specialisation course on the master’s study programme. However, the study board granted exemptions to allow a couple of students working on their bachelor projects during the final semester of their bachelor programme to take part as well.

### **Motivation for the activity:**

To nurture talent by providing academically strong and motivated students with additional challenges and competencies. We also wanted the course to give the students insight into what a PhD programme would offer and require of them, and to integrate research from an externally funded programme into the University’s teaching.

**Key learning objectives with focus on how the activity is research-based:** The ability to work and think independently. The courage to pursue ideas and elements that are not a predefined part of the syllabus. Tools and techniques that will optimise the students’ work processes and give them better opportunities to perform over and beyond the average.

### **Description of the activity:**

Part of the course involved mimicking a research activity linked to a project funded by the Carlsberg Foundation. I started by introducing an unresolved problem, as well as previously unseen source material to shed light on it. During the first part of the course, we also sought to generate the best possible overview of both the background literature and the latest research literature. The considerable volume of literature was divided up between the students. Each was responsible for writing an annotated bibliography and introduce one section of the literature. Several supplemented their assigned texts with other relevant texts that they encountered during the work. Overall, the group quickly gained sound knowledge and an overview of the academic field concerned. The second, shorter part of the course then focused on the acquisition of specific key technical competencies (a compact course in reading Gothic handwriting and an introduction to two collections of handwriting). In the third part of the course, the students worked alone on a defined, previously unseen volume of texts. During this part of the course, two groups of five students met for three hours every 14 days, and presented selected aspects of their work and related problems. Two days beforehand, they had submitted their written material to the group. At the meetings, the lecturer provided feedback and two students nominated in advance responded to each presentation. For the exam, the students submitted their work in the form of an article of approx. 10 standard

pages. The articles have since been peer-reviewed and will be published as a special edition in an academic journal. At the end of the course, we participated in a conference about the main topics, with keynote speakers and presentations by several of the researchers whose work formed part of the course.

### **Links between classes and exams:**

In their evaluations, the students stated that they had benefited from all parts of the course. In particular, they reported that cluster supervision was an effective way of preparing for the written exam.

### **The benefits of the activity for the students:**

The students expressed particular satisfaction with the added challenges and the opportunities to pursue their own ideas. They also spoke positively about the tools used to acquire a large amount of material in a short time and about using their peers as sounding boards. Several students reported that they felt that the course stood out in that their work was motivated by desire and curiosity rather than duty. Several participants have subsequently applied for PhD scholarships in Denmark and abroad.

### **The benefits in terms of research:**

The student assignments were published in a special edition of the venerable scholarly journal *Kirkehistoriske Samlinger 2017* (Ecclesiastical History Collections, 2017). Overall, the students processed more material than the lecturer would have been capable of in the same period. In addition, the lecturer benefited from using the students as a sounding board to discuss the latest work by her and her colleagues in the field.

### **Strengths and weaknesses of the activity:**

Developments at the universities in recent decades have shifted the focus away from the most talented students and towards fulfilling other externally imposed requirements. This means that there is a pressing need to provide extra challenges and encourage independent work. It was an advantage for both the students and the lecturer that we had the opportunity to experiment with and explore the archives together. The classes felt more like a craft apprenticeship than mere dissemination of material. This method represents a challenge to traditional curricula, which are very much fixed and offer few opportunities for students to experiment. Several of the students remarked that they would have preferred it if the course ran towards the end of their bachelor programme, as it would have helped with their master's programmes later on. We also noted a very clear difference between how male and female students related to being described as 'elite' or 'talented'. Female students were less inclined than males to see and describe themselves in such terms.

**Keywords:** Research-based teaching, nurturing talent, teaching and externally funded research projects