

International Evaluation of the Graduate School, Arts Aarhus University | 2021

Introduction

With reference to the Ministerial Order no 172 of 27 January 2018 (The University Act) §14, 5, Aarhus University is evaluating its graduate schools in 2021. An International Assessment Panel (IAP) was formed to evaluate the Graduate School, Arts (GSA). The members are Head of Department Per Krogh Hansen (University of Southern Denmark, Chair), Prof. Derval Tubridy (Goldsmiths, University of London) and Prof. Emeritus Trygve Wyller (University of Oslo).

The Graduate School, Arts provided the panel with a self-evaluation report (37 pages), a 2020 report on employment of the PhD students after graduation (18 pages, in Danish), and a 2021 report on the quality in the PhD process based on a student survey (42 pages). The panel requested further data on the students' progress and delays and received detailed information and explanation from the GSA administration. Furthermore, IAP were given access to a large sample of PhD dissertations, examined a broad range of yearly reports, the 2015 international evaluation and other documents on the university's website.

It is the panel's clear understanding that it was given all necessary information to undertake the requested evaluation. Furthermore, the helpfulness the panel was met with from the GSA administrators deserves praise.

The IAP were invited to visit the university from 17th to 20th September 2021 to conduct interviews with relevant stakeholders: these comprised senior leaders and management, administrators, faculty and PhD students. GSA planned the visit and presented IAP with a draft program well in advance and responded positively to the panel's requests for adjustments. The programme was well planned and included time for reflection and discussion for the IAP, in group as well as individually. The interviews and discussions took place in a warm, open and honest atmosphere.

The IAP are fully satisfied with all aspects of the information gathering for the present report.

General observations

With approximately 250 enrolled students, GSA is the largest Arts and Humanities graduate school in Denmark, and most likely also in the Nordic countries. The school is organised in eight interdisciplinary programmes that cover the wide research interests of the Faculty of Arts.

The IAP is impressed by how the GSA leadership, the Head of Schools and the Dean aim at developing a graduate school based on strong ambitions of excellence and interdisciplinarity within the context of a plurality of disciplines in the broader area of the Faculty of Arts. The choice of an obvious centralized organisation to run the GSA is explicitly based on the presupposition that competitive, fair and high-quality research is facilitated by an organization that reduces conflicts of interest on a lower level in the organisation. The IAP recognises the vital role that the GSA plays in ensuring high quality research in dynamic and vibrant research environment given the high number of PhD students and the parallel high number of disciplines and sub-areas that need to be chaired and coordinated from a leadership level, if the

ambition of a high-quality interdisciplinary GSA shall be fulfilled. The IAP finds this ambition significant and important and, in large, fulfilled.

The recommendations and proposals following below are meant to improve and develop the GSA in such a way that the strong interdisciplinary ambition can still be kept even if there are some changes in the organisation.

Organisation and administration

The GSA is run efficiently and with due care for effective processes that support and sustain excellence in doctoral research training. The IAP focused its examination on an analysis of the relationship between the different structures that make up the environment in which the PhD student operates with a view to evaluating the lines of communication through which the student and the staff members with which s/he engages.

The GSA is organised with a senior leader (Head of School/Vice Dean) who reports to the Dean and is part of the faculty's management group, and eight programme directors are appointed by the Head of School and are part of the Graduate School's management group. The IAP notes that a clear diagram of how the Graduate School relates to Schools (Institutes), Programmes and Departments would be welcome. The GSA is supported by an efficient and informed set of professional staff who are fully engaged with each student's care, wellbeing and progress. It is evident to the IAP that the quality of the GSA administration is a key element of the successful experience of the PhD student. The GSA administration play a key role in supporting the student's wellbeing and development, and their access to vital services across the university.

The GSA has a strategic interest in structuring its 8 PhD programmes across a number of departments. This structure enhances interdisciplinarity and ensures cross-fertilisation of ideas through participation in formal and non-formal research opportunities. In its discussion, the IAP heard about further avenues for inter- and multi-disciplinary research.

Recommendation:

- Facilitate research and networking across other Graduate Schools of the University of Aarhus to develop new areas of research such as the Medical Humanities, Environmental Humanities, and Ethics and New Technologies. This could be achieved by developing joint specialist courses and research seminars across Graduate Schools of the University of Aarhus, across the network of Danish Universities and with International Partners.
- Develop a clear diagram of the interrelations and lines of communication and report across all areas of PhD study under the remit of the GSA

PhD Committee

The PhD committee is a statutory Council given by Ministerial Order (The Danish (Consolidation) Act on Universities (the University Act)). Members of this council are elected (faculty every 3 years, students every year). A chair is elected from the faculty members and a deputy chair from the student members. The Head of the Graduate School participates as observer. Formally the committee is charged with securing the quality of the courses offered the graduate students, they have the mandate to propose assessment committees for dissertations and shall be heard in relation to changes of the PhD-guidelines at the university. In the meeting with the committee, the IAP got a good impression of an engaged and collaborative committee with equal participation and representation from students and faculty. In addition to fulfilling its formal obligations with care, efficiency, and with due regard to the regulatory framework,

the PhD Committee of the GSA takes initiative to complete projects that enhance the GSA's understanding of the student experience. One example is a project initiated by the PhD student members of the committee who gathered testimonials from the PhD students during the COVID 19-lockdown on their work situation and compiled a report for the GSA.

Even though the student members of the committee are appointed for one year, they were well informed of their role, responsibilities and rights as committee members. However, they reported finding the task of evaluating courses rather overwhelming. The administrators of GSA informed IAP that whereas there is a high interest among the faculty to have a seat on the committee, it is more difficult to encourage students to run for election.

Recommendation:

- Streamline the course approval and evaluation process for the PhD Committee. Consider ensuring that the detailed data sent to the PhD committee is accompanied by a brief summary of key elements of the data.
- Promote the value of sitting on the PhD Committee to PhD students across the PhD programmes in terms of networking, transferable skills and employability.

Directors of Programmes

The Directors of each of the 8 PhD programmes play a key role in ensuring a vibrant research environment, a diverse and relevant set of courses, and the timely progression and completion of the PhD candidate's study. The Directors do this through regular research seminars, writing workshops, and the progress evaluation of students. The Directors of the PhD programmes are fully invested in their role and operate at a very high standard, but also expressed concerns about the workload compared to the working hours granted. Due to the limited hours allowed for the role, the IAP noted that progression evaluation was confined to the review of data on the PhD planner. Also, the IAP were made aware of some differences in the way that Directors of Programmes were appointed.

Recommendation:

- Instituting a qualitative as well as quantitative means of evaluating student progression by having annual meetings with the PhD candidate and the PhD supervisor to include the Director of Programme and another Senior academic member of staff to discuss progress and identify challenges at an early stage.
- Due to the central role given to the Director of Programme, the IAP considers it relevant to increase the number of hours compensated. This increased numbers of hours should be prioritized to academic follow-up of the doctoral students.
- Institute a clear and transparent method of application (rather than appointment) for the position of Director of PhD Programme open to all suitably qualified academic staff members to ensure engagement.

Internationalisation

The IAP considers that international engagement is a core value of the Graduate School. This is facilitated in two primary ways: the admission of international students as PhD candidates, and the establishment of international networks to facilitate study abroad for doctoral candidates.

The Graduate School has been successful in establishing and maintaining such networks such as the collaboration with the White Rose Doctoral Training Partnership (Universities of Leeds, York and Coventry in the U.K.), and is aware of the need to further enhance recruitment of international students. Some visiting international graduate students are not registered by the GSA but make their own arrangements as visiting scholars with the departments, research groups or centres.

Given the rigorous standard of the application process the IAP considers that additional support could be given to prospective international applicants as they develop their applications. In addition, the IAP discussed how the studentship award system mitigates against applicants developing exploratory discussion with Aarhus university researchers that are experts in the field, and who can encourage a potential application to prepare an appropriate research proposal and application. Another concern is how the 4+4 model mitigates against the recruitment of international students particularly with regard to governmental regulations concerning the language in which courses are delivered on MA level.

Recommendation:

- Provide on-line virtual advice and preparation seminars for international students who intend to apply to the Graduate School of Arts.
- Facilitate researchers and research groups to recruit international candidates through their networks.
- Register and include international visiting PhD-students in the school's activities more explicitly, both for the sake of statistics and for network-establishment.

Enrolment

According to the self-evaluation, the “PhD programme director and the head of the Graduate School are the only parties who are able to enrol students, approve study plans or expel students for academic reasons following a three months trial period as described in the ministerial order §10,2.”

The funds for the PhD education at Arts are centralized, and the GSA has an annual budget of DKK 50 million. This means that it is the GSA that grants salary funds to the department's PhD staff. The decision regarding who will be appointed is made by the Dean on behalf of the recommendations of the Head of GSA and the programme directors. This process ensures that the GSA recruits PhD students of a very high standard and that the GSA has a direct role in ensuring quality across all programmes delivered by the school. Furthermore, it secures the interdisciplinary ambition. The IAP notes a number of key observations:

Heads of Departments and Heads of Schools (institutes) are not part of the hiring process. In the present system it is not possible for the departments directly to use the PhD-position as an option for recruitment to specific fields where they are short of competences or in a strategic perspective.

Allocating all internal funding to the Graduate School also excludes the departments from cooperation on shared PhD-positions with the other faculties at the university and thereby diminishes the possibilities for entering in interdisciplinary fields outside the faculty (e.g. medical humanities).

Not involving the Heads of Departments/Schools in the final decision regarding which project/candidate to promote is at the risk of different kinds of mismatch. One example of this is where the project/candidate might fit into the general research frame of the department, but not into the specific interests of academic staff of a particular department. This might be one of the sources for the sense of ‘academic loneliness’

that is expressed by some students in the student survey. Another mismatch happens when the doctoral student does not fit into the department strategy as a whole. That might lead to lack of trust between department and the GSA system

Recommendation:

- Support closer cooperation with the schools and/ or departments to ensure that departments are given the opportunity to put forward suggestions for the recruitment of PhD candidates to specific research areas and competencies.

Progress management

The PhD Planner is an effective tool in ensuring visibility of progression data across all levels of the PhD programme from the Head of the Graduate School to the PhD student. It is a vital tool to enable the Directors of PhD programmes to monitor the progress of students on their programmes. However, the IAP would like to see supervisors move from a transactional engagement with the planner to considering it as a tool to support the development and timely completion of the PhD. In addition, the IAP were given to understand that the PhD Planner is not set up to account for PhD students on the 4+4 model, requiring 1st year students who are preparing their Master's dissertation to also submit a PhD plan.

Recommendation:

- Enhance the integration of the PhD Planner into the autonomous development of the student. Through training of PhD Supervisors develop an understanding of the PhD planner as a useful timekeeping tool that complements the vital developmental discussions between supervisor and doctoral student.
- Mitigate the doctoral student's sense of responding to the targets provided by the PhD planner, and the transactional model currently in operation, to a collaborative one based on personal engagement, with the PhD planner as a support.
- Adapt the PhD planner to account for the distinctive framework of the 4+4 Phd programme.

PhD Courses

The IAP considers that the provision of courses by the PhD programmes approved by the Graduate School is flexible and responsive to student's needs and contributes to a vibrant and dynamic research environment. The Graduate School, Arts provides a broad range of courses for doctoral students comprising mandatory and optional courses. The mandatory courses provide training on fundamental skills across disciplines such as supervision and university teaching. Additional research specific courses are provided by the programmes. Students are encouraged to organise or access courses that respond to specific research needs, and these courses are funded by the Graduate School. The students report satisfaction in their access to courses and the value that these courses have on their progress and development. In general all courses need to be at a level higher than Masters. The Graduate School, Arts allows students to take Master's level courses only in specially approved circumstances. In discussion with students it was evident that there was some uncertainty as to the process of getting approval to take a Master's course at doctoral level. Students can opt to gain ECTS by engaging in additional activities such as courses provided by external bodies and international providers with ECTS allocation being recommended

by the primary supervisor. The courses provided by the Graduate School of Arts are approved by the PhD committee, and that committee reviews the course evaluation material from each course annually.

Recommendation:

- Review mandatory courses to ensure an updated quality and to enhance broad responsiveness to student employability.
- Facilitate more transparent access to the approval of Masters level courses for PhD study in special circumstances.

Supervision

Senior faculty are offered a course in PhD supervision when they are appointed as supervisors. The course is mandatory for new supervisors.

The supervisors the IAP interviewed all showed awareness of the complex role they have in relation to the PhD students, being both the senior researcher accommodating the students intellectual development and being the first point of contact for the PhD student for issues of social and mental health. It was evident that supervisors were aware of the different challenges related to international PhD students coming from research cultures very different from the Danish one. However, this awareness seemed to have been gained through experience rather than being acquired through formal training. Co-supervision is an increasingly important element of doctoral training. Co-supervision works well at the GSA, however increased communication between primary supervisor and co-supervisor could be further enhanced to support the student experience and progression.

Recommendation:

- Institute a rolling 5 year cycle of training to ensure that supervisors are updated on regulatory changes and aware of the most recent professional developments on excellence in PhD supervision delivery and on the relation between the supervisor and the supervisee.
- Develop a network of activities for PhD supervisors to enhance peer to peer support and knowledge sharing.
- Support supervisors by ensuring that they are aware of the portfolio of support services available to PhD students to enhance their wellbeing and mental health.
- Strengthen the cooperation between primary and co-supervisors to ensure that the co-supervisor is fully apprised of the doctoral student's development.

Teaching and knowledge dissemination

Both PhD students and their supervisors acknowledge the importance of gaining teaching experience as part of the doctoral education. The planning of the teaching obligations are part of the PhD plan that are finalized within the first three months of enrolment. The IAP had initial concerns on the teaching and dissemination workload (840 hours defined by the Collective Agreement) but met no objections from students and supervisors. This we see as sign of successful integration of the teaching obligations into the PhD students project plan.

The methods by which teaching and dissemination activities are allocated to students vary across projects, for example in the case of PhD students who due to the interdisciplinary aspect of their projects

are working across department borders, supervisors with externally funded projects, and international PhD students. The IAP identified some variance in the systems by which teaching was allocated to students.

Recommendation:

- Strengthen the process to ensure that PhD students' teaching obligations are planned in cooperation with the supervisor and the Head of Department and facilitated by the administrative staff.

Conclusion

The IAP is very impressed by the high quality of doctoral training provided by the GSA and of its ambition to further develop excellence and quality in all areas of research. To support and enhance the mission of the GSA we have presented a number of recommendations with a view to strengthening the strategic development of the school and the quality of provision across all programmes.

A key observation of the IAP in this report concerns the relation between the need to achieve interdisciplinarity by a specific kind of top down organization on the one hand, and what we see as a need to improve the role of the department level in the future development of academic cooperation and mutual exchanges within the GSA as a whole. The IAP is fully aware of the complexity of chairing and developing the GSA, given its significant position as the largest PhD graduate school for humanities in the Nordic region. The IAP considers the research environment on the department level to be crucial, both for the academic and the social well-being of the doctoral student, and also for the development of high quality research. The recommendations we have given in this context are meant to be loyal to the ambition of interdisciplinarity and at the same time strengthening the role of the department in the organisational structure of PhD provision.

We, the IAP, would like to close this report by expressing our gratitude for the opportunity we were given to have insight in the GSA. The IAP sincerely appreciates the preparation for, and reception during, our site visit. The different group of staff, faculty and administration we met all included us in open and concrete dialogue on the various issues necessary to arrive at the full, critical overview of the GSA.

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