

Evaluation of PhD program at the Faculty of Humanities, University of Oslo

5. March 2021

1. Mandate

The Faculty of Humanities at the University of Oslo decided to undertake a periodic evaluation of the PhD program in 2020 – 2021. The PhD Board at the Faculty decided upon an evaluation design, involving collection of background material and appointing an external evaluation panel. In the spring of 2020, the Faculty and the departments prepared the background material, which consisted of collected statistical data and self-evaluations submitted by each of the departments. In the fall of 2020, the PhD Board appointed an external evaluation panel. The following external experts were appointed:

- Professor Taran Mari Thune, TIK Centre for Technology, Innovation and Culture, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Oslo (chair)
- Professor/Head of Department Regina Grafe, Department of History and Civilization, European University Institute, Florence
- Professor Leon Horsten, Department of Philosophy, University of Konstanz
- Dean Julie Sommerlund, Faculty of Humanities, Roskilde University

The mandate states that the primary task of the external evaluation panel is to evaluate the scientific quality of the PhD program in light of good practices and international standards for PhD training in the humanities.¹ A range of specific issues to be evaluated was highlighted in the mandate, including program quality and efficiency, scientific merit, relevance, and competences achieved. The mandate suggests a holistic assessment of the PhD program. We interpret this as addressing the *input quality* (recruitment and attractiveness for candidates with high aptitude and motivation), *program quality* (structure and management of the program, content, coursework, supervision, etc.), *process quality* (completion, learning and well-being of students), and *output quality* (quality and impact of the scientific results including theses and other publications, skills obtained and attractiveness in post-graduation employment). It is the view of the panel that the scientific quality of a PhD program encompasses all of the above dimensions, and we see them as interrelated aspects of quality.

The panel has also chosen to emphasize coordination issues in this report, as this has been highlighted as particularly important in interviews and self-assessment reports. The evaluation report *does not* make assessments and recommendations pertaining to the specific PhD tracks, as the evaluation panel does not have the necessary expertise in all disciplines, and the available information pertaining specifically to individual tracks was limited.

To guide the panel evaluation, a range of materials was provided by the faculty administration, such as statistics, program and track descriptions, and self-assessment reports. The panel also met (virtually) with the PhD board, the faculty leadership, administrative staff, PhD leaders for each track, the coordinator of the faculty PhD course, and current and former PhD candidates.

¹ See further details in attachment 1.

The panel also received a description of key features of the Norwegian system of PhD training and University of Oslo regulations and practices for PhD education. The evaluation has been carried out with reference to international standards and good practices in PhD training,² as well as reflections on international tendencies in PhD education in the humanities offered by the international panel members.

2. Changes in PhD education in the humanities

During the last decade, PhD education in Norway has undergone significant changes. Following the implementation of the Bologna reform, a three-year PhD program was implemented with a much stronger focus on completion, follow-up of students, and training. Part of the reason is that there has also been a strong growth in the number of PhD candidates globally and in Norway, and increasing numbers of PhD holders need to find work outside universities. An increasing number of PhD candidates recruited to Norwegian universities are international candidates. Due to these trends, the professionalization of administrative and academic roles in PhD education has been strengthened.

The organization of PhD training has also changed – particularly in the social sciences and humanities – toward more emphasis on “training” in the PhD program and a more collective organization of research – akin to what is usually found in STEM-fields. PhD schools, structured PhD coursework, and more attention to skills are new elements in PhD training in the social sciences and humanities. Alongside this, there has also been a move away from what is often referred to as the “private model” of PhD training. The latter does not entail that the supervisor-student relationship has become less important, but rather that maintaining high quality PhD education – including supervision – is emphasized more as an institutional responsibility.

Humanities faculties and communities around the world are undergoing changes and some humanities faculties face significant challenges and budget cuts. New sources and systems of research funding – away from basic funding toward competitive grants – also characterize humanities research. This change also entails that thematic and cross-disciplinary research is increasingly emphasized and that research is expected to have societal impact – and even to demonstrate it. Alongside these trends, emphasis is put on internationalization of research projects, publications, and networks. In the European context, this entails the need to attract funding from European sources, and particularly highly competitive grants such as ERC grants.

These trends are general and do not only influence the development of humanities research, but in some respects they are harder to accommodate within traditional humanities disciplines. These trends are partly due to changing funding landscapes, and they reinforce developments within scientific discovery. New possibilities associated with digital data sources and methods, for instance, are changing the field of humanities from the bottom-up.

A changing research and funding landscape in the humanities leads to a division between new humanities research fields that are more thematic in nature, such as media studies, and traditional humanities disciplines, such as philosophy and musicology, that are organized and funded in different

² LERU “good practices” <https://www.leru.org/publications/good-practice-elements-in-doctoral-training>

ways. Strategies, policy papers, and research funding programs are now more than ever promoting projects that cut across disciplines and fields of research to find solutions to major societal challenges. At the same time, job market success for those PhD graduates who wish to move into an academic career still depends on their ability to demonstrate the required disciplinary training. For any PhD program, in humanities and elsewhere, there is a delicate balancing act between *depth* associated with disciplinary expertise and *breadth* in the sense of candidates acquiring broader skill sets.

These trends have been an important backdrop for the evaluation panel's assessment of the program.

3. Evaluation of the PhD program

3.1 Structure and coordination

The PhD program is a complex structure with one overall program and seven PhD “tracks” - one for each of the faculty's departments. This program structure is also found at other universities in Norway and at other faculties at the University of Oslo. The faculty has the overall responsibility for the PhD regulations, admissions, and granting of degrees, organization of a common introductory course, and ensuring that the program has sufficient quality. The overall responsibility for the program rests with the Dean of Research, assisted by a PhD board.

The operational management of the program is carried out at the department level, and departments have designated PhD leaders/Head of research and designated administrative coordinators/advisors who follow-up PhD candidates. Departments are responsible for recruitment and admission to the program, teaching, supervision, administrative follow-up and organize examinations and PhD defenses. Some departments have a third administrative layer, where responsibilities are carried out in disciplinary units.

The Faculty has chosen a decentralized model, which also reflects historical conditions, because PhD training needs to be closely aligned with disciplinary needs and research traditions. Although the panel acknowledges this need, some of the tracks enroll a small number of PhD candidates, and a discussion of the division of labor and coordination across tracks is highly recommended.

During the site visits and in available documents, the heterogeneity between disciplines and particularly between traditional humanities disciplines and thematically oriented research areas, such as media studies, area studies, environmental humanities, and more, was put forth as an explanation and in some cases an argument for splitting the program into seven individual programs. The panel does not support that this is a logical conclusion to a challenge of heterogeneity, as it may cement existing structures and limit opportunities for program development in the long run. The panel recommends that the Faculty puts more emphasis on coordination and collaboration across the tracks.

This does not entail that we recommend increased top-down steering, but rather that academics and professionals involved in PhD training need to find a suitable platform to develop the program as a joint endeavor. This requires strategic direction and support from the Faculty level, the PhD board and the PhD leader network. The faculty might consider establishing smaller “task force” groups to address specific questions.

Areas where the program would benefit from better coordination include certain administrative tasks, PhD courses, and training and professional support to supervisors. Good practices connected to hiring and integration of PhD candidates (internally, externally and project funded) and better integration of international PhD candidates are other areas which would benefit from inter-department cooperation. Shared practices about how to make the best use of the “completion grant” semesters for the benefit of all PhD students is another area for improved coordination. All of these issues are discussed further below.

3.2 Program quality

The overall quality of the PhD Program in the Faculty is unquestionably good. The program has implemented a range of good practices associated with high quality doctoral training, and the academic and administrative routines to train, supervise, support, and follow up students is very good. The PhD students overall seem to be satisfied with the program and the learning opportunities it offers. Below we comment on key parts of the program: PhD courses and teaching, supervision, and administrative follow-up of PhD candidates.

3.2.1 Courses and teaching

The education component is usually the part of a PhD that students are the least satisfied with. Frequent problems concern limited access, low frequency of courses and lack of relevance. Dissatisfaction with “generic” courses and mandatory work is also widespread. Some of these issues are also present in the humanities program at UiO, and such problems are often enlarged when PhD programs are small, highly specialized, and lack a large and stable group of PhD candidates.

The lack of critical mass to provide high quality and relevant courses is evident in several of the specializations in the PhD program at the Faculty of Humanities too. As far as the panel can see, it has been addressed through developing common introductory courses for all PhD candidates, in some instances participating in national PhD schools, organizing international summer schools, and through allowing considerable freedom in designing individual programs, including letting students organize PhD courses themselves.

However, the panel is of the opinion that the diversity in practices is too large and that there are signs of problems connected to access and quality in PhD courses. The panel recommends that the faculty and PhD leaders engage productively in an open conversation about what kinds of training contents could be best offered and at which level. The faculty level seems best suited for the basic introductory courses and for transferable skills and job market training. Disciplinary training remains important and should be done by the Departments. However, there seems to be a frequent problem with critical mass in some of the tracks, which means that disciplinary courses could be organized in collaboration inside the faculty but also with other national and international research communities.

The faculty might benefit from establishing a common platform of information about PhD courses held at the faculty. The panel would recommend committing to a certain frequency of courses and that departments agree upon a deadline for announcing courses through the platform. This will make the courses and their regularity more transparent for the PhD candidates. The platform could also include PhD courses in the humanities at other Norwegian universities, or – where relevant – in the framework of the National PhD Schools. The faculty should also consider developing clusters of researchers seeking training in particular skills that cross departmental lines. Environmental humanities has been mentioned, but this could also be relevant for some parts of digital humanities, or training in social sciences.

It should also be possible to agree on e.g. a common number of ECTS assigned for different kinds of courses and activities (thesis seminars etc.), and to make it easier for PhD students to take courses across the different departments and outside the faculty.

Credit points are also assigned for attending mandatory events, such as thesis seminars and “mock viva” events. However, practices across the tracks seem to vary in terms of how many and how ECTS credits are awarded for different activities, and there is a lack of transparency and uniform standards around ECTS credits and “work load”.

It appears that collection of ECTS credits is used as a way of ensuring quality of PhD training. There seems to be a somewhat mechanistic focus on quantity (how many hours of work does this require from the student) at the moment. Departments ought to make it clearer to PhD candidates that ECTS credits are an accounting tool and cannot be used as a measure of academic excellence. A more sustained focus on the quality of the courses and how students acquire essential skills would be a better target.

3.2.2 Compulsory courses and generic skills training

As has become the norm at several faculties at the UiO, the faculty is responsible for common and mandatory introductory courses covering a range of issues – philosophy of science, research ethics, research skills and research communication. There has for a time been some dissatisfaction with these courses (seen in other faculties as well) and the Humanities faculty has taken steps to improve them – with some success as seen from a student satisfaction perspective.

However, the current mandatory course is seen as too short and shallow by some and too long by others. The part that seems particularly difficult is that the introduction to theories of science and research ethics is squeezed into a few days, and that this requires that all students have prior knowledge to benefit from the courses. The current model relies on the notion that Norwegian PhD candidates received some relevant instruction during previous degrees. However, prior knowledge among the increasing number of internationally trained PhD candidates is subject to much more diversity and the Faculty will need to design courses that take account of that shift.

Research skills (project management) and communication skills (academic and popular science writing) are also important, but not all of this is useful for students at the very start of the program. Although we recognize the difficulty in organizing a mandatory course to fit all students’ needs, we still think that there is room for improvement. One suggestion could be to split the introduction course into different parts and allow students to take modules at a pace that fits their research programs. Academic writing courses or workshops should be offered, preferably in collaboration with the University Library that offers many resources here, too.

Another suggestion would be to extend the philosophy of science and ethics courses, and design these as courses that stretch over time and are tied much more closely to the candidates’ own scientific work. The University of Bergen³ has an alternative way to organize such courses, and there are many good examples of how such courses can be organized and taught with a more student-centered pedagogy and content. This would also entail awarding more ECTS for these courses, and cutting credits for tasks that are closely related to thesis work (such as thesis seminars, mid-way evaluations and mock vivas). This is done by some other departments, and the argument is that thesis work is already awarded 150 ECTS.

³ <https://www.uib.no/svt>

3.2.3 Supervision

Supervision and the close collaboration between senior academics and PhD candidates are undoubtedly the most important parts of research training. Having good practices for supervision is essential for high quality PhD programs. The faculty of humanities have taken several steps to ensure that all PhD candidates receive adequate supervision and have occasionally offered supervisor courses for MA and PhD supervisors. Organizing mandatory training for PhD supervisors at the Faculty level might not be warranted, but all supervisors should be offered adequate training (particularly new supervisors and supervisors that are new to the Norwegian universities). Even more important is the facilitation of a collegial network for supervisors and finding ways for supervisors to mentor and support each other, and the faculty should provide support for setting up supervisor networks.

The practice of assigning a second supervisor to PhD students is widespread in the Faculty, and is required by some, but not all, departments. The faculty may consider a more uniform policy of second supervisors. The panel want to emphasize that supervision and the quality of supervision is a shared responsibility. The faculty should work continuously to make the supervision relation a less “private” relationship, so that problems in the supervisor-supervisee relationship (e.g. communication problems) can be detected early on. How this can be organized must be tailored to the specific research project and discipline.

The Faculty also actively encourages outside experts (national and international) to be deeply involved in PhD supervision. Outside experts routinely function as second (or third, or fourth) supervisors of PhD projects. This is an excellent way of introducing PhD students to the international quality expectations from the very start of their PhD work (rather than just at the end, when they are judged by outside PhD examiners).

3.2.4 Follow-up and integration in work environment

The program structure and administrative routines in the program are in line with the high standard that is associated with Norwegian PhD training – also in an international perspective. There seem to be good practices with several milestones (introductory meetings, midway seminars, thesis seminars, and mock vivas), and progress is followed closely. There also seems to be a clear sense of responsibility felt at the department level for the work environment and welfare of PhD candidates, also regulated by Norwegian employment laws. The department PhD leaders and PhD advisors clearly follow up these tasks in a good manner. Candidates and supervisors in all departments submit annual performance assessments. All candidates are offered annual meetings with the PhD leader/Head of Research to discuss performance, progress, or issues regarding their work situation. Multiple departments report that their PhD leaders have an open-door policy for their PhD candidates.

There are also a lot of great bottom-up initiatives reported in the departments’ self-evaluations to support the social and academic work environment, such as breakfast seminars, lunches, social meetings outside work, writing seminars, shut up and write sessions, etc. Both ILN and IKOS arrange a semester kick-off with candidates and supervisors. Departments like IFIKK, ILOS, and ILN set new candidates up with a more senior PhD “buddy”. This seems to be a success, especially for international candidates. The panel would recommend that the faculty make use of the departments’ self-evaluations when processing the overall recommendations in this report. One might collect and identify common challenges and best practices within these short assessments, giving both the faculty and the departments an overview of common challenges and concrete ways of solving them.

Increasing numbers of PhD candidates are affiliated with research projects and centers, and some of these seem to have a very proactive approach to supporting a vibrant research community with close interaction between senior academic staff and PhD students. It seems that quite a lot of the international PhD candidates work in these groups. We regard this practice as highly commendable, but there might be increased disparity between groups of PhD students that work in research groups and those who work on their own individual projects. Candidates reported that the thesis seminars helped them feel like colleagues. Deliberately organizing these seminars across research groups might counteract some of the trenches that the research groups necessarily form. The faculty should continue to pay attention to integration of all candidates in research groups, and particularly pay attention to the needs of international candidates. In some cases, there seems to be a lack of appropriate information, and several candidates point to Norwegian work culture as being very informal and that you need a lot of tacit knowledge to “know your way in the system.” PhD candidates seem to be mindful of this problem and assist each other. The Faculty would not be remiss to develop targeted ways of introducing incoming international PhD students not only to the way in which the Faculty and the University work, but also of helping them “land on their feet” with respect to the practicalities of living in Oslo. International PhD candidates should be supported more fully in acquiring at least a working knowledge of Norwegian, which is essential for their academic and personal integration.

3.3 Attractiveness and internationalization

The Faculty of Humanities at the University of Oslo is clearly the largest research institution for humanities research in Norway. Traditionally, the faculty has recruited PhD candidates from Norway and a high proportion of those have been UiO graduates. Although this is not all that surprising given the nature of some of the disciplines, there has been criticism toward “inbreeding” and that internal candidates are often preferred as they have connections and know the specific research areas.

We have no information that could suggest that this is a real problem. On average, each announced research fellowship had more than 21 applicants in 2018 and 2019. The number of applicants did however to some degree vary. A few highly specialized announcements generated only 2-4 applicants, while broader announcements attracted close to 50 applicants. It would be in the interest of the Faculty to ensure that professors who apply for grants that include PhD positions structure the latter - already at the proposal level - in ways that are not too narrowly defined.

Over the last few years, however, international recruitment of PhD students has become much more important. The number of candidates with international master’s degrees (or equivalent) has steadily increased in the last 10 years. In 2019 international candidates constituted over 50% of the admitted candidates. The program has the great advantage that PhD positions in Norway are well funded and attractive from an economic standpoint. An increasing number of projects funded by prestigious grants (such as ERCs and Center of Excellence schemes) and an increased number of international academic staff also make the program more attractive for international candidates.

The students in the PhD program are very well funded, and well cared for. From a perspective of well-being, and from an economic perspective, the PhD program is very attractive. The increasing diversity of the PhD student mass also boosts the attractiveness of the program (from a social perspective). In this sense, the increased internationalization of the program is indeed a great asset.

Internationalization also has “outgoing” dimensions. There is a clear ambition in Norway that all PhD candidates spend time abroad during their PhD, and it is frequently regarded as a problem that too

few candidates do this. 42 % of the candidates in the faculty's survey reported that they had been abroad during their doctoral studies. Only 8 % of the surveyed candidates reported that they had been abroad to receive supervision at another institution, while 16 % reported they had spent time abroad for the purpose of academic stimulus.

The faculty might consider whether PhD students make sufficient use of opportunities to stay abroad during the PhD and what may hinder such stays among different groups of PhD candidates. In some departments, a semester abroad is strongly recommended or even semi-obligatory. The faculty could instigate a discussion on some uniform expectations to communicate to the candidates – preferably early in the PhD period – as well as support in planning for research stays. The Faculty should ensure that outgoing internationalization becomes a feature of the PhD experience for both Norwegian and international candidates. The Faculty should monitor outgoing internationalization, and pay special to the potential pitfall that Norwegian candidates, because of their diverse age structure and family situations, may face bigger obstacles than international ones.

Outgoing internationalization is also carried out through shorter research visits, participation in PhD schools and courses, and attendance at international scientific meetings and conferences. The faculty expects all candidates to attend international conferences as part of their organized research training, reinforcing the outgoing dimension. The practice of inviting international researchers to act as opponents in Oslo in thesis seminars and vivas is also a good way to embed PhD candidates in international research networks.

3.4 Quality of output

3.4.1 Completion

The faculty has significantly increased completion rates and decreased completion time during the last decade. On this aspect of quality, the program has made significant advances, and the completion grant scheme appears to be a highly effective tool in this regard. What is unclear is the potential impact the strong focus on efficiency and decreasing completion time has had on the scientific quality. Currently, there is no evidence to evaluate the impact of the scheme on scientific quality, and the panel has not met critical concerns during the site visit.

3.4.2 Scientific contributions

Currently, the faculty has limited data on the scientific contributions and quality of PhD research, as it does not systematically collect data on candidates' (and former candidates') scientific achievements. The panel has limited data to support an assessment of scientific contributions, aside from a short survey among 50 former thesis examiners who in 2019 were part of evaluation committees for PhD theses. Their assessment portrays doctoral theses submitted at the Faculty of Humanities as high-quality doctoral theses on par with international standards. Supervisors interviewed during the site visit did not voice strong concerns about quality and the trade-off between completing on time and scientific quality.

The main safeguard against a potential compromise on scientific quality has been to firmly embed the PhD program in the international academic landscape. In particular, international scholars frequently serve as external examiners of PhD dissertations, thus serving as guarantors for academic quality.

The panel believes that using international examiners and making sure PhD candidates present their work in international arenas is a good way to provide clear benchmarks for international standards of

excellence for PhD candidates and supervisors alike. The midway evaluation stands out as a particularly successful practice. By embedding early career researchers in international networks, the quality of their work is both verified and enhanced.

The panel is mindful that these deliberations might be different across disciplines, and some fields of investigations, particularly those that have traditionally focused on the publication of substantial monographs, might have other viewpoints on this issue.

The Faculty of Humanities must deal proactively with the diversity of scientific cultures inside the faculty. Rather than agreeing on a set and often quantitative standard for scientific quality (number of papers, etc) which often do not work in social science and humanities, the peer review practices offered at midway, thesis seminars, and mock vivas should be used proactively to discuss scientific “quantity,” contributions, and quality.

Thus, currently, there appears to be no reason to worry about scientific quality and contributions, but the panel would like to point out that the lack of systematic monitoring of scientific contributions is worrying. Systematizing publication data (also including monographs) should be possible through the Norwegian Cristin system. Introducing PhD candidates’ scientific output into a platform like Orcid would e.g. increase their international visibility, while also allowing the Faculty to monitor their success across a series of outputs that is broad enough to work for different disciplines.

Bibliographic information should always be used with care, but paired with peer review and broad use of international experts in supervision and examination, the Faculty should have sufficient information to make updated assessments of scientific quality and contributions at regular intervals.

For this to become a meaningful exercise, it is important that the various program leaders undertake a joint effort to develop a clear language of what scientific quality in a humanities PhD program means. It is also essential that PhD candidates and supervisors know how the quality of the output of the PhD program will be assessed, and in the light of which strategic aims defined ex ante by the faculty this is undertaken.

3.4.3 Transferable skills and preparation for careers

Following the implementation of the Bologna-degree system and the qualification framework approach,⁴ the PhD should lead to deep scientific competences, but also a range of associated competences. Most of these competences are best achieved through working on independent research and the completion of a thesis. However, most universities see the need to strengthen what is often referred to as “generic skills” and “transferable skills” by raising candidates’ awareness of their achieved competences, and also to offer targeted learning opportunities.

Which skills ought to be emphasized has been subject to a lively debate, and an important point of reference is the European Science Foundation report on research careers.⁵ At the University of Oslo, efforts has been made to create uniform standards for the support for early career researchers,⁶ that highlight what skills should be promoted and how the candidates can be supported. In addition to competences in management of the research process, analytical and communication skills, emphasis

⁴ https://www.nokut.no/siteassets/nkr/20140606_norwegian_qualifications_framework.pdf

⁵ http://archives.esf.org/fileadmin/Public_documents/Publications/moforum_research_careers.pdf

⁶ <https://www.uio.no/for-ansatte/enhetssider/med/aktuelt/leder/2019/bilder/karrierestotte-til-forskere-i-tidlige-karrierefaser--rapport.pdf>

is also put on skills related to teaching and supervision, and promotion and use of scientific competences in private and public sector.

At the Faculty of Humanities, generic skills training is tied to the research process itself and learning through collaboration in research groups and knowledge-exchange between peers. In addition, structured training in communication skills is part of the mandatory “introduction course” (see above).

Former candidates that the panel met during the site visit. reported that they often were reminded that a majority of PhD holders have to find work outside the university sector. They were trained as academics, but also made aware of the small chances of securing a permanent academic position. This emphasis is not seen as particularly helpful by the PhD students, as they are well aware of this, and would prefer to strengthen competences that are seen as particularly relevant in preparing for post-graduation employment, whether it is inside or outside the university sector. What is particularly requested is skills in the research process, including writing of grant proposals, support to network building, information about the research system and funding opportunities in Norway and beyond, etc. Mentoring students on how to develop job applications, CVs, and an application dossier for academic positions was also requested by PhD candidates.

The most relevant generic skills from a PhD perspective are competences in supervision, teaching, and other tasks related to education. The PhD candidates feel that the system of assigning teaching tasks to PhD candidates during the completion year is too unsystematic and provides insufficient opportunities to develop skills through learning and mentoring from experienced academics. This was particularly highlighted by international candidates, who often felt that Norwegian PhDs had much better opportunities to develop their teaching in relevant courses, rather than just being “assigned” a course. This was seen as an area where “tacit knowledge”, as mentioned above, was necessary, and where international students saw themselves as at a disadvantage.

Overall, although PhD students and former candidates appreciate courses in communication and support from the work center at the University of Oslo, the emphasis on communication skills early in the PhD career is not sufficient to develop the skill set required for any post-graduation occupation, and this is readily acknowledged in reports referenced above. The kinds of skills and the timing of training should be addressed. Moreover, the faculty is actually in a unique situation of strengthening transferable skills through the completion year arrangement, and in some ways can be a leading institution when it comes to promotion of skills (generic and scientific) in the PhD program.

Most institutions offer three-year PhD positions and hence the space for addressing generic skills is limited. If the Faculty instead of modularizing skills-training in special courses, approached the PhD as a learning process, and made better use of the completion grant, training in generic skills could be carried out throughout the four years. And since PhD graduates early aim for different careers, some degree of tailoring to specific career ambitions would also be recommended. Some PhD students we met also suggested that it would be possible to include internships or collaborative projects with private and public organizations as a good way to include post-graduation labor market skills that are best learned through practice rather than in courses. For other candidates, this is not an attractive option. More flexibility and use of the full four-year period, would enable meaningful organization of generic skills training, while not jeopardizing the PhD students’ scientific work.

Overall, the panel suggests that the Faculty should consider the unique opportunity it has to emphasize skills training throughout the whole period and make better and more creative use of the completion year. Also, , the faculty should systematically collect information about its graduates’

career developments and scientific contributions, and involve alumni in discussions about relevant competences.

3.7 Quality enhancement and assurance

The panel acknowledges the overall quality of the PhD program at the Faculty of Humanities. The program has implemented a range of good practices associated with high quality doctoral training, and the academic and administrative routines to support and follow-up students is adequate. The PhD students overall seem to be satisfied with the program and the learning opportunities it offers. The program structure and administrative routines are in line with a high standard that is associated with Norwegian PhD training. However, the Faculty cannot afford to rest on its laurels. The needs of the PhD students at the Faculty are changing because of the increasing proportion of international PhD students, externally funded PhD students, and candidates with interdisciplinary backgrounds.

This entails new challenges and opportunities for the whole PhD program structure and a need to better coordinate the program to meet new demands. It also has ramifications for quality maintenance and improvement, and the Faculty will need to adapt and evolve to keep up with these changes and challenges. The structure of the PhD program at the Faculty will need to adapt to the on-going changes in the research and funding landscape, which are only expected to continue.

One fundamental question is how the overall quality of the PhD program can be assessed. As seen in the introduction, the panel recommends a holistic approach to quality in PhD education. A quality enhancement scheme needs to address the quality of the *input* to the program, the organization and management of the program, the quality of the *process* that the PhD candidates go through during their PhD education, and the quality of the *output*. In the current state, the program delivers on all these points. What is to some extent lacking at present is:

(1) a collective *reflection*, not just at Faculty level, but also at the department and interdepartmental level, on what is meant by high quality PhD education and how different aspects of quality can and should be *measured*.

(2) extensive and robust *data* about the PhD program' quality, as defined by the measurements indicated in (1).

The panel believes that it is essential for the Faculty to revisit the alignment between the strategic aims of the program and its quality monitoring. It is vital that the strategic goals are made explicit and shared among faculty members. The shared elaboration of goals and the way to monitor their progress cannot be substituted with quantitative and administrative benchmarks.

With respect to (2), it might prove useful with more systematic data collection of, inter alia, the following:

- average number of applications per PhD position at the Faculty
- post-graduation employment of the faculty's candidates
- PhD student wellbeing
- average number and quality of publication out of PhD dissertations

The processes through which the Faculty seeks to maintain the quality of the PhD program are effective, but here, too, there is room for improvement. In particular, more *uniformity* in these processes would in various instances be desirable. The Faculty should take a coordinating role to achieve this. Moreover, quality enhancement should be seen as a joint professional responsibility

and an opportunity, rather than an administrative “burden.” More active involvement of academic staff and better use of PhD leader network and the PhD program board is advisable.

4. Recommendations

The panel has made several observations and assessments of the PhD program at the Faculty of Humanities, and in light of international and Norwegian standards for PhD training and our own experiences in managing PhD programs, we offer several recommendations that we hope will be valuable in the further development of the PhD program by the Faculty of Humanities.

4.1 Program structure and coordination

At present, one of the program’s main challenges is coordination and collaboration. The program, in the eyes of the panel, appears fragmented with different tracks and sub-tracks closely in-line with either disciplinary and or thematic specializations. Although this provides a close link between PhD education and specific research traditions, it carries risks associated with cost-efficiency and of a lack of critical mass to provide a stimulating research environment for all candidates.

The fragmentation also provides too little incentive to further develop the PhD program in a way that takes into account the changes in the field of humanities, including increased internationalization, attention to interdisciplinary and thematic research, the integration of some fields (such as History and Archaeology) into National Research Schools, and the adaptation to changing funding landscape and careers of humanities scholars.

The split between “old” and “new” humanities is evident in some fields at the University of Oslo, and thus also in its PhD education. The Faculty of Humanities at the University of Oslo has evidently engaged in multiple interdisciplinary projects, some of which received substantial external funding. These well-funded projects of high excellence attract highly qualified international applicants to the PhD program. These changes will, however, create new tensions for PhD program with more and more international PhD candidates writing increasingly interdisciplinary projects. They also represent a challenge to the often disciplinary course components and teaching environments. This development risks furthering a divide between the “old” and “new” humanities.

The Faculty of Humanities has necessarily responded to these changes in several ways, but still seems to see current developments as mainly a “problem.” The decentralized structure for the program does not leave enough space to work against such a division. Rather than seeing such changes as mainly a challenge, a high-quality research community such as the Faculty of humanities should regard it as an opportunity for further development and address these challenges through collaboration and coordination across scientific communities, guided by support and strategic direction at the Faculty level.

Recommendations

- The faculty should keep the one-program structure
- The Faculty and the PhD leaders need to rethink the structure of the program to achieve better coordination, collaboration, learning and common quality standards across all parts of the program.
- We recommend that the role of the PhD board is strengthened in the coordination of the program and that routines

- The Faculty and PhD board should support the development of professional networks between supervisors and more collaboration across the different tracks.

4.2 Recruitment, attractiveness, and internationalization

The program has traditionally recruited mostly Norwegian candidates and candidates mainly from the University of Oslo. This practice (sometimes referred to as “inbreeding”) – although logical – poses a problem for the attractiveness and quality of the program. We see an increased internationalization of the program, and particularly increased international *recruitment*, as positive developments and a sign of the increased international recognition and attractiveness of the program.

The high number of applicants per PhD position is another sign of quality and attractiveness. We recommend that new positions are announced openly and not in overly narrow specializations, to ensure recruitment of the best candidates. This will also make the program more attractive for international candidates.

Although we sometimes encounter the sentiment that international candidates pose a problem, we rather encourage the program leadership to see internationalization as something that strongly enhances quality. As seen above, international PhD candidates experience problems (many administrative and integration-related issues), and the Faculty needs to develop routines that better accommodate the needs of international candidates.

Recommendations

- The faculty should make sure that all new positions are announced openly and that they are not too narrowly defined to allow for a significant pool of able candidates for all positions
- The faculty needs to develop a better and more consistent support system for international PhD candidates

4.3 Program and process quality - courses, supervision, and administrative follow-up

The program quality is handled in a good way, but often with the attention to administrative routines. Although this is important, we also encourage more attention to ensuring uniformity and coordination/collaboration across tracks, particularly in the “taught” part of the program. The size of the program does not warrant such a diversity of practices (e.g. in the assigning of ECTS) and the lack of communication and collaboration across tracks seem to hinder the development of a good portfolio of courses.

We are of course mindful of the need for disciplinary training, but recommend that the Faculty puts in place a platform for cross-disciplinary communication and collaboration, so that candidates might benefit from courses offered in other departments and in other universities – in Norway and abroad.

Moreover, we recommend that the mandatory introductory course is rethought and that the faculty takes advantage of the full PhD period to offer relevant training in generic skills, teacher training and preparation for future careers. We also recommend that the Faculty promotes the viewpoint that the PhD is a learning trajectory where different skills, disciplinary insights and scientific achievements

need to be integrated rather than being seen as “separate”. The National qualification framework for PhD (third cycle)⁷ should be a good basis for discussions.

We also see that the very short introductions to philosophy of science and research ethics do not work well (as they are based on an assumption that all PhD candidates are already familiar with these subjects through the traditional Norwegian “exphil” training). Overall, we recommend that this part is increased in terms of credit points and taught in different formats. They should also be more closely integrated in the research projects of the candidates.

We see that there are good practices overall when it comes to supervision – and stress that this is the most important part of PhD training – and that the practice of assigning more than one supervisor is a good way to ensure quality in supervision.

We recommend that PhD supervisors receive training and support – not in the form of mandatory training for all (junior supervisors might benefit more) but through mentoring by experienced academics and supervisor networks. This has been successfully implemented at both University and department level elsewhere at UIO. The midway seminar is also a good place for supervisors to receive feedback from colleagues, and should be taken advantage of as supervisor training.

Recommendations

- The faculty should foster communication and collaboration in course offerings and better flow of information about courses through setting up a course platform
- The faculty should support the development of more uniform practices and transparency when it comes to assigning ECTS for different activities
- The faculty should rethink the current format of the introductory course, the panel suggests increasing the number of ECTS given and spreading the course components over a longer time period (modularized)
- The faculty should have ample opportunities for supervisor training and mentoring

4.4 Quality of output – completion, scientific output, and skills

Overall, the program has achieved much when it comes to efficiency. There is a risk that this comes at the cost of reduced scientific quality. However, we do not see any clear signs of this, and the overall assessment of external thesis examiners is that theses submitted for examination are of high quality. The practice of using international examiners on midway seminars, mock vivas, thesis evaluations, and defenses is a commendable practice, and a good way to ensure scientific quality.

We are, however, concerned that the faculty has too little information about the scientific quality of its program, and the learning outcomes achieved through the PhD period. The faculty should take responsibility for collecting more information about further careers (post-graduation publications, academic posts, grants, awards, etc.) as such information provides the best signposts of the scientific achievements and attractiveness of PhD candidates trained at the Faculty of Humanities.

The panel believes that there is room for improvement in training in so-called generic skills. This part seems to be mainly taught in the first semester, which is probably not the best time to engage in such issues. The Faculty should make better use of the opportunity that the completion year offers to support development of generic skills.

⁷ <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/tema/utdanning/hoyere-utdanning/nasjonalt-kvalifikasjonsrammeverk/id564809/>

Until now, it seems that generic skills are equated with “communication,” but emphasis should instead be placed on skills that are relevant for further careers, including important academic career skills (grant proposals, management of research projects etc.) and teaching. For some PhD candidates who do not plan to pursue an academic career, internships or other opportunities to engage with potential employment contexts could be a good way to acquire generic skills.

Learning situations to support skill development could be found in all parts of the program: courses, supervision, dissemination, writing, and so on. Attention to broader skill sets and integration of a variety of research skills and so-called generic skills, should be fostered and integrated into more learning situations.

To further develop its approach to generic skills training, the national qualification framework is a good starting point for discussing what, when and how the faculty should support development of generic/transferrable skills. The PhD candidates and former graduates should also be more actively involved in developing this part of the program.

Recommendations

- The faculty needs to set up a system to regularly analyze information about scientific contributions. This does not mean that only simple indicators should be used, and the faculty could make better use of the many and varied practices of involving international experts also to get feedback on the scientific quality of the PhD program
- The faculty should rethink its current approach to generic skills training, allow for more flexibility and make better use of the completion year to support development of different employability skills
- The faculty should gain more information about relevant generic skills, discuss these with the national qualification framework in mind, and involve PhD students and graduates in developing good learning opportunities
- The faculty should take steps to collect information about the career developments of its graduates

Quality assurance and enhancement – further work

Quality assurance practices seem to be very much an administrative responsibility, but in response to major developments with humanities research and PhD education, the Faculty should put more emphasis on quality enhancement, continuous development and learning. To this end, the faculty should engage in a cross-departmental effort to enhance the quality of the whole program. This would entail developing a common “language” about quality in PhD education, and an agreed upon standards for quality in PhD education at the faculty.

Recommendations

- We recommend that a process to develop the quality of the program should be anchored in the PhD board and involve the PhD leader network who should take a joint responsibility for the quality enhancement of the whole program.
- A reflective discussion about what is meant by quality in PhD training is necessary. Our report offers a starting point to discuss quality in PhD training, with a broad definition of what this entails.
- We recommend that the faculty sets up a system for collecting data and uses its many peer-review opportunities to get feedback on the quality of the program and particularly the scientific quality.

- We recommend that the Faculty and the PhD board take a close look at the self-assessment reports, as there are multiple examples of both good practices and common challenges, that should be discussed with the relevant academics, PhD leaders, and PhD candidates.
- We recommend that the faculty consults and involves its PhD population in the further development of the program.

In many respects the panel believes that the PhD program in Humanities at the University of Oslo has a unique opportunity to develop a leading PhD program in Humanities, and hopes that the recommendations offered by the panel can serve as a starting point from which to take on such a task.

Attachment 1

MANDATE PHD EVALUATION 2020/2021

Mandate for the external evaluation of the PhD program at the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Oslo, 2020.

The primary task of the external evaluation committee is to evaluate the scientific quality of the PhD program in light of international standards. This includes an evaluation of the program structure, courses offered, supervision, research environment, administrative support, internationalization, the scientific merit of doctoral dissertations and the attractiveness of the program. When considering the research training, the panel is asked explicitly to consider issues related to career planning and transferable skills with a view to a career both inside and outside academia.

The external evaluation committee should also evaluate the overall program efficiency, including organization, leadership, systems of quality assurance and communication. It should consider whether the program should be developed through increased integration and harmonization of the practices at the Departments or whether a more decentralized model would work better.

The evaluation should use internationally agreed principles for high quality doctoral education as benchmarks for the program evaluation (including the LERU principles and the principles for doctoral training suggested by the European commission). The evaluation committee must take into account the setting of doctoral education in Norway, including the financing of candidates through doctoral research fellowships, either at the degree awarding institution or at external institutions.

The evaluation committee should prepare a report that (i) describes the status of the program compared to relevant benchmarks, and (ii) points to means through which the Departments' organized research training can improve its scientific quality and the program as a whole can enhance its efficiency.

The evaluation committee is asked to submit its report to the Pro-Dean of Research at the Faculty of Humanities by 15th February 2021.