

The PhD School, Faculty of Business and Social Sciences, University of Southern Denmark

Action plan (DRAFT)

Based on the report for the International Evaluation
of the PhD School



February 2014

Future focus points for quality improvement

The following recommendations for quality improvement are extracted from the report of the international evaluation committee (IEC) and are, for matter of completeness, supplemented with actions suggested during the internal discussion of the self evaluation report. To facilitate overview, the suggestions are grouped along the headlines of the self evaluation report; a structure which was also adopted by the IEC.

The PhD School Structure

- While a majority of PhD students is satisfied with their work and study environment, around one in four is less or not satisfied. It is important that future satisfaction surveys be more detailed on this matter. Furthermore, it is desirable to get more frequent information from PhD students on their satisfaction. In the short term, we will implement such questions in the end of study in the form of questionnaires which we plan to introduce for all students. This will give the PhD School a continuous flow of information to act on. Second, it will be considered whether the satisfaction survey should run more frequent than the present every 3rd year.
- Given the geographical dispersion of the PhD School, actions are needed to support optimal interaction among PhD students from dispersed environments as well as optimal matching of supervisors and PhD students. Specifically, the financial opportunities for reimbursement of travel expenditures for supervision and social activities must be explicated.
- Improved network building for PhD students at the University of Southern Denmark as well as across Danish universities and internationally must be initiated and supported.

The PhD study course and course supply

- The supply of PhD courses from the PhD School appears heterogeneous and specialized. To ensure a common high standard of the PhD graduates, attention must be paid to streamlining of the individual PhD student's study course. This streamlining takes place at the approval of the PhD plan and during the 1st and 2nd year evaluations and must ensure accordance between the course portfolio, the area of the study, the prior qualifications of the student, and the PhD project.
 - o Furthermore, action must be taken to ensure that all PhD students follow some high quality core courses within their area and at the right stage of study. Assisted by the

- course committees for the areas, we will assess for each area to which extent such courses are present with a satisfactory frequency at SDU or other universities. If necessary, action will be taken to improve the supply, either by SDU courses or by courses during consortia.
- To ensure critical mass for a coordinated supply of core courses, it must be considered to which extent coordinated intake of PhD students once/twice a year can be implemented. While this can hardly be done for externally funded projects PhDs and Industrial PhDs, the opportunity of doing so for the internally financed PhDs will be discussed with the relevant parties (Dean/Heads of Departments).
 - Generally, given that two-third of the PhD students are less satisfied with the availability of courses to choose from, an increase in the number of PhD course activities must be achieved. This holds for the PhD School's own supply as well as for the supply in consortia and information about abroad courses.
 - The quality of the individual courses held by the PhD School will be assessed through a formal evaluation questionnaire.
- The 4+4 option presents many advantages, and the number of such students must be increased. However, to ensure a successful implementation of this, certain problems must be addressed. Especially, requests are put on the supervisors to ascertain a proper training of these students to compensate for their lack of the fifth study year and in particular the lack of a M.Sc. thesis writing training. These matters will be raised at the PhD School level as well as through SDU's PhD Board.

Application, admission and affiliation

- While the balance of internal versus external and Danish versus international students appears adequate, the gender balance is less so, given that the distribution of male and female PhD students is 6 to 4, and given that the drop-out risk is around 50 percent higher for female than for male. Specifically, we will set up a taskforce/committee to discuss gender problems at the PhD study and to come up with a report on this matter, including possible recommendations for actions.
- Mentors for new PhD students are implemented at some departments and must be implemented at all departments.

- Perceptions of ‘often feeling stressed’ were found among 15 percent of the PhD students. This figure is not very different from what you find in other groups (assistant professors, professors, etc.), but it is still an important issue that calls for monitoring and action.
 - o As part of the Faculty of Business and Social Sciences’ strategy on improving the well-being of its employees, all employees, including PhD students, will be offered coaching sessions in small groups or individually. A reputable private coaching firm will offer this service along with general feed-back to management.

PhD supervision

- The mandatory PhD supervisor course for new supervisors is a genuine tool for quality improvements and is commended by participants as well as the IEC report. During the coming year, it will be ascertained that all active supervisors participate in this course, if they did not already do so.
- While the early affiliation of supervisors presents many advantages, it may also present drawbacks. Given that the PhD students are at a very early stage connected to their supervisors (some are in practice even so during their Master’s study), an unhealthy dependence of the student on the supervisor may occur and render the matching of student and supervisor less superior. Thus, the matching of students and supervisors needs assessment throughout the study course. This may conveniently be assessed at the department level during the MUS conversation, which is typically held by the PhD coordinator or the Head of Department. For example, the first half of the MUS conversation could include the principal supervisor and the PhD student jointly.
- The rights of the PhD student as opposed to the supervisor in conflict situations, including the formal complaint opportunities, must be explicitly stated.
- The satisfaction survey revealed that many PhD students are less satisfied with the supervision and support related to their teaching activities. Indeed, it is important that the PhD students get good experiences from these. Short courses and mentor systems might equip the PhD students for teaching.
- A PhD School level folder about PhD supervision will be prepared, which can supplement the PhD policy statements specified at the departments and the PhD supervisor courses.
- Quality insurance efforts specifically targeted to PhD supervisors with several years of experience will be developed and implemented in cooperation with the Human Resource Office at SDU and will be launched in 2014.

PhD plans and evaluations

- The 1st and 2nd year evaluations are to some extent considered to be mainly control mechanisms. While they should indeed serve this purpose, it is of course important that they also serve as opportunities for constructive recommendations and comments to the PhD student. This must be recognized by the PhD student when preparing written material for the evaluations as well as by the evaluators when preparing participation in the seminars, and it must be explicitly reflected by their written statement.
 - o Future user satisfaction surveys and end of study questionnaires must include question(s) regarding experience with evaluations.
 - o A brief three-part talk between the student, the supervisor and the PhD coordinator after the evaluation could support the above.

Completion time

- While it is an ultimate target to keep completion time as low as possible without risking the loss of quality, attention must also be paid to study courses, where causes beyond the students control (sickness, family problems, stress, data delivery problems, supervisor shortcomings, etc.) cause delays. Genuine responsiveness and support must be shown in such situations.

Internationalization

- The timing and selection of institution for abroad stay is largely left for the PhD student and the supervisor to decide, and no formal sharing of experiences and knowledge is facilitated. While the timing can be addressed by the PhD School in connection to approval of the PhD plan, an evaluation effort is needed to accumulate knowledge. Specifically, experiences with environment shift must be detailed in future satisfaction surveys as well as end of study questionnaires.
 - o A web-based guide regarding research stays abroad, which include input from elder PhD students as well as senior fellows from different departments sharing their experiences and knowledge, must be facilitated. The guide must be based on survey knowledge and conveniently updated.
- Career development support must explicitly include international considerations (presentation to international job market, job market paper, etc.).
- International recruitment must be supported

- Including an improved service level for international PhD students. Integration of this service by establishment of a joint International Help Desk at SDU.
- Increased focus on international doctoral research cooperation. Guidelines for entering international doctoral research cooperation and templates for agreements on e.g. joint/dual degree projects will be launched during 2014.

Assessment of PhD thesis

- While the procedure for evaluation of internal theses appears satisfactory, a more careful procedure for taking “theses from the street” (application for handing in a PhD thesis without prior enrolment on the PhD study) must be exerted. Specifically, the present evaluation by the course committees must be supplemented with an internal peer reading of the thesis proposal when needed.

Scientific production

- The quantity of scientific production subsequent to the PhD study is impressive, and the number and quality of refereed journals is good. However, relatively few top outlets are represented. Effort must be done to stimulate more ambitious publication strategies for the best PhD students. This is in accordance with an increased stimulation of job market paper production.
 - However, we must be aware that motivations and strategies behind publication may vary. For some courses (including some Industrial PhDs) quick publication in good journals may be prioritized rather than long term top journal publications. Likewise, in some fields the career and scientific impact opportunities are better by writing a monograph in English or Danish. Such decisions should be fully respected, but they must be based on explicit considerations from the student, the supervisor and other relevant parties regarding the optimal outlet of the student’s research.
- The 3-4 years time span of a PhD study course is relatively narrow as compared to the time needed for genuine top level publication, which may span 5-6 or more years. Thus, the good students, who aim for such publication, must be supported in searching for Post doc financing from the Research Councils or other funding opportunities.

Career coaching and subsequent employment

- The career coaching presently offered from SDU must be further improved, especially for PhD graduates, for whom it is somewhat unfocused.

- Collaboration with SDUE and other parties, who can promote PhD graduates' contacts to future occupation opportunities, must be further developed.
- Similar to other leading universities, SDU must stimulate PhD graduates' international job market search. PhD graduates must be offered professional help in putting together their international job market package (CV, application, reference letters, job market paper, home page, etc.)
- Too little is known about subsequent careers of PhD graduates from SDU. While this is in common with the situation regarding M.Sc. as well as B.Sc. and other graduates, a joint initiative must be taken at SDU level with respect to alumni follow-up. Aarhus University is in front on this; we should not be second to them.

Recruitment

- In order to ensure retention of the best applicants to PhD position calls, the shortest possible timing from deadline to decision must be ensured. Specifically, the evaluation time in the course committees must be reduced and should only in specific cases exceed one month.
- PhD position calls must ensure the broadest possible recruitment base. This implies that calls should be set up internationally whenever possible and announced in ambitious outlets.
 - o Exceptions in the form of Danish calls and / or internal announcements may occasionally be convenient, but should be carefully motivated.

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