

# **International Evaluation**

**Doctoral School of Social Sciences  
Aalborg University  
2018/2019**

## **Report from the Evaluation Panel**

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# Introduction

This report summarizes the Evaluation Panel's observations and recommendations in relation to the international evaluation of the Doctoral School of Social Sciences (DSSS) 2018-2019.

The Evaluation Panel was asked by the DSSS to focus on four strategic priority areas:

- Developing supervisor capabilities and skills
- Internationalization of the PhD studies
- Further professionalization and program development
- Facilitation of PhD onboarding and socialization processes

The Panel's feedback and comments are organized in line with these four strategic prioritized areas.

The report is based on two main inputs:

- A self-evaluation report prepared by the DSSS (April 2019), including various appendices with key documents as Strategic Action Plan, guidelines, surveys and evaluation of PhD courses).
- A site visit at FSS June 13-14. During the site visit the Evaluation Panel had meetings with Heads of Departments, Heads of Programs, PhD-students, supervisors, the PhD School administration, and the Head of PhD School, Professor Poul Houman Andersen.

Academic Officer Ann Cathrine Criddle from the PhD administration has provided secretarial support to the Panel.

The Evaluation Panel wants to thank the PhD School and all the participants in the site visit meetings for valuable input and engagement and frank discussions on the four selected evaluation areas.

It is the Panel's overall conclusion that the Doctoral School of Social Sciences works well within the present framework. The Panel notice that the Strategic Action Plan, guidelines and various other initiatives taken by the PhD School and the departments contributes systematically to the quality of the PhD-education. The Panel has focussed on the systematic quality assurance in its work and would like to emphasise the importance of that as a prerequisite for a PhD-education of high quality.

# 1. Developing supervisor capabilities and skills

For the PhD students the perceived quality and satisfaction of their PhD education depend to a very high degree of the quality of supervision and their cooperation and relationship with their supervisor(s). DSSS has over the years taken various initiatives to improve and safeguard the quality of supervision. These initiatives include guidelines for the formal tasks of the principal supervisor and identifying the responsibilities of the principal supervisor on top of the academic/scientific supervision of the PhD-student's research. Other newer initiatives taken by DSSS are mandatory courses for supervisors, limitation of number of PhD-students per supervisor, and that a decision about whether to appoint of a co-supervisor, which is taken no later than 12 months from enrolment.

The discussion at the site visit meetings with the Heads of Departments, Heads of Programs, PhD-students, and supervisors concentrated on the issues listed below:

## *Mandatory courses for supervisors*

- It was recognised that it was important to support the development of supervisors in relation to supervisory practice. However, there were mixed views on the need and usefulness of mandatory courses for supervisors and their current format and duration. Instead shorter (half a day) courses/seminars with more focus on specific areas of practice might function better.
- Several of the supervisors expressed interests in a fora/space for exchange/sharing of experiences about the different role as the supervisor.
- There was mixed feedback suggesting that some supervisors might be more willing to commit to a course if it is planned inside the department. However, others also noted it valuable to meet supervisors from other departments to learn how others do it and share areas of common concern
- It was recognised that one of the challenges of being a supervisor is that "every PhD is different" and this makes it important to understand candidate expectations, motivations and capabilities.

## *Co-supervision*

- All stakeholders agree that it would be beneficial to make it mandatory that students have a co-supervisor. Although this is possible in the present arrangements, the PhD students are not confident to ask for a co-supervisor themselves because this may be perceived by their primary supervisor that either they need additional help or that there are problems with the primary supervisor. The PhD students were unclear about whether they can have a co-supervisor outside their own research group. Sometimes a co-supervisor is needed because of the disciplinary topic, sometimes it is needed for other reasons. Co-supervision is also a good solution - especially if the PhD student and the main supervisor are located on different campus.
- An example of where a supervisory team is in place is in the Department of Law which has adopted a model where each PhD student has three supervisors who focus on different elements of the supervisory practice: Academic, Teaching and Methods.
- It was noted that Co-supervision can also be a way to integrate/train less experienced supervisors. A barrier that was identified to having a co-supervisor was the needs to share the (now reduced) supervision hours between the principal supervisor and the co-supervisor.

## *Role of the research group*

- It is important to engage the research groups in PhD-training, so PhD-students become part of a research environment. "There is more to a successful PhD process than writing a thesis".
- Heads of Department consider the research group to be the main mechanism through which PhD-students are socialised into the research area/discipline but there was variability in the students experience of this depending on individual research group size, structure and location.

### *Division of responsibility*

- Heads of Department identified that they generally are not involved in the PhD process when it is running smoothly and only get involved when things are going wrong. However, there is no official feedback channel from the HoD to the PhD school and vice versa. This means that problems are dealt with locally and there is little opportunity to use these to inform wider supervisory practice. There might be different ways to set-up this channel at the department level.
- There is currently no evaluation of the PhD supervision as part of the evaluation of the research group although all stakeholders noted that the research group was integral to the PhD process. As members of the PhD board the Head of Programmes have discussions regarding training of supervisors and content of the supervisor courses.
- Supervisors are appointed by the Head of Department. Head of Programmes have no formal power to disapprove a supervisor.

### *Other raised topics*

- The PhD school has discussed a maximum of two PhD students per supervisor
- There are only few means in terms of allocated hours for the co-supervisor
- Problem with co-financed PhD students where the companies think that they “own” the PhD students
- All departments are looking into the rate of discontinuity

## **Panel recommendations**

- The Panel suggests that additional formats and structures for supervisor training are considered. A supplement to PhD-supervisor courses could be “supervisors’ seminars” (e.g. just half a day) at either faculty or department level with lectures on current, interesting generic issues, e.g. how to deal with a conflict, how to supervise PhD-students from “another generation” etc. In addition, during the meeting with the supervisors it was suggested to establish a fora/seminars/workshops for PhD supervisors with the purpose to exchange and learn from each other’s experience.
- Mandatory co-supervision should be supported, but the Panel expresses concern about the resources (teaching hours) allocated for supervisors and co-supervisors. Consider training/education of younger researchers as co-supervisors before they become main supervisor.
- Develop systematic follow-up on supervisors and research groups in relation to PhD-training – but in consideration of not developing rigid quantitative measurements.
- Supervision sessions where both the main supervisor and the co-supervisor participate should still be prioritized when relevant despite cuts in allocated resources.
- Clarify how students can ask for co-supervisors/additional supervisors and make this clear in the introduction for students and supervisors.
- Explore mechanisms to ensure that the PhD student becomes an active part of the research environment. For Industrial PhDs special initiatives and attention may be necessary in this respect. In relation to this, the research groups are urged to discuss and articulate what it implies for the PhD student to be part of the research group. The role of the PhD student may vary over the course of the PhD study.
- Consider how to strengthen the link between and among the Heads of Department and the PhD School.

## 2. Internationalization of PhD studies

In line with the Ministerial Order, DSSS emphasizes that change in research environment strongly contributes to the development of PhD student's capability to function as an independent and international researcher. However, as documented in the self-evaluation report, there are considerable differences between and within the various PhD-programs (and thus departments) to what extent PhD students stay abroad and change research environment during their PhD-study.

DSSS has taken different initiatives to stimulate and support students' change in research environment as part of their PhD-period. A key initiative is a guideline that specifies the internal regulations for international research stay. The regulation applies for PhD-students enrolled after April 2018 and it sketches 3 flexible models for 3 months research stay – from a consecutive 3 months to several shorter 2-4 weeks for instance combined with conference participation, PhD courses or data collection, see

<https://www.handbook.aau.dk/document?contentId=351780>

Furthermore, DSSS wants to establish connections and mutual agreements with several partner universities concerning exchange, double degrees and joint degrees. Along these lines, a MoU has been signed with Plymouth University, and DSSS has applied for membership of EDAMBA (European Doctoral programs Association in Management & Business Administration). DSSS notices in the self-evaluation report (p. 40) that these initiatives need to become more visible for the PhD-students, the supervisors and the administrative staff.

The discussion at the site visit meetings with the Heads of Departments, Heads of Programs, PhD-students, and supervisors revolved around the issues listed below. In general, all parts seem to share the perception of benefits but also sometimes difficulties for PhD-students in conducting longer research stay abroad. There appeared to be a lack of understanding of the flexible models that exist within the existing requirements and a perception that visits had to be for at least 3 consecutive months.

### *Strong Benefits*

- Change in research environment – preferable involving a stay abroad - is important for the student's research, network and further career.
- Being abroad has been a good experience for the interviewed PhD students. They have used different models concerning lengths of stay, how the contact was established, etc.
- The stay abroad is mainly seen as an individual thing benefitting the individual PhD student. The PhD student typically do not share knowledge and experience from the stay abroad with their research group at AAU after returning.
- Supervisors and research group could use the stay of the PhD students to generate research collaboration, development of new projects. However, the supervisor/department need to take action to invite to such a collaboration.

### *Flexibility*

- There are a range of personal factors that inhibit some PhD students' ability to participate in changes in research environment/international visits (e.g. caring responsibilities, partner working arrangements). However, none of the programmes are dealing - in a structured way - with the difficulties PhD-students face in relation to going abroad for a longer period.
- The current model seems to prioritize the length of the stay rather than the outcomes from it.

### *Funding*

- The departments and the research groups have different approaches to funding of stays and conferences – for instance to what degree the PhD student is expected to apply for external funding.

- It is seen as a problem to require a stay abroad if at the same time the department is reluctant to finance it.
- Applying for funding takes focus from the PhD and the PhD students would like more specialised information and help to apply for external funding.

*Planning and preparation are key*

- Important to define a clear purpose prior to the stay.
- The School expects the supervisors to engage in the process of stays abroad, but the supervisors do not always feel responsible.
- Stay abroad needs to be an integrated part of the PhD proposal.

## Panel recommendations

The Evaluation Panel finds the DSSS initiatives to furthering internationalisation very relevant and the following recommendations are in line with these.

- There are many reasons why PhD students may not be able to undertake lengthy mobility periods including caring responsibilities, financial implications and personal circumstances. Flexible approaches and models that enable all students to engage with mobility opportunities need to be in place at the *institutional level and with institutional support* rather than dealing with circumstances on a *case by case basis*.
- The PhD School and the departments could describe different (good) elaborated (maybe concrete) *examples of various types of stay abroad and change in research environment* (longer stay, combination of shorter stay, stay in connection to conferences, etc. as mentioned in the new internal regulations). In this way, focus may be on the benefits and not on the time served abroad.
- In order to support international research stay(s) (independent of type) students should be well prepared with a clear purpose *AND this should be evaluated after return*. The PhD School could consider develop a format/scheme to be filled in prior to departure and after the stay.
- According to the internal guidelines for supervision [unfortunately only in Danish] it is the PhD student's decision where to conduct an international research stay, but the supervisor is expected to provide guidance and suggestions. From the site visit it appeared that there were different experiences and understandings of the supervisors' responsibility in helping the PhD student with selection and preparation of these research stays. More explicit responsibility of the research group in this respect should be considered.
- Since external funding for conferences, courses, and research stay abroad is becoming an increasing issue, the PhD School together with the departments could consider how *more information on sources and help for the application procedures* can be strengthened.
- Consideration needs to be given to how the *outcomes of the students' mobility period can be shared with the research group and more broadly*. At present some longer-term visits were very much individual and independent endeavours rather than necessarily building institutional relationships. Some examples of shorter visits had more purpose/benefits to the student and AAU.
- The PhD School has a wish list to e.g. registration of research stays and courses, so it becomes easier to extract data and make analysis. A dashboard with an overview of the PhD population, data on research stay, etc. is also at the wish list. The Panel suggests that the PhD School contact the other Danish universities using the PhD Manager system in order to agree on upgrading of the system.

### 3. Further professionalism and programme development

Coinciding with the DSSS evaluation there has been a reorganization of departments, introduction of new administrative procedures, and changes in the organizational anchoring of the PhD schools but not yet all in place. Naturally, these uncertainties influence the conditions and discussions on further professionalism and program development before the new context is known.

The discussion at the site visit meetings with the Heads of Departments, Heads of Programs, PhD-students, and supervisors focused on three main topics:

#### *One or more programs at the faculty level*

- Critical mass is/may be an issue for a programme, but it is important to maintain different programmes with different academic focus that fits the different departments at the faculty level.

#### *Mandatory PhD courses for the PhD students*

- Different view on more mandatory PhD courses on top of existing mandatory courses on PBL and on Code of Conduct. Important to leave space and time for individual needs.
- Department of Law develops relevant PhD courses together with other Danish universities.
- PhD students should be encouraged to take PhD courses around the world.

#### *Coordination and division of labour between HoP and HoD*

- Heads of Programmes are included in the department management in various degrees.

### Panel recommendations

Taken the ongoing structural and administrative changes on all levels of the university into consideration, the Evaluation Panel finds it important that DSSS should initiate a bottom up dialogue with the main stakeholders when these overall structural changes are implemented or at least decided.

- In order to ensure a good PhD student experience and training in programmes/research groups with low numbers of PhD students and group members there may be a need to look at cross-training activities, etc.
- Both in relation to strategic and administrative issues the Panel suggests that the PhD School takes initiative to discuss a clear and transparent division of labour between the PhD School, Head of Department, Head of Sections, Head of Programmes, research group leader and the supervisor through the whole PhD journey.
- The various departments have different management structures, and there might be good reasons for that. However, the Panel suggests that the Head of Programmes become formally integrated in the management structure at the department level. There might be different way to do that depending on the individual department's management structure.
- The Panel also suggests that the Head of PhD-School becomes a part of the management structure at the faculty level and participate in meetings with HoD and the dean, e.g. twice a year.

## 4. Facilitation of PhD onboarding and socialization processes

Since the previous international evaluation of the DSSS took place in 2014, PhD onboarding has been a focus area for DSSS. Various initiatives have been taken at the PhD School -, department – and research group level to improve the onboarding process. These include for example:

- PhD plan and progress report (four-step-model).
- Various guidelines (e.g. thesis writing, supervision, HoP responsibilities, stay abroad) – all accessible from DSSS homepage.
- Buddy system

The discussion at the site visit meetings with the Heads of Departments, Heads of Programs, PhD-students, and supervisors focused on three main topics:

### *Buddy system and other welcoming procedures*

- According to the HoD and HoP most PhD programmes have a buddy system to help new PhD-students to navigate in the system. Some departments have a welcome folder, others draw on their PhD Club. The PhD secretary at the department level plays an important role in helping with practical formalities.
- However, meeting with the group of PhD-students gave a more nuanced picture of buddy system and welcoming procedures. They conveyed different experiences with the buddy system – apparently there is no common ‘training/information’ about being a buddy. The Buddy system is seen as an informal system by the students who would like some more formal introduction too.
- Many PhD-students start as a research assistant and from this experience onboarding seems easier. However, the bureaucracy is seen as an obstacle.

### *Fulfilling the teaching load*

- Filling out the requirements for teaching load (600 hours over the three years) may be a challenge for many PhD students. The challenge is both concerning reaching the number of teaching hours and concerning the quality of teaching and supervision.
- The supervisor is expected to ensure that the PhD student gets sufficient and relevant teaching/supervision. However, the supervisors have very different approaches to administration and the PhD students’ fulfilment of these requirements.

### *Narrow or broad definition of onboarding*

- Onboarding can be defined broader than ‘welcoming’ with a structured programme for the first days. It may also include introduction to academia, presentation skills, networks, teaching, administrative systems (including the PhD manager system).



## Panel recommendations

The evaluation Panel finds the ongoing DSSS initiatives to improve and secure constructive onboarding for the PhD-students very relevant and the following recommendations are in line with these.

- The Panel suggests that the departments and the PhD School make and share “best practice” for onboarding (welcoming).
- The Panel suggests a common half day onboarding course for the supervisor and the new PhD student where they sit together and get the same information related to the mutual expectations, the 4 steps evaluation model and other administrative issues.
- There might be a need for the PhD School to make/offer a more tailormade PhD course on teaching/supervision, examination and grading from the very start of the PhD student’s enrolment.
- As mentioned above, onboarding can be defined broader than ‘welcoming’ with a structured programme for the first days. It may also include introduction to academia, presentation skills, networks, teaching, administrative systems (including the PhD manager system). The Panel suggests that the PhD School takes initiatives together with the departments and research groups to support activities related to the broader definition of onboarding.