

Closure of the PhD Administration – a commentary

First of all, we would like to acknowledge that a thorough and well-prepared report has been presented. The report clearly recognizes the significant work carried out by the PhD administration and highlights the many important functions it performs for PhD students and the broader academic environment. We appreciate that this work has been documented and acknowledged.

However, it is precisely because the report highlights the value of the current administration that we find it concerning that the proposed decision still points toward closing this unit. Many of us, along with colleagues across the institution, find it alarming to consider shutting down a dedicated administrative body that plays such a central role in supporting the well-being and everyday functioning of PhD students.

PhD students occupy a very particular position within the university. They are both employees and students, and their employment conditions are inherently temporary and often precarious. The administration of PhD programs must therefore address employment conditions, educational regulations, and research progression simultaneously. This includes, among other things, the administration of PhD plans, midterm evaluations, the management of supervisory relationships and course requirements, as well as the coordination of assessment committees and dissertation procedures. It also encompasses the administration of international research stays, collaboration agreements with partner universities, and the establishment of joint degrees, including coordination between partner universities' regulations and educational structures. PhD programs thus operate within an institutional intersection of employment, doctoral education, and research, and their administration must therefore be able to address all three dimensions in an integrated manner.

Because of the dual nature of PhD programs, their needs and circumstances differ significantly from those of other academic staff (VIP). We are therefore concerned about the suggestion that PhD students should be handled within the same administrative structures as other academic employees. Their situations are simply not comparable. If administrative responsibilities are increasingly consolidated within a general HR structure, there is a risk that the PhD program will primarily be approached as an employment relationship at the expense of the specific requirements of doctoral education. HR functions are naturally oriented toward recruitment processes, contracts, and compliance. Doctoral education, however, also requires sustained attention to research progression, supervisory relationships, and academic quality. The issue is therefore not one of administrative competence, but rather how organizational placement best supports the PhD program as a whole.

In addition, issues such as sick leave, parental leave, contract extensions, funding structures, and study progress all have unique implications for PhD students. These matters are closely tied to the fixed-term nature of their employment and the strict timelines of their research programs. Navigating these situations requires a high level of specialized knowledge and sensitivity to the particular vulnerabilities PhD students

face. We worry that this nuance could be lost if responsibility is absorbed into broader administrative structures that primarily serve permanent academic staff.

We also feel that the interpretation of the KiP report may be somewhat misaligned in this context. The KiP report emphasized concerns about PhD students' well-being and highlighted that many already feel a significant level of pressure and responsibility. However, the proposed administrative restructuring could risk increasing this burden. From the outside, it may appear that PhD students would now need to take on more responsibility for navigating administrative processes themselves, which could add additional stress to an already demanding period of their careers.

Another concern relates to the potential creation of a knowledge gap. The current PhD administration holds a significant amount of specialized institutional knowledge regarding regulations, best practices, and the specific challenges faced by PhD students. If this administrative structure is dissolved, we need a clear and credible plan for how this expertise will be transferred and preserved. Without careful knowledge transfer, there is a real risk that valuable experience and competence will be lost, which could negatively affect both current and future PhD students. At the same time, the proposed organizational model may introduce additional institutional interfaces in the handling of PhD cases. If the employment dimension is managed within HR while research- and education-related functions are placed elsewhere within the administrative structure, cases may increasingly move across multiple units. Such arrangements can lead to longer processing times and reduced flexibility, as several administrative actors must coordinate the handling of individual cases. The resulting paradox is that a reform intended to streamline administration may, in practice, increase organizational complexity.

These dynamics become particularly apparent in the personnel-related legal situations that may arise in PhD program. PhD employment frequently involves cases in which employment-related and educational considerations are closely intertwined. For instance, insufficient progress in a PhD plan may have employment implications, just as conflicts within supervisory relationships may affect both the working environment and the educational trajectory. Similarly, illness, parental leave, or extended research stays abroad may require simultaneous adjustments to both employment conditions and the timeline of the PhD program. In such situations, cases cannot be treated as ordinary HR matters, because the employment relationship is contingent upon conditions within the doctoral program. Addressing these situations therefore requires a combination of personnel-legal expertise and in-depth knowledge of the regulations, practices, and progression structures governing doctoral education. In this respect, the PhD administration also performs a form of institutional risk management. Through accumulated experience and detailed knowledge of both regulatory frameworks and institutional practices, it contributes to preventing procedural errors and ensuring the appropriate handling of complex PhD cases. Thus, the PhD administration forms part of the university's institutional capacity to conduct doctoral education on a professionally and legally sound basis.

We are also concerned about the potential international implications of this decision. PhD schools are often evaluated globally not only on research output but also on how well they support their doctoral candidates - through onboarding, administration, career support, and overall PhD environment. If Aarhus University signals that it no longer maintains a dedicated PhD administrative structure, this could raise questions externally about the level of institutional support provided to doctoral researchers. In an increasingly competitive international landscape for attracting strong PhD candidates, such signals matter.

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that PhD programs vary considerably across academic fields. Although doctoral education is regulated by common national frameworks and overarching institutional rules, its practical implementation differs across disciplines and research traditions. This variation means that PhD administration does not simply manage standardized procedures, but must also adapt administrative processes to the specific circumstances of individual PhD projects and their research environments. Doing so often requires detailed familiarity with disciplinary practices and working methods, as well as an understanding of the administrative implications that different forms of research activity may have for the structure and progression of PhD programs.

In addition, we would like clarification regarding the PhD application and recruitment processes. The current system involves substantial coordination and administrative support. It is not entirely clear how these processes will be managed under the proposed changes and whether the quality, transparency, and efficiency of these processes can be maintained.

Overall, we want to raise our concerns in regard to the preliminary decision of closing down the designated PhD Administration in a merger as we find it crucial to ensure that any restructuring carefully safeguards the support structures that PhD students rely on. In light of these considerations, it may therefore be useful to clarify how the faculty intends to ensure that PhD programs can continue to be managed as coherent processes in which employment-related, educational, and research-related considerations remain closely interconnected. Given their unique position within the university, we believe it is essential that their administrative support remains specialized, accessible, and sensitive to their particular needs.

- On behalf of the PhD representatives of the PhD committee