

Evaluation of the Graduate School of Business and Social Sciences, Aarhus University

Preamble

As part of the international evaluation of the Graduate School of Business and Social Sciences (GSBSS) at Aarhus University, the evaluators were asked by the Head of the Graduate School (Vice-Dean Per Baltzer Overgaard) to “...comment and advice on the organisation of the graduate school and its PhD programmes” and to “...give recommendation to actions, which can contribute to the further development of the PhD programmes”. The evaluation panel was chaired by Professor Thomas Rønne (Copenhagen Business School) and included Professors PerOla Öberg (Uppsala University), Xavier Groussot (Lund University), and JT (Taco) van der Vaart (University of Groningen).

The panel received material documenting the organization and performance of the Graduate School, including a self-evaluation report. An on-site visit took place on May 6-7 during which the panel met with PhD students, representatives of the PhD Association, supervisors, Program Chairs, Faculty Management Team, and the Head of the Graduate School. The panel of evaluators would like to thank the persons involved for a very a well-organized visit and for open and helpful discussions.

General Impressions

It is the overall impression of the panel of evaluators that GSBSS is well-functioning and supports the departments/programs in providing PhD training of high standards. The panel would like to emphasize the following points:

- i) GSBSS plays an important role in attracting the best talent. The announcements of PhD positions at the level of the Graduate School attract a large number of applicants. Furthermore, the assessment and enrollment procedures whereby the allocation of PhD scholarships is negotiated between Program Chairs and Vice-Dean seem to work well and to ensure that the best candidates are recruited within and across programs.
- ii) GSBSS is an internationally oriented graduate school with a large number of international applicants and a significant share of non-Danish PhD students in most

- programs. Also, PhD students are encouraged to visit a leading foreign university, and longer stays abroad are supported financially by the Graduate School.
- iii) GSBSS has implemented rules and regulations that ensure consistency across PhD programs and that codify and disseminate some best practices.
 - iv) GSBSS has a day-to-day administration (organized around the software “*PhD planner*”) that implements the procedures outlined in the ministerial order and that does not seem to create unnecessary bureaucracy.
 - v) GSBSS seems to be a useful platform for Program Chairs to discuss common problems and to learn from each other.

Although all PhD programs work within the same framework, there appear to be important differences between the individual programs. Some of the well-established programs – in particular, the programs in Political Science and in Economics and Business – offer a relatively large set of courses and have various procedures and rules that help PhD students to achieve the best possible result. Other programs offer fewer courses and seem to provide a less supportive environment. Some of the differences can probably be explained by how long the programs have existed and by the recent expansion of some of the programs; “Rome was not built in a day” as someone expressed it in an interview during the panel’s on-site visit. It should also be noted that the mild discontent expressed in the interviews with certain aspects of some programs is not found when looking at supervision: There is a high degree of satisfaction with supervision among all PhD students enrolled in GSBSS.

The management of GSBSS has set up incentive systems to encourage the programs to offer longer courses and the students/supervisors to plan longer stays abroad. While the panel agrees with the objectives underlying the incentive systems, it saw little evidence of incentives changing behavior. It seems that improving PhD education in the programs where more structure would be beneficial requires managerial attention at the program/department level more than anything.

Finally, before turning to more specific comments, the panel will not attempt to evaluate the performance of GSBSS by looking at output measures. It is hardly surprising – although reassuring – that graduates from GSBSS find a job soon after graduation. After all, PhD students are selected among the best students in their cohort and trained for an additional three years. It is the opinion of the panel that the most meaningful output measures in the context of PhD

education are the ranking of the outlets in which the research contributions of the theses are published (three to four later) and the placements of GSBSS graduates. However, as these statistics are not available, the evaluation report focuses on the input side of PhD training.

More Specific Comments

A three-year PhD program is short by international standards, especially as it includes 840 hours of teaching and course work amounting to 30 ECTS points. Therefore, it is important that the focus of PhD training is to provide students with the necessary tools to successfully complete their PhD projects. This observation has two important implications:

- i) Most of the courses that PhD students take should be of relevance to their project. While acquiring more general skills and broader knowledge are valuable investments in an academic career, there is less time for such investments in a three-year program.
- ii) Teaching activities should be organized efficiently in order to increase the time available for research. This can, for instance, be done by letting PhD students teach the same class several times. It might be a purpose in itself that PhD students try to teach (also) at the master's level in order to improve their teaching skills, but care should be taken that this does not become too time consuming.

Several of the comments and recommendations outlined below come back to these two points.

Courses

The panel shares the view of the management of GSBSS that the most effective courses in terms of learning are internal courses of longer duration. Some of the programs (e.g., Economics and Business) offer many such courses but other programs (e.g., Business Administration) offer relatively few. The PhD students pointed out that few courses – together with the rule that 20 out of 30 ECTS points should come from courses offered by GSBSS – made it difficult to take courses of direct relevance to the PhD project. The problem of few courses is aggravated by the fact that there does not seem to be free access for PhD students to courses offered by other programs within GSBSS. In the interviews, the panel was told that PhD students from other programs go to the back of the queue when courses are filled; implying that PhD students from

other programs cannot get into popular courses. The Program Chairs also expressed the view that there could be benefits from coordinating courses better within the Graduate School.

Teaching

There seems to be general satisfaction among PhD students with the courses in teaching methods and dissemination. Looking at the allocation of teaching activities, there seems to be differences across programs in how much effort is spent finding appropriate teaching activities for PhD students. The Political Science program appears to have a clear teaching policy: First, PhD students teach repetitions of the same class at the bachelor's level. Later, they progress to the master's level where they teach together with an experienced lecturer. This seems like an almost ideal way of organizing PhD students' teaching. In other programs, however, the allocation of teaching assignments appears less well-planned and often left to the students (and sometimes their supervisors) to organize. It was also mentioned to the panel that some PhD students felt a certain pressure to teach more than the required 840 hours.

Recruitment

Recruiting the best talent is a key challenge for any PhD program. The program in Business and Economics appears to have success using the "elite" master's program (IMSQE) for training and recruitment of future PhD students. Having IMSQE comes with a number of advantages for the PhD program. First, IMSQE students take PhD courses, which increase the scale at which PhD courses run. Second, as PhD students coming out of IMSQE already have taken introductory PhD courses, they can follow more specialized courses during the PhD. Finally, the grades of IMSQE students in PhD courses provide valuable information about their likely performance as PhD students. It is the opinion of the panel that research-oriented master's programs could be advantageous also in other areas. For example, it is often difficult to recruit PhD students with both an interest in management and a strong command of research methods.

Looking at the selection of PhD students, the panel noted that not all programs use interviews. Writing a thesis requires both strong professional qualifications and certain personal characteristics such as independence, persistence, and motivation. Personal characteristics might be better judged by having an interview than by looking at papers and transcripts.

Integration of non-Danish PhD students

During the interviews, it was mentioned several times that PhD students from outside Denmark face some additional challenges in integrating into department life and are disadvantaged when it comes to teaching. It seems that not all e-mails containing important information for PhD students are in English. Also, the departments have chosen different policies regarding the allocation of offices. Some departments deliberately choose to let Danish and non-Danish students share offices in order to increase integration. In other departments, non-Danish PhD students share offices (at their own request). While the panel has no firm opinion about which model is preferable, it seems an issue where an exchange of experiences across departments could be useful. Turning to teaching, it seems more difficult for PhD students not speaking Danish to find courses that match their expertise and that can be taught more than once. On the positive side, the Heads of Department seem aware of the problems and to be actively working on addressing them.

Financial support

There seem to be important differences in the extent to which departments offer financial support to their PhDs (on top of the DKK 30.000 included in the PhD budget). While this is probably unavoidable, and reflects the financial position of the departments, it seems that PhD students in some programs find it difficult to finance important activities/resources such as participation in major conferences and access to data.

Rules regarding the stay abroad

The panel shares the view that a long stay at a high-ranking foreign university is a valuable learning experience for PhD students. It can help them to build up an academic network, and it may foster joint work with leading researchers in the field. For this reason, the panel is also sympathetic to the idea of incentivizing PhD students to spend at least three months abroad. This having been said, the current rule whereby the Graduate School only supports stays abroad of minimum three months duration does seem inflexible and unable to accommodate the individual needs of students. The rule seems to be a source of frustration among PhD students; especially as not all PhD students can count on financial support from the department (instead of support from

the Graduate School) if personal circumstances prevent them from spending three months (or more) abroad.

Responsibility for the well-being of PhD students

Not all PhD students seem to know whom to turn to for help or advice. They are employed by the Graduate School, enrolled in the PhD program, but work in the department, which apparently creates some confusion about who is responsible for them and their well-being.

Review of study progress and use of PhD Planner

Only the biannual progress report in January seems to be associated with real assessment of study progress. On the other hand, this seems to be a careful review by a group of supervisors from the department. The panel noted that the match between the supervisor and the PhD student does not seem to be a part of this review. Looking at the match might be particularly relevant after the first year of PhD studies as PhD projects often change direction in the beginning and it might be hard to predict from the outset whether the supervisor/supervisee will have a fruitful working relationship.

The panel noticed also that PhD Planner does not seem to be used for planning the studies, which apparently is one of the purposes of the system.

The quality requirement for the PhD thesis

The rules and regulations of GSBSS states: "...The monograph as well as the collection of scientific articles must include research contributions which have been published in or are potentially publishable through recognised publishing channels." This is a sensible and flexible rule. However, it seems that some programs have implemented local rules where the requirement is that the contributions of the thesis should be published or submitted for publishing. This is an unfortunate rule as it induces PhD students to submit their work too soon. Hence, they risk having their work rejected at good outlets where it would have had chance of being published later (thereby missing a publishing opportunity), or they risk having their work published below its potential.

Recommendations

The above observations and discussions translate to a number of recommendations for action:

- a) To ensure that PhD students in all programs have access to a coherent set of courses that prepares them for doing research. For some programs this would probably imply expanding the portfolio of courses offered.
- b) To ensure all PhD students equal access to courses offered within GSBSS in order to increase the number of courses available to PhD students.
- c) To consider organizing courses, in particular methodology courses, at the level of the Graduate School in order to benefit from larger scale and to ensure that PhD students in all programs have access to core courses.
- d) To consider developing more research-oriented master's programs in order to improve recruitment and training of future PhD students.
- e) To formulate an explicit teaching policy in all programs. The policy should allow PhD students to economize on preparation and expose them to different types of teaching and supervision activities. The implementation of such a policy would probably require increased managerial involvement in the allocation of teaching and supervision activities in most programs.
- f) To improve integration of non-Danish PhD students by ensuring that all important email communication is in English, considering how offices are allocated, and finding ways of equalizing the teaching load that Danish and non-Danish PhD students experience.
- g) To let GSBSS administrate and allocate a budget for participation in international conferences. This might require an increase in GSBSS' tax rate, but it would ensure that all PhD students in GSBSS have the possibility of participating in a major conference.
- h) To make the rules regarding the financing for the stay abroad more flexible (while maintaining the requirement that PhD students must spend a significant amount of time abroad to obtain funding). For example, it may be possible to divide a longer stay into shorter stays of the same total duration and still obtain financial support. Several shorter stays may achieve many of the same objectives as a longer stay but would, e.g., be more compatible with family life.

- i) To clarify to whom PhD students should turn in case they experience problems or have matters to discuss. A possible solution would be to introduce a “PhD ombudsman” at GSBSS.
- j) To evaluate the supervisor-supervisee match as part of the review after the first year of PhD study.
- k) To register systematically where the contributions of theses from GSBSS are ultimately published and where the graduates are employed.
- l) To interview candidates for PhD positions as part of the assessment procedure (whether in person or via Skype).
- m) To remove local rules requiring the research contributions of the thesis to be published or submitted for publication. The panel recommends that all programs follow the rule stated in the Rules and Regulations of GSBSS that the research contributions must be published or potentially publishable through recognized publishing channels.