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International Evaluation of the Doctoral School of Social Sciences, Aalborg University

Report from the external evaluation committee

August 25 2014

1. Introduction

This report presents the 2014 evaluation of the Doctoral School of Social Sciences (DSSS) at Aalborg University (AAU). The Danish Act on Universities requires that the dean, in consultation with the head of the relevant doctoral school, initiates an international evaluation of the doctoral education every five years. This is the first time the DSSS is evaluated.

The evaluation was commissioned by Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences (FSS), Hanne Kathrine Krogstrup. The committee was asked to emphasise opportunities for further development by producing concrete, pertinent recommendations for the school to apply in the future.

The report is based on three sources:

- 1) a self-assessment report prepared by director of the DSSS, Professor Ann-Dorte Christensen, in cooperation with the PhD Study Board and the doctoral programmes at FSS, presented to the evaluation committee in April 2014. See the report [here](#).
- 2) a three day site visit at FSS in May 2014. During the visit, several key persons were interviewed, including the Dean, the head of the doctoral school, heads of department, heads of doctoral programmes, supervisors, and Danish and international PhD students. The programme for the site visit is included as Annex 1. Those who were interviewed were encouraged to send additional comments to the committee. A few persons used this opportunity and their comments are included in the material which has been considered by the committee.
- 3) a large amount of additional material made available to the committee (see Annex 3).

Msc. administrative officer Henrik Marcher Larsen from the administration of FSS has been secretary to the committee.

The school's overall objective is to "ensure doctoral programmes of high quality, effectiveness and high international standards in the Faculty of Social Sciences' core activities in terms of research and teaching". It was not within the scope of the present evaluation to evaluate the quality of the PhD students' research and teaching. The report focuses on the governance of the doctoral school, the research environment, supervision and related matters.

The structure of this evaluation largely follows the structure of the self-evaluation report. Each chapter includes a number of recommendations. The most important conclusions are listed at the end of the report.

2. Organisation and Management

2.1 Management

DSSS was established in 2008. Professor Ann-Dorte Christensen became director in 2012 and implemented comprehensive changes in the management and administration of the school. The school is organized with a director, a secretariat and a PhD study board consisting of the heads of the doctoral programmes. The school has been in constant growth. At present, about 150 PhD students are enrolled across seven doctoral programmes. The target to enrol 40 PhD students per year was almost met with 39 enrolments in 2013. In 2013, AAU awarded 23 degrees in the social sciences.

Recent years have focused on the on-going implementation of the Strategic Action Plan for the DSSS 2012-2015, which includes more structure, more formal requirements, homogenized rules among departments, more focus on standard time limit for PhD studies, development of PhD courses, strengthening of the school's international profile etc. The committee commends the ambition to improve the functioning of the doctoral school even further. The overall impression is that the administrative changes have improved the management and functioning of the doctoral school considerably. The PhD programmes are generally of high quality, well organized and there are high levels of satisfaction with the DSSS among PhD students and the staff.

2.2 A complex organizational system

The doctoral school includes seven doctoral programmes and more than 40 research centres with different organizational structures and scholarly identities. The relatively complex organization of the Faculty is reflected in the structure of the DSSS, which appears to be difficult for outsiders to grasp, e.g., students from other universities and especially international PhD students.

To add to the complexity, PhD students' relationship with the university consists of two tracks: HR matters are handled by departments, and more specific procedures concerning PhD programmes and everyday study activities are governed by the doctoral school, supervisors and heads of programmes.

The complexity may not be a large problem for students or advisors. A PhD student is member of at least one research group and to which the supervisor normally also belongs. However, some students, in particular students without AAU employment, are not well integrated in the research groups.

Despite the complexity, it seems to be a well-functioning, decentralized, bottom-up system with relatively short distances in the hierarchy and strong connections between the doctoral school and the faculty.

The committee found that some PhD students and possibly some staff members had difficulty understanding the character and identity of the doctoral school. Since the school is primarily an administrative body, there may be good reasons for this perception of the school, but it may be a problem that the complex system is difficult to understand for PhD students and staff members. The problem is particularly pertinent when cases that appear to be similar are organized and regulated in different ways in different departments or doctoral programmes.

The committee does not recommend identical structures in different departments or research centres. However, FSS might evaluate whether streamlining or homogenization of procedures in the PhD programmes could be useful.

The increased volume of PhD students makes such initiatives urgent. In particular international PhD students rightly call for well-defined rules and more information about the system and the organization of the FSS and the DSSS. The committee also recommends special focus on the functioning of doctoral programmes offered in both Aalborg and Copenhagen. The fact that several PhD students live and work in Copenhagen is a challenge to their working environment and integration in the departments. Specific initiatives should be designed and initiated by the relevant departments and doctoral programmes.

In order to improve the level of information, the committee recommends that FSS/DSSS produces an introductory manual for new students with information about the organisational structure and management levels at the DSSS and AAU in general, including rules and policies for supervision, teaching, course work, funding for research and travel, guidelines for writing a thesis etc. The manual should be online and updated whenever necessary. The manual is probably best designed for each of the doctoral programmes and it should accommodate Danish as well as international students.

Additionally the committee recommends that DSSS establishes a mandatory, joint introductory course for all new PhD students at the faculty that includes guidelines for PhD process, rights and obligations, and general information about doing research and writing a PhD thesis. Besides the formal purpose, such a course would contribute to organizing a cross-departmental network among PhD students.

There is a strong need for a manual specifically tailored for international students with emphasis on their rights and obligations, practical information about the organisation and functioning of the PhD system and other things that may differ from their home universities.

2.3 General challenges for the doctoral school

Several recent changes challenges the doctoral school at AAU as well as at other Danish universities: 1) A PhD programme is no longer an individual apprenticeship, it now has a much broader scholastic purpose. 2) Previously a PhD degree was only seen as a stepping stone to a career in research, but now some students see other career opportunities as

attractive. 3) An increasing number of externally funded PhD students may challenge academic freedom, teaching and the course catalogue.

3. Recruitment and completion

3.1 Procedures and practices for enrolment and start of study

Since its establishment in 2008, DSSS's PhD intake has increased, resulting in a population of 154 PhD students by the end of 2013. This requires well-defined and well-functioning procedures and practices for enrolment and the committee finds that DSSS generally meets the requirements.

There are many ways to become a PhD student at FSS and many models of funding. In general, enrolment procedures are well described, flexible and tailored to the different models of employment and funding. Some students are employed after open employment procedures while, regrettably, other students have been employed without a formal application procedure where the funding institution has had appointed the PhD student without a job announcement. In some of these cases, the university may, for funding reasons, be tempted to employ a specific PhD student without a careful selection process. It is vital that a university's hiring process is transparent and based on formal qualifications rather than pragmatic considerations. Transparency in recruitment procedures and practices should be secured.

The committee recommends that DSSS strives for open application procedures, including job adverts, whenever possible to ensure fair access and better competition, higher quality of PhD students and legitimacy in hiring procedures.

3.2 Financing of scholarships

The significant increase in externally funded PhD scholarships has various consequences that can be perceived as both negative and positive for the quality in doctoral education. Some research topics may be defined by the funding institution, and the committee recommends a balanced rate of external and internal funding to secure some freedom in research topics and more influence on the strategic management of research profiles at the departments.

Aalborg University is primarily a modus 2 university. Modus 2 production of knowledge is in line with the increased cooperation with external partners in doctoral education, which to some extent makes comparisons with other universities on this parameter difficult. The committee recommends *adapting to* rather than opposing the changes in financial sources for doctoral education.

In the process of adapting, the committee recommends that the doctoral programmes and departments are aware of the potential challenges in socialising and integrating PhD students appointed and employed by the external funder at the university and in the research landscape. The committee points out specific issues to consider:

1. To be critical of externally funded projects and even reject them if the topic does not match the department's research profile.
2. To strive for flexibility in projects and theses. In externally funded projects with very constrained frames for topic and maybe even research question, the head of department and the principal supervisor should play an important role in communicating with the external funder and in that way ensure a relevant, research-based, and independent PhD project.
3. DSSS should secure that secondary supervisors suggested by the PhD student and external funders have the required research-based academic qualifications and supervisor experience.
4. Discuss and secure enforcement of externally funded PhD students' rights and obligations in cooperation agreements. It is decisive that DSSS strives to ensure that internally and externally funded PhD students have the same rights in terms of research time, participation in active research environments, and relevant teaching experience.
5. Evaluate candidates suggested by external funders via legitimate and transparent employment procedures to secure that they are qualified and match the research profile and research environment at the department.
6. Securing a smooth relationship between the department and the funding organizations is not just an issue for the PhD student; supervisors or heads of department must have regular contacts with the funding organization.
7. The departments and research groups should strive to integrate externally funded PhD students.

3.3 Assessment procedures

The assessment procedures at the DSSS are well described and seem to be well functioning. Quality and legitimacy are embedded in the procedures, and the committee welcomes the recent years' strong efforts to improve efficiency and consolidate the quality in the assessment process.

3.4 Average study time and discontinuation rates

Although the average study time is declining at the DSSS, it still appears to be longer than at other universities in Denmark. However, the statistics may be somewhat misleading; the small number of students makes the averages vulnerable to outliers, i.e. few significantly delayed PhD students, and recent years' initiatives to complete inactive and delayed PhD students has also affected the numbers. The committee recommends statistics or better analyses of existing statistics to monitor changes in study time more accurately. Moreover, there is a time gap between submission of thesis and defence and subsequent approval by the academic council. It thus seems reasonable to suggest that the three year limit applies to the period from the PhD study commences until submission of thesis to the faculty. In practice,

this means that the target for the total study time should be three years + three months from the beginning until the PhD study is formally completed.

The DSSS's targeted initiative for completing inactive PhD students is promising and perceived by the committee as a concrete, ongoing implementation of the target in the school's strategic action plan regarding efficiency and completion. The DSSS seems to be on track to improve the average study time and reduce discontinuation rates.

Even though PhD students, DSSS, and supervisors aim to limit the study time to three years, very few students have submitted their thesis after three years of study. Even with a shorter average study time, it is likely that many PhD students will be unable to complete their thesis within the three years.

The committee is aware that this issue is handled in most cases, and that delayed PhD students normally are offered support and additional supervision to complete their studies, but still recommends a more formalized system, partly to ensure equal rights for all PhD students, partly to avoid undermining the students' dignity when the existing systems (completion initiative and four step model) are applied to enforce the time limit (3 years + 3 months). The formalization will not necessarily entail additional resources if based on the following:

1. PhD student and department (including doctoral programme and supervisor) should match their expectations regarding the maximum time limit from the outset (could be added to the school's internal rules and guidelines and articulated in doctoral programmes, supervisor courses etc.).
2. Continued and increased utilization of the four step model in terms of possible delay or discontinuation. Possible discontinuation should be identified and determined by the 12 month evaluation, and plan Bs to complete should be discussed throughout the monitoring process (also added to guidelines and articulated in programmes, at supervisor courses etc.).
3. A formal assurance of supervision hours for delayed students to finish their studies. This could be organized by earmarking for instance 15 of the 300 supervision hours for the last 3 months before submitting the thesis. In that way all PhD students are secured supervision when completing their study, whether or not they are delayed, while the doctoral programmes avoid providing "free" additional supervision hours to complete delayed students (could be added to internal rules, articulated in programmes and implemented by the secretariat).
4. A formal assurance of access to the necessary facilities. After determination of employment, enrolled PhD students should be able to keep access to library, buildings and a temporary workstation. This already seems to be practice in most cases, but should be formulated and added to the internal rules in order to secure equal rights for all enrolled PhD students.

The combination of already implemented initiatives, the four step model (which will be discussed below), and formalization of existing practices and mechanisms for handling issues about delayed students will make flexible schemes for the continuing improvement of average study time.

The committee agrees with DSSS that discontinuation rates should be expected to drop in the future and it supports DSSS's ambition to detect possible complications in the student's work (including possible discontinuation) as early as possible.

4. Quality assurance in the PhD process

4.1 Continuous monitoring (the four step model)

The DSSS has introduced a new structure for internal progress reports on individual students during their period of study. The written bi-annual progress reports have been reduced to four reports, two written and two oral assessments (the four step model). The two oral assessments include advice from the supervisor and from an ‘external’ discussant (a senior researcher within the research area).

During the site visit the committee experienced satisfaction with the four step model from both supervisors and PhD students. In particular the two oral assessments with external involvement (after 12 and 30 months) were seen as valuable. The four step model is in general seen as a qualitative and valuable follow-up system that detects possible needs for changes, assures constructive support and feedback for PhD students, and stimulates progress and completion.

The four step model is important in terms of assuring quality in doctoral education at FSS. For that reason the committee recommends that efforts are made to consolidate and develop the model.

Chapter 3 recommended even more emphasis on study delays and possible discontinuation in the model and that such issues are handled as early as possible in the process. Recommended improvements to the model are mentioned in chapter 4.2, since they are related to supervision. Two general recommendations regarding the four step model are mentioned in this section: 1) the oral assessments seem to be satisfactory to PhD students as well as supervisors, while some see the written assessments as rather superficial or without impact on the study process. The written assessments do not appear well implemented. The principal supervisor is supposed to write the progress reports, but in some cases PhD students write them up themselves before they are signed and submitted by the supervisor. This procedure does not respect the purpose of the evaluation and limits the supervisor’s responsibilities. The committee recommends that the doctoral school evaluates the management and outcome of the written progress reports, and perhaps replaces the written report with another procedure in order to have a comprehensive system with quality and outcome in all phases. 2) The oral assessment meeting may be more valuable if the discussions are broadened by including other PhD students and/or relevant members of the department or even researchers from other universities.

4.2 Supervision

The quality of supervision is probably the single most important factor for successful completion of a PhD study. The APV survey, which is described in the self-evaluation report, notes that about 70 percent of the PhD students found the supervision to be of high quality to a very high degree and to a high degree. This overall satisfaction with the

supervision was confirmed in the meetings with the PhD students. However, some points should be mentioned:

A majority of the students finds that the supervision is of high quality while a minority is somewhat dissatisfied. Interviews with the PhD students revealed various reasons for finding the quality of supervision less satisfactory. It is important that problems in supervision are identified and solved as early as possible. Suggestions are summarized at the end of this report.

Other results in the APV survey are more problematic. To the question whether the PhD student is “receiving the supervision I need”, only slightly more than half answered “to a very high degree” or “to a high degree”. The relatively low satisfaction is not acceptable and the doctoral school and the heads of doctoral programmes need to scrutinize the reasons. The committee emphasizes the following points:

1. It is difficult to tell how supervisors are chosen, in particular the degree to which PhD students have influence on the choice. The committee recommends that the PhD students are given more influence but that the choice of supervisor(s) is based on consultation with the head of department or the head of the doctoral programme. In many cases a PhD student may wish to have a main supervisor as well as a secondary supervisor. Each PhD student is granted 50 hours of supervision each term. It is not entirely clear to the committee how the hours of supervision are divided between the main and secondary supervisor and what influence the PhD student has on this decision. The role and responsibilities of the main and secondary supervisor are also unclear. More than one supervisor is perhaps especially common in interdisciplinary projects. There are examples of up to four supervisors per student, but this seems to be far too many. Normally no more than a main supervisor and a secondary supervisor should be selected.
2. The supervisors’ obligations are clearly stated in the regulations from the PhD study board but not all PhD students and supervisors are aware of the regulations. The committee recommends that the supervisor is instructed to inform the PhD student about the regulations at one of the first meetings between supervisor and PhD student.
3. In terms of evaluation and support, it is a critical point whether the four step model is sufficient or whether a personal, non-bureaucratic contact option could be established as a supplement. The quality of supervision is a strong determining factor for success and relying on a formal reporting system is not sufficient. During the site visit, some PhD students highlighted the complexities of student-supervisor relations and the possible dangers of trying to change supervisor. It should be clear to the PhD students how to cope with such conflicts. A common, unproblematic procedure would be to discuss the problem with the head of the doctoral school but for some reason this does not happen very often. Another solution could be an impartial, informal contact person – an ‘ombudsman system’ – whom students may talk to about problems that they find it difficult to discuss with the supervisor. The idea is not to abandon the four step model, but to open an additional channel for the students when needs arise, for instance if PhD

students are dissatisfied with their supervision in terms of research issues, personal relationship or something else.

4. The supervisors' work load was also highlighted by the PhD students as a potential problem for quality in supervision. There are of course different needs for supervision depending on the students' profiles, but generally the time compensation of 50 hours per supervisor per semester seems adequate. However, a few supervisors have many students, which results in unfulfilling feedback and long response time to thesis drafts. To limit the supervisors' work and assure adequate feedback to the PhD students the committee suggests a suitable limitation on the number of students per supervisor and establishing a formal supplement to the progress reports in the four step model to assess the supervisor's work load and availability, for instance by asking the PhD student to report the number of meetings with the supervisor(s).
5. Training of supervisors is a general issue in the quality assurance of supervision. In 2013, the DSSS introduced a mandatory one day course for all PhD supervisors employed at the faculty. It is expected that all supervisors have completed the course by the end of 2014. The committee acknowledges this initiative as an important step in the right direction, yet it is recommended that the courses are followed by more intensive supervisor training or by creating a learning environment among supervisors for instance by organizing regular meetings where problems, obligations, administrative procedures etc. are discussed. Such meetings would probably best be conducted within the doctoral programmes, and reports from the meetings might be part of the agenda for meetings in the PhD Study Board. The committee also recommends that the doctoral school reflects on whether a one day supervisor course is enough and whether regular, mandatory meetings for all supervisors should be introduced. Proposed contents and subjects: a theoretical conceptual framework for supervision, PBL in doctoral education, study efficiency and utilization of the four step model (cf. chapter 4), authorship/co-authorship, handling of varying needs and cultural differences in student profiles, discussions of change of supervisor, obligations and responsibilities for supervisors, etc.
6. In the future the DSSS may also consider the possible relevance of institution-wide supervisor courses across doctoral schools. Contrary to commonly held views, supervisor training with participants from all departments may be more valuable than training in a relatively more homogeneous group from one faculty.

4.3 Thesis writing

Due to uncertainty among PhD students at the DSSS about the requirements in the different thesis models, the PhD Study Board initiated a discussion in 2011 to clarify the requirements and expectations to a thesis. The output of the process was an agreement for all doctoral programmes to recommend – and make guidelines for – three different models of writing a thesis: a) a monograph, b) an article-based thesis, and c) a combination model. The committee regards the guidelines to be important and clarifying for the students.

Currently, the vast majority writes monographs, but there may be a tendency towards more article-based theses. Since a PhD education focuses on research training, the committee finds it important that PhD students are encouraged to write international scholarly articles. As a minimum PhD students should present their research at international conferences and receive detailed comments to such papers by their supervisor. Following this line of reasoning the committee also recommends a change in the described thesis models. According to the guidelines, the combination model consists of two sub models: a research report of 75-100 pages (either theoretical or empirical) plus 2 articles, and an empirical research report of approx. 100 pages plus a mainly theoretical report of approximately 100 pages. The committee encourages PhD students to write scholarly articles and recommends that DSSS considers removing the latter model from the guidelines.

Writing a monograph plus at least one substantial international article during a PhD project would be demanding, but in many cases a chapter in a monograph can relatively easily be rewritten as an article. Working this way may help the student arrange the research project in a manner that facilitates piece-meal publications and may of course affect the design and content of chapters and time arrangements.

The proposal should therefore be introduced by the supervisor at one of the first meetings with the PhD student. The focus on academic publishing will ensure graduating PhD students a better footing in the academic job market. Such an emphasis would encourage supervisors to prod, guide and encourage students to produce at least one solid publication before graduation. Co-publication with supervisors or chapters in books produced by research groups to which PhD students belong should also be encouraged.

4.3 Quality of the theses

As mentioned, it is beyond the scope of this evaluation to assess the quality of PhD theses at FSS. However, the committee recommends that the doctoral school establishes a system that compares the quality of the PhD theses with theses at other Danish or international social science faculties. This might be done by asking members of the assessment committees how they consider the quality of a thesis, by asking external experts to evaluate a selection of FSS theses or by comparing theses from comparable doctoral programmes at other universities. Such evaluations should include whether there is a bias in choice of topics, methods or similar dimensions.

Another approach would be to analyse the impact of the theses in relation to other publications (are they for instance quoted by other scholars?) or whether they are used in teaching.

It must be emphasized that such initiatives should not be an assessment of the individual thesis (this is of course already done by the assessment committee), but should take place at the organizational level, i.e. as an assessment of the theses from the FSS as a whole.

4.5 Teaching

According to the Danish AC agreement, PhD students are expected to teach or perform 840 hours of other relevant activities in addition to the other obligations of the PhD project. At DSSS, PhD students' teaching obligations are 600 hours, of which 100 hours may be used for other knowledge dissemination tasks related to the project. In cases where it is difficult to find enough teaching or supervision hours (this is especially relevant for international students) the rate of other dissemination tasks can be increased after agreement with the supervisor and the head of department.

The committee finds that this flexibility is a valuable addition to the regulations and is pleased to know that the information is available online in English as well as in Danish. The kind of teaching PhD students are expected to do, whether they can choose their teaching freely or whether they are appointed to different kinds of teaching varies considerably. In some cases the teaching is an integrated part of supervision and courses of students at a department. In other cases teaching obligations seem almost to be market organized and students have to show strong personal initiative to get the supervision or lectures they need to obtain the required ECTS. Students who are externally employed (e.g. at university colleges) may only teach at their funding institution but not at the university.

The committee recommends that the teaching component of the PhD study is considered a learning experience for the PhD student and that the supervisor and the PhD student are responsible for including teaching in the overall plan of the PhD study and for making sure that the teaching load contributes to the PhD student's qualifications in general and in relation to their thesis.

This means that as many as possible of the students teaching activities should be relevant for their PhD project. MA or BA supervision may increase the students' qualifications in relation to process supervision – which is important – but normally it does not strengthen their scholarly qualifications in relation to their project. Thus, it is crucial that the students also have an opportunity to teach courses or parts of courses that are directly relevant to their project. It should also be an ambition that externally funded students, even students who teach at the university colleges, teach courses at university level at AAU as an integrated part of their PhD study (if necessary by reducing their teaching load at their home institution). This point should be negotiated when the contract between the FSS and the funding institutions is drafted.

Since supervision is often done in Danish there is a special obligation for the PhD school or the heads of programmes to develop acceptable models for integrating international PhD students in the teaching at the faculty.

5. PhD Courses

PhD students are obliged to participate in PhD courses or similar activities corresponding to 30 ECTS points. The PhD students attend courses both at AAU and at other institutions and they are expected to attend generic as well as thematic courses. The courses offered at FSS are mostly developed from below based on suggestions from PhD students, research groups or PhD programmes. Some courses are fully funded by the DSSS while others are co-funded and co-organized in cross-institutional doctoral programmes.

The evaluations of the courses differ but are overall positive. In general, the courses seem to be relevant and of good quality and the committee has no general recommendations as to the number of the courses. However the committee suggests that DSSS considers changes in the course offered on the following points:

1. Develop mandatory courses in research design. They could be implemented as independent courses or as part of the mandatory introductory PhD course.
2. Greater focus on international issues, views from the global South, and challenges to conceptualizing ideas outside or partially outside the Western cultures. This ambition is important in order to respect the changes in the social science disciplines and is especially relevant for DSSS, considering the relatively high number of international PhD students.
3. Consider the need to develop specific courses that would be helpful for the students enrolled in interdisciplinary programmes.
4. Most PhD courses seem to be based on a relatively traditional pedagogical tradition which differs from the principles of problem orientation and project organization at BA and MA level. DSSS may consider designing courses that are closer to the PBL principles than is currently the case. This is especially important for international students.
5. Experiment with other types of courses than the ones currently offered. For instance, it might be a requirement for PhD students to plan and organize a course for other PhD students at the DSSS or even, when conditions permit, campus wide. The students should have one staff member as facilitator/advisor and a financial envelope at their disposal. This could even be defined as part of their work duties or teaching. Another idea is “reading clubs” where a group of students meet for instance at a weekly two-hour session for one term and work through a book or a collection of papers. The teacher is appointed to the reading club as a facilitator with the main responsibility to advise the students in their work.

6. Internationalisation

6.1. International students at FSS

There is a stable rate of incoming international students at the DSSS, and the population of international students is relatively high (34 people = 22 % of the total population). The international PhD students are concentrated at specific highly internationally oriented departments and research centres (in particular SPIRIT and the Innovation and Business Economics Programmes). They seem to have problems meeting their teaching obligations in a satisfactory way.

- 1) In general international students seem to have more problems than Danish students in relation to teaching. Much of the teaching load at FSS is related to being advisor to groups of MA or BA students, many of whom prefer to be advised and write their reports in Danish. This means that some international students have problems gathering sufficient teaching experience and they receive no help from the administration or the staff in this respect. The committee strongly recommends establishing procedures for international students to acquire the required teaching load.
- 2) The vast majority of courses at the DSSS are offered in English and most are one or two day courses taught by international researchers. The internationally oriented course programme is applauded, but the committee recommends longer courses and visits by the international keynotes to make it possible for PhD students to meet and talk to international scholars.

6.2 Studying abroad

The rate of study visits by students enrolled at the DSSS differs considerably across doctoral programmes and research groups depending on traditions, contacts etc. One way to improve PhD students' access to visits at other universities is to establish more permanent contacts with international research environments to share contacts between research groups. The committee also recommends formalization and standardization of access to financial resources. Funding for study visits is currently organized in different ways across doctoral programmes at the DSSS; some students apply to the departments for funding, for others it is included in their individual study budget. To ensure equal rights and homogenized accessibility to stays abroad the committee recommends a more centrally organized system, for instance that students apply to the doctoral school for funding, or that funding is automatically released based on specific criteria for visits abroad.

In terms of doctoral education partnerships, the settings for entering agreements about joint and double degree partnerships have improved significantly. The committee encourages the DSSS to continue this work and to focus on articulation and local implementation in the doctoral programmes.

7. Working environment

7.1 General Working environment, including personnel management

The main impression from the self-assessment report and the site visit was that there is a good working environment for PhD students enrolled at the DSSS, characterized by an appropriate amount of recognition, support and professional feedback. In the workplace assessment from 2012, a few PhD students responded that they have been burdened by long-term or intense stress. The work load for PhD students at the DSSS generally seems to be well balanced, but stress and work demands vary between the different models of funding and employment. During the site visit it was highlighted that problems sometimes occur in relation to externally funded PhD students without employment at the FSS. In such cases the external partner has managerial responsibilities, and it is therefore difficult for the departments to control that students are not overburdened by work at the funding institution. It is important that the individual contractual agreements are carefully thought out before the beginning of study and that there is regular contact between departments, supervisors and funding organization.

In general, working conditions and obligations for students at the DSSS seem appropriate and reasonable, and but it is important to focus on handling stress symptoms, possible conflicts, and the general well-being of the individual students. As a supplement to the everyday interactions between colleagues, some formalized forums could be useful instruments, e.g. supervision, regular meetings with heads of programmes, an ‘ombudsman system’, or the yearly staff development interviews (MUS). Some PhD students complained that interviews are not offered every year, and the committee therefore recommends that the DSSS in the future complies with national regulations regarding ‘MUS’.

7.2 Integration in departments and research groups

Research groups constitute an important unit in terms of a well-functioning working environment and professional feedback, recognition, support, collegial relations, and integration in the research environment.

The DSSS requires all PhD students to be affiliated with a research group, and in general the integration appears well functioning. The PhD students feel and are treated like equal staff members. However, some PhD students without AAU employment seem to be less integrated in the groups.

Contrary to the positive indications on research group affiliation there are indications in the APV-survey and the self-evaluation report that a relatively large group of students to some degree feel lonely in their work at AAU. This may be related to the different models of funding and employment, since it must be assumed that for instance externally funded students who are employed in a specific project have a higher degree of affiliation to their research groups, while internally and co-funded students tend to work more independently with their research project and thus are more likely to feel lonely.

Generally the committee acknowledges the successful integration of PhD students in research groups and departments and recommends that the current emphasis on active involvement is maintained. In order to detect possible loneliness or failed integration, it is important to focus on the well-being of the *individual* students.

7.3 Social and academic integration of international students

Social and academic integration of international PhD students, specifically, requires special attention in order to assure a good working environment for them. Based on the interviews with international students during the site visit, some issues need to be considered.

Apparently, a few departments do not put sufficient emphasis on integrating international students in the research environment. At the site visit some of the international PhD students spoke of problems with language, for example that important emails are only sent in Danish. Others complained that meetings were only conducted in Danish. The committee emphasizes that regular communication in English is a necessity when departments enrol non-Danish speaking students in their programmes.

Internationalization differs widely across doctoral programmes, and the language problems seem to be concentrated in departments and doctoral programmes with only few international students and employees, while the doctoral school and the internationally oriented departments/programmes seem to have all relevant information available in both Danish and English.

In addition to eliminating language and cultural barriers in some doctoral programmes at the DSSS, some other general measures may improve the integration of international students:

1. Establish an online information system and introductory courses across programmes with special focus on introducing the international students to formal and informal systems at FSS.
2. Develop a better 'buddy scheme' covering all doctoral programmes under the DSSS. A newly enrolled international student should automatically be assigned a Danish-speaking 'buddy' who will assist with practical matters, inform about the organization and the research environment at the FSS, perhaps give a tour of campus and the city etc.
3. Continue support to the PhD students' organizations and networks and encourage students – both Danish and international – to support and participate in the interdisciplinary network, Delphi, since it is an important platform for social and academic integration and intercourse across doctoral programmes and schools. At the time of the site visit Delphi seemed to lack importance and it is recommended that the doctoral school finds ways to support the international students as much as possible to ease their studies in Denmark.

8. Career development

Career development is formally not a part of the evaluation; however, since it has become a distinct element in the DSSS' strategic action plan, the committee would like to attach a few comments to the latest initiatives regarding career paths and research strategies for PhD students.

Generally, the committee acknowledges the increased focus on career paths, which illustrates a responsible approach to the dramatic increase in the number of PhD students. The primary aim of the initiated process is to create transparency in the PhD students' career paths and opportunities within and outside academia, partly to document the relevance of the programmes, but mainly to inspire and motivate current and future PhD students.

The committee suggests that the increased focus is maintained and extended to include concrete career development initiatives for the current PhD population. During the site visit, a PhD student pointed out that there is no formal system for non-academia guidance, e.g. support in networking and career opportunities. It is therefore recommended that this type of guidance and support is formalized and implemented in the doctoral programmes, partly through the earlier mentioned staff development interviews, partly through enforcement of the existing interview regarding clarification of the student's further career, which should take place no later than one year before termination of the PhD position. Additionally the DSSS may consider including career guidance as an element in the future courses for supervisors.

9. Summary

DSSS was established in 2008. In recent years much work has gone into implementing the Strategic Action Plan for the DSSS 2012-2015. The developments include more structure, more formal requirements, homogenized rules among departments, more focus on standard time limit for PhD studies, development of PhD courses, strengthening of the school's international profile etc. The overall impression is that these changes have improved the management and functioning of the doctoral school considerably. The PhD programmes are generally of high quality, well organized and satisfaction with the DSSS is high among PhD students and staff.

This evaluation report offers concrete, applicable recommendations for further development. The following paragraphs include the most important recommendations.

Enrolment

The committee recommends that DSSS strives for open application procedures, including job adverts, whenever possible, in order to ensure fair access and better competition, higher quality of PhD students and legitimacy in hiring procedures.

The DSSS/FSS should carefully examine externally funded projects and even reject them if the topic does not fit the research profile of the department.

Study time and progress

Despite important initiatives to reduce the average study time, very few students will submit their thesis within the three year limit. The committee recommends establishing a formal system to handle situations when PhD student are delayed. The system is recommended to ensure equal rights for all PhD students and to avoid undermining the students' dignity when the existing systems are used (completion initiative and four step model) to enforce the time limit (of 3 years + 3 months).

The four step model is an efficient tool to monitor the progress of PhD students. However, there is some dissatisfaction with the written assessments. The committee recommends that the doctoral school evaluates the management and outcome of the written progress reports and perhaps replaces the written report with another procedure

Supervision

Interviews with PhD students and the APV survey revealed some dissatisfaction with supervision in certain respects. The doctoral school and the heads of doctoral programmes need to scrutinize the reasons for the relative dissatisfaction with the amount or character of supervision. The committee also suggests that DSSS considers an impartial, informal contact person – an ombudsman – whom students may talk to about problems that they find difficult to discuss with the supervisor. Specifically the committee suggests

1. limiting the number of students per supervisor

2. a formal addition to the progress reports in the four step model, where work load and availability of the supervisor is assessed for instance by asking the PhD student to report the number of meetings with the supervisor(s)
3. intensify supervisor training or create a learning environment among supervisors, for instance by organizing regular meetings where problems, obligations, administrative procedures etc. are discussed.

The thesis

The committee recommends at least one substantial international publication even for students writing monographs.

The DSSS has designed models for theses. The so-called combination model consists of two sub models: a research report of 75-100 pages (either theoretical or empirical) plus 2 articles and an empirical research report of approx. 100 pages plus a mainly theoretical report of approx. 100 pages. Based on the committee's emphasis on encouraging the PhD students to write scholarly articles the committee recommends that DSSS considers removing the latter model from the guidelines.

The quality of the theses at FSS is beyond the scope of this evaluation but the committee recommends establishing a monitoring system to evaluate the quality of the PhD theses compared to theses at other Danish or international social science faculties.

Teaching

The committee recommends that the teaching component of the PhD study is considered a learning experience for the PhD student and that the supervisor and the PhD student are responsible for including teaching in the overall PhD study plan and for making sure that the teaching load contributes to the PhD students' qualifications in general and in relation to their thesis.

The committee strongly recommends introducing procedures for achieving the required teaching load for international students. Since supervision of MA and BA students is often done in Danish there is a special obligation for the PhD school or the heads of programmes to develop acceptable models for integrating international PhD students in the teaching at the faculty.

PhD courses

In general the courses offered at DSSS seem adequate and satisfactory. However the committee suggests putting more focus on international issues, views from the global South, and challenges to conceptualizing ideas outside or partially outside the Western cultures. This ambition is important in terms of respecting changes in the social science disciplines and is especially relevant to DSSS considering the relatively high number of international PhD students.

Another idea for developing relevant courses is reading clubs where students meet for instance at a weekly two-hour session for one term and work through a book or a collection of papers with a teacher as facilitator.

Finally, the doctoral school may consider whether it would be useful if the university would organize supervisor training programme covering all faculties.

Integration of international PhD students

Overall, some departments do not appear to put sufficient emphasis on integrating the international students in the research environment. The committee emphasizes that regular communication in English is a necessity when departments enrol non-Danish speaking students in their programmes.

It is also very important to help international student acquire relevant teaching tasks in relation to the MA and BA students.

The DSSS should develop a better ‘buddy scheme’ covering all doctoral programmes under the DSSS. A newly enrolled international student should automatically be assigned a Danish-speaking ‘buddy’. The buddy scheme may also be applicable to Danish speaking students.

Annex 1

Annex 2