

11 November 2012

Final report from the international evaluation panel
Faculty of the Humanities, Copenhagen University

Introduction

The panel has had access to a wide variety of documentation – including statistics, internal memoranda, studies, evaluations and regulations of PhD education at the Faculty of Humanities. From the 30. – 31. October the panel visited the Faculty of Humanities and enjoyed generous access to interviews with a number of stakeholders at the Faculty – among others some PhD coordinators, selected members of the PhD committee, some of the heads of department, the PhD administration, the dean and the head of the PhD school as well as four representatives from the PhD students. The programme is attached as appendix 1.

The scope of recommendations does not include comments on or recommendations with regard to the overall organisational structure of the faculty and departments as such. The recommendations offered are based on the existing organisational framework of faculty and departments.

The evaluation panel would like to bring to attention that some of the studies, evaluations and reports made available to the panel reflect institutional forms and practices in the PhD education which has since been changed. It should especially be noted that the Faculty of Humanities recently, by decision within few months before the evaluation, has reorganized the structure of its PhD programme, and that the future effects of this restructuring of course cannot be documented at the time of this evaluation. The aims and expected outcomes of the reorganization and of the new policies that has been introduced, have, however, as far as possible, been considered by the panel when formulating its recommendations.

The panel acknowledges that the Faculty of Humanities is restricted in its possible policies and administrative practices by national legislation and other binding regulations. It has taken note of the efforts of the University of Copenhagen, within the framework of Universities Denmark, to engage in a dialogue with the government and legislators about more flexible legal and regulatory frameworks for PhD education.

1. Criteria for enrolment and employment of PhD students

- Do the criteria for enrolment and employment ensure that that the best qualified applicants and applicants who are most likely to complete their PhD studies are enrolled at the PhD School?

The panel finds that there seem to be sound recruitment policies and evaluation practices in place with regard to calls for faculty stipends. It notes that the time span from the call to the actual enrolment of the selected candidates does seem to be fairly long and that there might be a risk that some, especially international, candidates in the meantime accept offers from other universities, research institutions or from non-academic employers. The panel understands that PhD co-ordinators up to now have taken part in, and in the future might continue to take part in, the work of selection committees. The members of the panel find that it is valuable for the quality of the selection procedure that knowledge about the overall performance of the department's or discipline's PhD students is included among the evaluators in the selection committee. It is equally important that evaluation criteria and admission requirements are consistent across departments and correspond to faculty and PhD School policies.

Recommendation 1:

That the Faculty of Humanities explore the possibilities for simplifying the recruitment process and/or of shortening the time from the call to enrolment.

Recommendation 2:

That the PhD co-ordinators of the departments generally be included in the work of selection committees and that they, under the leadership of the head of the PhD School, facilitate the exchange of information about and co-ordination of evaluation criteria and admission requirements.

2. PhD supervision

- Does PhD supervision at the Faculty of Humanities function in a satisfactory manner?
- Do PhD supervisors have the necessary qualifications to supervise the PhD process?
- Is the quality of PhD supervision and PhD supervisors assessed and ensured?

The interviews with stakeholders gave panel members the impression that, generally, there was widespread satisfaction with the supervision. The panel did, however, note that there is a need for further clarification especially of the future role of departmental PhD co-ordinators in relation to supervision in general and to approval of PhD plans and progress reports in particular. In the documentation available to the panel the members noted that past evaluations contained points of criticism, and that different perceptions of the nature of PhD education and supervision still exist. Senior faculty interviewed in some instances remarked on the "schoolification" of the PhD level and objected to the term "training". Many said that PhD students were and should be treated as colleagues. The panel was satisfied to see the PhD students integrated in the academic life of departments in an inclusive and respectful manner. However, members also felt a need to caution that PhD students, although they might be perceived as colleagues by other academic staff, in fact are on temporary contracts and that their work and research progress is subject to review at regular intervals by supervisors and senior faculty.

The self-assessment report submitted by the faculty mentioned a lack of commitment and responsiveness on the part of some supervisors as a problem. This was confirmed in the interview that the panel had with the PhD students where it became clear that some students received considerably more attention than others. However, in general the PhD students meeting with the panel expressed much satisfaction with the supervisory support at the departmental and discipline (research centres) level. The panel found that requests for changing supervisor were expedited appropriately, but is keenly aware that individual problems in supervision can be difficult to detect and address. The members also considered a more widespread and consistent use of co-supervision a valuable instrument to strengthen the overall supervision and, in some cases, to forestall individual problems.

Recommendation 3:

That the future role of departmental PhD co-ordinators in relation to supervision be further developed and clarified.

Recommendation 4:

That the PhD School engage in closer dialogue with supervisors about supervision, quality assurance, and the strategic aims of the faculty and of the departments for the PhD programme. The dialogue should contribute to a broader consensus about and transparency of the faculty's aims for the PhD education and for supervision.

Recommendation 5:

That all supervisors, including both new and experienced supervisors, participate in a structured dialogue about quality issues and best practices in supervision. The panel felt that this effort was less about formal qualifications than about developing a common understanding of challenges and possible solutions in supervision among the college of supervisors – in other words: mobilising, sharing, and developing existing knowledge.

Recommendation 6:

That the head of the PhD School in close collaboration with departments pay close attention to questions about supervisory capacity and responsiveness when appointing supervisors. Moreover, it is recommended that the head of the PhD School continue the existing practice with regular assessments of studies based on the PhD experience.

Recommendation 7:

That the PhD School in collaboration with departments extend the practice of complementary co-supervision more widely – especially where the PhD projects include one or more disciplines or are interdisciplinary.

3. The PhD process

- Do the PhD plan and the regular assessments of the PhD students' progress function in a satisfactory manner?

Good policies and practices are in place with regard to the PhD Plan and progress reports. However, as mentioned above, the panel noted that there existed some uncertainty with regard to the future role and mandate of the departmental PhD co-ordinators. This was particularly the case with regard to their role in approving PhD Plans and progress reports. Some uncertainty was expressed about the future division of labour between the department and the PhD School in the approval of the progress reports – especially in the distinction between elements in the reports documenting employee related matters and such elements as relate to the requirements of the PhD School (mainly the Ministerial order on the PhD degree). The panel recognizes the importance of the PhD plan and of the progress reports for monitoring the progress of the individual PhD students. The panel took notice that the PhD School rarely subjected PhD students to the 3 month trial period set down in the Ministerial order on the PhD degree, but found no basis for drawing any conclusions from this fact.

Recommendation 8:

That a clear procedure and mandate be developed for the approval of the PhD plan and progress reports, and that the distinction between departmental duties and PhD education (the PhD project included) be kept clear for all involved. Attention should in this respect be paid to securing common practices between departments and alignment with the policies of the PhD School.

4. Courses

- Is the range of courses offered by the PhD School satisfactory?
- Do the courses support the quality of the PhD programme at the Faculty?

The panel recognises that the Faculty of Humanities with the PhD course committee has set up a good mechanism for strengthening the focus of and internal collaboration on PhD courses. It took notice of the extensive PhD course programme. The panel, however, felt that the role of, selection of, and definition of generic courses offered could be clarified. In particular, the panel found it confusing that both skills courses and courses with topics from the theory and philosophy of science were grouped together as generic courses. The panel also explored the place of generic courses in the PhD regulations of the faculty and learned that some key stakeholders interviewed were uncertain about the requirements and faculty policies on generic courses.

The panel registered general satisfaction with the discipline-related PhD courses in the present course programme. However, the panel noted that there was no clear connection between the generic courses and the discipline-based courses and that there was no obvious connection between the many different courses that are discipline-based. The course offering appeared to be consumer driven rather than being motivated by a coherent educational rationale. The panel felt that the development of discipline-related PhD courses should be used to develop a positive synergy with the research activities at the departments – as well as across departmental lines – and that the PhD course committee could play an important role in realising these possibilities. Some faculty members expressed concern for the future coverage of discipline based courses.

Recommendation 9:

That the PhD course committee proceed to develop a clearer definition of generic courses, including making clearer distinctions between skills/professionalization courses and other generic courses, and develop a clear rationale for selecting them. It is also recommended that a sound balance between discipline-oriented courses and generic courses is upheld in favour of the former.

Recommendation 10:

That the PhD course committee engage in a dialogue about the identification of courses offering methodological, theoretical or thematic core competences within the relevant disciplines, and that corresponding PhD courses be developed and offered on a regular basis.

Recommendation 11:

That career guidance or support be offered in the form of PhD courses or otherwise – with a view to research careers as well as other kinds of relevant employment for future PhD degree holders.

5. Internationalisation

- Is internationalisation e.g. research stays abroad, change of research environment and international orientation of PhD students in general sufficiently ensured, encouraged and supported by the PhD programme?

PhD students interviewed expressed appreciation for the support from supervisors and departments with regard to planning periods of research at foreign universities or research institutions as well as with regard to developing international contacts. They also stressed the need for flexibility in order to make it possible for PhD students with family responsibilities to develop international contacts in a flexible manner and over time. However, they also pointed out that there was little administrative support for organizing longer periods at foreign universities or research institutions, in particular support for dealing with questions of taxation, insurance, visas, etc. The panel recognises that the international mobility of PhD students follow the pattern of international research networks and that it is more difficult to offer systematic institutional support for PhD mobility than for ordinary student mobility based on exchange programs. However, given the importance that extended periods at foreign universities and research institutions have for developing international networks, there should be an increase in the resources made available by the faculty to support and facilitate such stays.

Recommendation 12:

That institutional counselling in some form should be offered to outbound PhD students with regard to common issues such as tax, insurance and visas.

Recommendation 13:

That the faculty establishes a fund to support, on a selective and competitive basis, extended periods at internationally recognized universities or research institutions.

6. Teaching, dissemination and work obligations

- Does the work obligation of the PhD students in for example teaching, dissemination of knowledge, etc. support the quality of the PhD programme?
- Does the obligation to take on teaching, dissemination projects etc. influence whether the PhD students complete the PhD programme on time?

The panel notes that the workload with regard to the institutional work duties of the PhD students (the 840 work hours) is well monitored. PhD students interviewed stressed the importance of PhD students being able to perform the work duties partly in functions closely integrated with the departmental or discipline based research activities such as research centres, academic conferences or substantial research applications. Examples of supervisors and senior staff engaging in team teaching with PhD students were mentioned approvingly.

Recommendation 14:

The panel would like to encourage senior staff to engage in more team teaching or other forms of collaborative teaching with PhD students.

7. Completion time and percentage

- Are the completion times satisfactory?
- Are the completion percentages satisfactory?

The panel noted that average completion time and drop-out rates are well within acceptable standards. The members of the panel are of the opinion that the pursuit of marginal improvements of such performance indicators can distract attention from other important quality aspects in PhD education. During interviews it was mentioned that some PhD students who did not, eventually, manage to hand in a PhD thesis might have been identified – and possibly supported – at an earlier stage with a more focused and determined utilisation of the progress reports for quality assurance. It came up that the content of progress reports in some cases was provided primarily by the PhD students themselves and that some supervisors were reluctant to put problems – of a temporary or in some cases more severe nature – on record in the progress reports.

Recommendation 15:

The panel would like to recommend that further efforts in this area, considering that performance is well above the acceptable, should be concentrated on the *completion rate*, rather than on marginal improvements on average completion times.

8. Assessment criteria and assessment procedures

- Do the assessment criteria and the assessment procedures ensure a satisfactory thesis evaluation process?

The evaluation panel found that sound policies were in place with regard to the evaluation of the PhD thesis. Administrative procedures with regard to planning and execution of the oral defence likewise represent good practices in the division of labour between the central PhD administration and the departments. The panel noted that the reports submitted to the Faculty of Humanities by thesis assessment panels generally showed a propensity for critical prose in the tradition of the classical peer review in the humanities. The panel found that this practice, although laudable in terms of academic evaluation, in conjunction with the extensive use of thesis reports in Denmark for applications for postdoc grants or other forms of external research funding placed PhD degree holders from the humanities at a disadvantage.

Interdisciplinarity was commented upon by a number of stakeholders. A majority pointed out that with the recent changes in the PhD programme at the Faculty the balance between a discipline-based focus and interdisciplinarity had been shifted in favour of the individual disciplines. A number of those interviewed by the panel expressed an awareness of the special needs of PhD students working within interdisciplinary subject areas. The panel felt that complementary co-supervision and extended visits to relevant international research institutions might offer such support. Examples of this practice were given, but there seemed to be no systematic mechanism in place to facilitate such a solution – especially for projects straddling two or more departments.

Recommendation 16:

That it be made clear to external and international members of thesis assessment committees that the thesis report, within the Danish context, is used as documentation in applications for academic posts as well as in applications for external research funding. It is also recommended that internal chairmen of the thesis assessment committees be well informed about the prescribed content and form of the final thesis reports.

Recommendation 17:

Noting that thesis reports often are used for communicating recommendations about how to publish the thesis results or to recommend alterations in form and style with a view to publication, the panel recommends that the faculty facilitate an alternative, more or less formal, channel for passing this kind of information to the author and/or to publishing houses – e.g. in the form of an appendix to the thesis report.

9. Bibliometrics

- How is the research and scholarly standard of articles, theses and other publications written by PhD students?

Having examined the evaluation of a selected group of thesis reports the panel gained the impression that improvements could be made on two points. It appeared to be clear that some of

the most representative points of criticism in the study were focused on a limited number of problems – especially the discussion of the state of the art, methodology, and placing the thesis within the field of the relevant research literature. The panel also noted that the publication profile of PhD students reflected a propensity for publishing in local or national Danish language publication channels.

Recommendation 18:

That the PhD course committee consider the possibility of offering PhD courses addressing the potential shortcomings in current PhD projects on such issues as were identified as problematic in the study of the selected group of thesis reports.

Recommendation 19:

That supervisors and departments encourage PhD students to seek to publish research results where they will find the greatest possible, relevant international audience – including to seek a more international publication profile where relevant.

10. Employment

- Is there correspondence between PhD education and the employment subsequently found by the PhD graduates?

There seems at present to be a very good employment rate for PhD degree holders from the faculty. The panel, however, found that the current increase in the volume of PhD education at the Faculty of Humanities and at other Danish – and international – universities would be likely in the future to make it necessary for PhD degree holders to take up non-academic employment. The panel asked stakeholders at the faculty how the PhD education at the faculty supported the recruitment of the most talented PhD students for postdoc and junior faculty positions irrespective of gender and background. The replies given seemed to indicate that the recruitment for further research careers at the faculty reflected quite well the talent available between men and women alike. No figures on this had been included in the background material for the evaluation.

Recommendation 20:

As mentioned in recommendation 10, career guidance or support should be offered in the form of PhD courses or otherwise – with a view to research careers as well as other kinds of relevant employment for future PhD degree holders. Such guidance should also alert talented researchers, irrespective of gender and background, to the possibilities of pursuing academic research careers as well as to the possibilities for alternative careers.


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