

Report for the International Evaluation 2013 of the PhD School, Faculty of Business and Social Sciences, University of Southern Denmark

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1. Overall conclusions and recommendations

Our overall conclusion is that the PhD School works well within its present framework.

We have evaluated a number of different dimensions of performance and quality. Our comments are organized similar to the Self-evaluation Report. Below we provide detailed comments and recommendations on each aspect of the School's activities.

Two overarching themes are prominent in our assessment.

First, a number of comments revolve around the overall structure of the PhD programs which currently mainly have the characteristics of an "apprenticeship" model rather than a "class-based" model. This is true for most other Danish PhD programs within the social sciences and it has historical antecedents in all scientific fields. Our comments are in many cases two-fold: 1) suggestions for "fine-tuning" the workings of the PhD School within the current framework, and 2) discussions of the limitations that the currently adopted framework presents in order for the PhD School to be able to fully pursue its stated objectives.

The "apprenticeship" model has a number of interrelated implications for pursuing potential economies of scale within and across different academic fields and for admission criteria applied and the actual recruitment channels for the students. We recognize that there are external constraints on the PhD School, most importantly being a moderate-sized and multi-disciplinary school and being subject to public regulation of the PhD study. Still, we suggest that SDU use our observations as inputs to a discussion of potential future structural amendments of the PhD School.

Our second main observation is regarding the level and content of internationalization of the PhD School. This is suggested as a "special focus" but we feel that it is addressed in a fairly limited way by the Self-Evaluation report. We see it as a cross-cutting theme that also relates to the structure of the course program, the structure of the thesis and publication strategy (job market paper versus several smaller papers), students' intentions of going the international job market, SDU junior faculty hiring policy, etc.

In fact, we see clear limits to the level of internationalization that can be expected within the current structure and the amount of support currently offered. Many of our recommendations in this regard are suggestions for "fine-tuning" within the present structure, short of moving to a US graduate school-type structure that has become the international norm in many fields.

The main focus of this evaluation has been to assess and improve the quality of the PhD School's activities. While the Self-evaluation Report emphasizes a number of quantifiable goals (such as the number of publications and completion times) and aspects of control and regular evaluations of the course of study, we would like as a final note to point out that the ultimate objective must be a creative (high quality) research environment that furthers the best science and prepares its talented students for a career grounded in science. It is important not to let any criteria for evaluation become aims in themselves and counterproductive to academic values. We submit our comments and recommendations with the intention to contribute to achieving this goal.

2. Outline of the work process of the evaluation committee

This report was commissioned by the PhD School and the Faculty of Social Science as follows:

“[Evalueringen tilstræber] en vurdering og international benchmarking af kvaliteten af ph.d.-skolens aktiviteter, herunder vejledning, studieforløb, færdiggørelsestider og –procenter, forskningens kvalitet i forhold til internationale standarder - herunder bedømmernes vurderinger af afhandlingernes internationale niveau, internationale aktiviteter under ph.d.-uddannelsen - herunder internationale forskningsnetværk og projekter, udlandsophold. Den internationale evaluering formuleres således, at evalueringen har et konkret udviklingsorienteret sigte.”

We received the Self-Evaluation Report (with associated links) on October 10, 2013.

We requested a teleconference to be able to ask clarifying questions. The teleconference was conducted on December 13, 2013. It included the members of the evaluation committee as well as Jørgen T. Lauridsen and Charlotte Pilgaard Møller from SDU.

A list of the committee's questions in preparation of the teleconference and the written replies provided by SDU is included as appendix A to this report.

Subsequent to the teleconference, we requested further information on PhD graduates' publications and on SDU hiring policy. The material is included in appendix B to this report.

3. Comments regarding the PhD School structure

The current structure is clearly described in the Self-Evaluation Report. It apparently works well in practice. It relies on a separation of decisions regarding hiring, teaching and budgetary matters which rest with the individual departments, and decisions regarding admission, courses and the overall contents of the PhD study which are decided upon by the PhD School or by its subcommittees.

There has been an apparent reallocation of enrolments across fields over recent years. This seems not to have been guided by considerations at the level of the PhD School. We observe that the separation of authority over budgetary and content matters limits the possibilities for reallocating resources across fields in accordance with PhD School priorities.

The affiliation of each student with a particular department seems to work well. Most students spend the majority of their working days at the department. With the exception of students at one department, most feel well assisted by the department. The majority of students is satisfied with their work and study environment. However, about one in four students is not satisfied. It would seem important to uncover the reasons for dissatisfaction among the latter group of students. On a related note, we recommend that the student satisfaction survey be conducted more often than every third year.

Students within the PhD School are dispersed across different SDU campuses and common scientific standards and criteria are implemented by the course committee structure that cuts across campuses within each field. The geographical dispersion does, however, pose a potential limitation to frequent

interactions between students and between students and faculty. In particular, to maximize the potential for the best matches of students and advisors within and across campuses, we recommend that there be clearly defined and widely advertised rules for financial support of travel related to supervision, and also for social gatherings of students across fields and across campuses.

4. Comments regarding the PhD study course

The requirements and overall structure of the PhD study course is – to a large extent – determined by the Ministerial Order. From an international perspective we do believe, however, that a three-year course of study is a severe constraint which greatly accentuates the need for a tightly structured program.

The structure of the “5+3 program” presupposes a “full M.Sc.” within the relevant field, high grades on M.Sc. courses, and a top grade in the M.Sc. thesis. Thus, in terms of student ability, the intake within each field is of high quality and quite homogenous. In terms of the composition of the M.Sc. study curricula of incoming students, this is probably less so.

We believe that securing a common set of core competencies within the field at a sufficiently high level is essential for signaling the quality and contents of the SDU PhD program. In particular, this is required for graduates to be competitive in the international academic job market. We therefore recommend – as an essential part of the PhD School’s admission of each student – that such core competencies are secured when the student’s PhD plan is seen in combination with the advanced and research-oriented courses already taken in during his or her M.Sc. program.

Judging from the list of courses presented in the Self-Evaluation Report, there are few restrictions on the kind of courses that students can include in the 30 ECTS course part of their PhD plan. Many courses on the list seem quite specialized and appear directly related to a student’s thesis topic. Moreover, the rules for approval of courses presently on the PhD School website leave the choice of courses to the student and his/her supervisor. This suggests that the PhD course program (30 ECTS) at present is mainly aimed at providing students with a specialized knowledge within or in close relation to the topic of their dissertation, not at the establishment of core competencies within the field.

A binding three-year constraint and the need to secure core competencies in the field suggest further exploiting the 4+4 option for admission of students already after their first year of M.Sc. studies. This way the final year of their M.Sc. studies can be used for establishing or supplementing students’ core competencies in the field. The Self-evaluation Report leaves us with the impression that the 4+4 admission option is currently not a main focus of the Ph.D. School. We recommend that the PhD School gives more emphasis on the 4+4 option in planning the outlook for the composition of the student body and course portfolios.

Going beyond the present framework, the PhD School should also evaluate the option of moving to a more “cohort” based admission policy that could allow “critical mass” for class-room based teaching of core competencies in the field at the PhD level.

5. Comments regarding application, admission and affiliation

SDU's application and admission process attracts a diverse student body in terms of Danish versus international backgrounds (3/4 versus 1/4) and in terms of SDU versus non-SDU degrees (½ versus ½). Although gender composition is not a focus of the Self-Evaluation Report, we are confident that the PhD School is observant as to any gender bias that may arise from its adopted criteria and procedures for admission.

A notable feature is that the PhD School admits its students throughout the year. While this enhances flexibility on the part of the students, it does limit the potential to provide coherent course programs that have sufficient "critical mass" and provide the students with essential skills at the right stage of their PhD studies. We recommend that the PhD School closely considers the pros and cons of having all-year admission rather than admitting students once or twice a year.

6. Comments regarding PhD supervision

Supervision issues seem to be appropriately considered and evaluated at the SDU. There are explicit rules for approval of supervisors. The qualifications for being supervisor are specified, and they include a PhD Advisor course that all new supervisors must follow. Obligations for main and co-supervisors are also specified. Several initiatives are taken to ensure a systematic follow-up on "norms and expectations for good supervision". In supplementary information in addition to the Self-evaluation report, we have been informed that "the PhD coordinators and/or Heads of Department hold annual conversations with the PhD students, during which (also) satisfaction with supervision is a topic ". According to the evaluation undertaken by the SDU, "the large majorities – more than 80 percent – are satisfied" with supervising.

Overall this is satisfying. However, there are also some worries that the evaluation committee wants to comment on. Although a large majority of the students are satisfied with supervising, there is still a group that is much less satisfied. Although we recognize that this group of students may face individual problems not easily handled by the University, we still think that this should be addressed. There are indications of structural problems (too) since female students and students with independent projects are less satisfied with the availability of their advisors.

There are in particular two things that the evaluation committee recommends SDU to consider.

First, allocations of supervisors are decided very early in the program. Although the subject for the thesis is decided at the beginning, theory, literature and methods may change severely especially during the first year, which makes it difficult to calibrate the best match between student and supervisor. Instead of increasing flexibility, with e.g. a system of preliminary supervisors in the beginning, the SDU emphasizes and encourages contacts with supervisors before entering the program. According to supplementary information, "all 4+4 at present enrolled came from such contacts to subsequent supervisors," and "it is not uncommon that the departments affiliate promising (SDU as well as non-SDU) students as research assistants for 1-3 months in order to prepare project descriptions." The evaluation committee agrees that this may "improve quality and matching", but also recommends SDU to consider potential problems. Not only does this mean that most supervisors are in fact appointed even earlier than what is described in the

Self-evaluation Report. If we understand this correctly, supervisors, as well as students, have to make very strategic decisions already when they decide to write (or supervise) a Master's Thesis. This might also put the student in a position of unhealthy dependence on the supervisor since s/he in fact helped the student to be admitted to the school. Moreover, this may have negative effects on the procedure for admitting students to the program: Informal contacts with supervisors (and indeed supervisor's informal contacts with students) before application could become decisive.

Second, it is not clear in the Self-evaluation Report or in supplementary information how the students' interests are taken care of in case of conflicts. It seems that a change of supervisor, or even to appoint additional co-supervisors, cannot be implemented if the main supervisor disagrees. This might put students in a sensitive position and make it difficult to be explicit about problems e.g. in talks with the coordinator. Moreover, since writing together with supervisors seems to be common at the SDU, it is also important for the supervisors' careers that they can recruit students that continue to write very close to their own research. This might also impact on the relation between students and supervisors.

We recommend SDU to reconsider how and when supervisors are appointed, and how the student's position in this relationship can be strengthened. It is especially important to find out a strategy that reduces the current gender bias where female students are less satisfied with certain aspects of supervision.

7. Comments regarding the PhD plan and evaluations

SDU has a very ambitious system for evaluating how PhD projects progress. As required by the Ministerial Order, the research plan must be handed in no later than two months after admission and revised versions are required as part of the first and the second year evaluations. The process with first and second year evaluations include internal (not the supervisor) as well as external evaluators. There are good reasons to believe that all this contributes to improved quality of theses and the evaluation committee sees no reason for far-reaching changes.

It is emphasized in the Self-evaluation Report how important it is that this procedure not only functions as a control device, but also provides constructive comments and recommendations for improvements. This is indeed important. The evaluation committee encourages SDU to critically evaluate the evaluation process continually, in order to avoid that it becomes an aim in itself. High quality research processes rarely follow ideal-type stages. A myopic, detailed and bureaucratic evaluation may contribute to more PhD projects finishing on time, but it might also impede creative thinking.

Again, SDU seems to be aware of this danger. However, there is no information in the Self-evaluation report on the extent to which students find the evaluation process helpful or mostly constraining. There is only information about the extent students are "satisfied with their PhD study" and if they "think that the work is progressing well" or not. The evaluation committee recommends SDU to find out if students are satisfied because the evaluation process is helpful, or in spite of unnecessary preparations that should otherwise not have been done. Although an effort along these lines is planned for 2015, it should preferably be implemented earlier.

8. Comments regarding dissemination activities and teaching

The amount of dissemination and teaching activities is regulated in the Ministerial Order and by labour agreements. However, the content of the hours is naturally not regulated, and there is always a risk of exploitation when the Head of Departments and/or supervisors see shortsighted needs that can be fulfilled by students. According to supplementary information from SDU, the PhD school can act as a safeguard against exploitation by rejecting a PhD plan if planned disseminations are not "satisfactorily motivated".

However, there are indications that more needs to be done. Although "a large majority" is satisfied with their teaching experience, several are not. There is no information in the Self-evaluation Report or in supplementary information on what kind of help students are offered when teaching, or in choosing or setting up a course to teach.

The evaluation committee recommends SDU to consider seminars or short courses that introduce students to teaching, possibly supplemented with a system of mentorship for young teachers. Measures along this line could not only address the problem of dissatisfaction with teaching, but also help students to become more efficient in preparations and teaching administration, which in the long run would benefit also the quality of their research project.

9. Comments regarding study completion time

The evaluation committee agrees with the wordings in the Self-evaluation Report that the average completion time is satisfying. However, the numbers on completion time are somewhat hard to interpret as they include both 5+3 and 4+4 students. This should be clarified in future versions of the report. Deviations and variations over the years are explained in the report. Only one thesis was rejected (due to plagiarism).

The evaluation committee would also like to emphasize that low completion time is not the most important goal for a university. It is stated in the report that "focus should be maintained at keeping the completion time as low as possible". The evaluation committee would like to add "without risking the loss of quality".

10. Comments regarding PhD course supply

The most important comments regarding the structure of the PhD course program and possible alternatives have been expressed already under "The PhD study course."

Course supply has so far been a weak point as two-thirds of students in the student questionnaire respond that there are not enough courses to choose from. We commend the efforts of SDU within the present structure of the PhD School to further the supply of in-house PhD courses. In developing the SDU course portfolio we would prioritize a limited number of high quality core courses, and a number of special courses where SDU have proper conditions for providing (internationally) high quality teaching. Current efforts to seek more collaboration with other universities in Denmark and abroad should also be furthered.

It is imperative that the overall portfolio of in-house and collaborative courses will ensure that the most essential courses are given at a regular basis to enhance students' planning.

11. Comments regarding internationalization

The PhD School encourages PhD students to establish contacts with relevant international research groups. Many students take longer stays at other research institutions, present research papers at international conferences, and take PhD courses given by other institutions. It is clearly important that the students are given the possibility to benefit from foreign as well as other domestic research groups specializing on relevant topics for their own research. The short-term gain is that the PhD dissertation builds on the best current research. In the long run students will benefit from collaborating with researchers in relevant research areas. Furthermore, international research stays may also make it more attractive to participate in the international job market.

To facilitate research stays, the PhD school offers funding as well as helps the student to establish initial contacts with relevant researchers at the visiting institutions. As reported, a large majority of the students is satisfied with the assistance from the school.

We believe that international stays and participation in conferences are essential for writing a good dissertation and, more generally, in producing excellent research. Research is increasingly becoming specialized and SDU will, as most other institutions, need to take advantage of specialized research groups at other universities. The PhD students are usually dependent on some effort from their supervisor to establish initial contacts and, consequently, the visiting institution reflects both the students' research interests and the supervisors' own contacts or research collaborations. Although the list of recently visited institutions (p. 22) contains a large set of very good institutions, it is difficult to assess to what extent the choices of institutions reflect optimal choices for the students' research interests. A good university to visit should reflect both the possibility to actively take part in a research group, the quality and relevance of the group's research, as well as the set of PhD courses offered by the visiting institution. The optimal timing of a research stay may also vary across students depending on e.g., the need for taking specialized courses or whether they need to get comments on research papers. Although the best choice is very student specific, we encourage the PhD school to facilitate sharing of experiences and knowledge about visiting PhD student opportunities across students and faculty members. This might be particularly important given that the PhD students are located at different campuses.

We would also like to remark that the notion of "internationalization" addressed in the Self-evaluation Report is fairly narrow in view of the fact that it is suggested as a "special focus" by the introduction to the report. We see it as a cross-cutting theme that also relates to the structure of the course program, the structure of the thesis (job market paper versus several smaller papers), students' intentions of going the international job market, junior faculty hiring policy, etc.

12. Comments regarding assessment of the PhD thesis

The Self-evaluation Report outlines the procedure for assessing the quality of the dissertation. This is a careful process which emphasizes the objectivity and academic qualification of the assessment committee. The procedure is in line with similar procedures at other Nordic universities and we do not see good reasons for changing the procedure.

The time frame for the assessment process appears to be regulated by the Ministerial Order (three months until the public defense). Still, we would like to remark that the objectivity and academic qualification of the assessment committee should remain first priority.

13. Comments regarding scientific production

The quality of a PhD program is commonly evaluated based on the placement of PhD candidates (their first jobs) and publication of papers from the PhD dissertations. The Self-evaluation Report describes the number and quality of publications following from the dissertations. This information is supplemented with information from a questionnaire where the evaluators rate the performance of the candidates.

The questionnaire reveals that on average the thesis quality is very satisfactory, but there is scope for improvements. In addition, publication of PhD dissertations is reported. 43 PhD graduates in 2010-2011 produced 170 refereed and 237 non-refereed publications based on their dissertation. These numbers have later been supplemented with a list of publication outlets and co-authors. We find the numbers very impressive. They show that the candidates have been successful in disseminating their research. The quality of the refereed journals is good but few top outlets are included. Although the Self-evaluation Report emphasizes the importance of targeting top journals the candidates have on average a large set of publications but very few top publications.

We believe that Self-evaluation Report is right about emphasizing publication in top journals. Furthermore, we believe that an implication of this orientation towards top journals should be that at least the best candidates should focus their efforts on a job-market paper that aims for top journals. This is in line with the practice in the best European universities and will clearly help the PhD candidates in the international job market.

Given that the PhD program is rather short compared to many foreign institutions, we suggest that SDU considers recruiting a few of the most promising candidates for a one-year post doc position and thereby allow the candidates to "polish" their best work for the best journals. This should be contingent on completion of the PhD thesis (not a prolongation of the PhD period). A successful publication in a top journal will make a candidate significantly more attractive in the international job market. We believe that the School's support to candidates applying for post.doc grants from the national research council is well directed. There are also post doc grants available from EU to promising candidates. Usually, these application procedures are rather demanding and the students may need considerable support from their home institutions.

14. Comments regarding career coaching and subsequent employment

PhD candidates have highly specialized skills and it is frequently challenging to find the right job match. To support their job market candidates SDU offers individual career coaching through a Career Centre, and courses through their HR department, and recently a two-day seminar "Building a career with a PhD degree." SDU is successful in placing a significant fraction of their candidates in good non-university jobs.

The quality of placement of PhD candidates should be seen as a success criterion of any PhD program. Recently many top European universities are increasing their effort in this regard. Placement efforts should also be considered as part of SDU's internalization strategy and as more students consider the international job market more assistance will be needed. Successful international job-placement will also help in recruiting top foreign PhD students as well as recruitment of assistant professors from the international job market.

We recommend SDU to consider appointing one of its faculty members as a placement officer with particular responsibilities for ensuring that the candidates get information about the job market and necessary support (e.g. putting together a job-market package including reference letters). PhD students need help to promote their general qualifications from the course program and their specific competences acquired while working on the thesis. In addition, a placement officer can serve as a hub for collecting academic reference letters and distributing the letters to the institutions where a candidate applies for positions.

Webpages where the job-market candidates present themselves and their research projects are also recommended tools for reaching potential employers.