
INTERNATIONAL EVALUATION OF AARHUS BSS GRADUATE SCHOOL PANEL REPORT

Preamble

According to the Danish Ministerial Order no 778 of 7th August 2019 (The University Act) §14, 5, Danish universities must evaluate their Graduate Schools regularly. The evaluation must be by a panel of acknowledged international researchers. Aarhus University is evaluating its five Graduate Schools in 2021. The last evaluation was conducted in 2015. The evaluation is based on two elements: a self-evaluation report written by the individual schools documenting the organization and performance of the Graduate School, and a site visit and written report by the international panel. The 2021 international panel for the Aarhus BSS Graduate School (for simplicity, 'BSS PhD School' in what follows) consists of the following researchers:

- Professor Janine Leschke,
Department of Management, Society and Communication, Copenhagen Business School
- Vice-Dean Tore Nilssen,
Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Oslo
- Professor Thomas Saalfeld,
Department of Political Science, Vice President for Research, University of Bamberg
- Professor Ingo Zettler (chairperson),
Department of Psychology and Copenhagen Center for Social Data Science, University of Copenhagen

The self-evaluation report (including several appendixes) was sent to the international panel on 30th June 2021, and the site visit took place on September 13th-14th 2021. At the site visit, the panel met with

- the Head of the BSS PhD School
- the BSS PhD School partner
- representatives of the BSS PhD School administration
- the Dean and the Head of Departments of Aarhus BSS
- representatives of the PhD association of the BSS PhD School
- the program chairs of the BSS PhD School programs
- representatives of PhD supervisors across Aarhus BSS
- representatives of PhD students across Aarhus BSS

Generally, Aarhus BSS and the various representatives provided the information the panel required to carry out the evaluation. The self-evaluation report was very comprehensive, and the meetings were characterized by an open, honest atmosphere. We also received some follow-up emails providing further information/clarification. **We thus want to thank the organizers and participants of the site visit, as well as the authors of the self-evaluation report very much.** Everyone whom we met was very engaged in and eager for maintaining a high standard of the BSS PhD School.

The high quality of the BSS PhD School is also reflected in some statistics, e.g.,

- the BSS PhD School enrolled a minimum of 62 new students every year since 2016 (until 2020)
 - around 45% of these were female
 - around 30% of these were international (including 40% in 2019 and 31% in 2020)
- the vast majority of students receive a PhD degree (the dropout rates are $2 \leq \% \leq 7$)
- the majority of students finish their PhD on time (68% submit their PhD thesis on time, and an additional 18% submit their PhD thesis within the first three months after the initial due date)
- the students publish in various forms, including ≥ 118 publications in scientific journals every year (some of which in internationally leading journals)

While the evaluation process (including the comprehensiveness of the information provided prior to the site meeting) was very positive, we have the following **recommendations for the next evaluation cycle**:

- The next self-evaluation report should include a section in which the BSS PhD School reflects critically upon their performance, in addition to providing descriptive information. Such a section is lacking in the current report.
- The next self-evaluation report should include a section in which the BSS PhD School describes how they followed up on recommendations issued in the present evaluation. Such a section is lacking in the current report.
- At the site visit, some meetings were held in larger groups (with representatives from all departments) and some meetings were held in smaller groups (in which the representatives as well as the panel members split up). Generally, smaller meetings worked better from our perspective, so we recommend splitting up most of the meetings at the next site visit.
- For the next site visit, we recommend organizing the meeting with representatives of PhD students across Aarhus BSS as early in the program as possible. The reason for this recommendation is that this meeting provides insights into various aspects that could/should be followed up in the meetings with the BSS PhD School administration, management, and supervisors.

The organization of the Aarhus BSS Graduate School

Overall, the BSS PhD School is an umbrella organization comprising (currently) seven PhD degree programs. The degree programs, in turn, are linked to the departments of Aarhus BSS. This organization is aligned well with national and international standards and allows the BSS PhD School to account for differences between departments and fields of research, respectively—while keeping some standards and conditions similar across the BSS PhD School. Potential differences between departments and fields of research may include, for instance, an academic field's tradition of what is considered a particularly good publication (e.g., journal or book, single-authored or not), a field's expectation towards the internationality of topics, or departmental differences in how many academic activities (e.g., guest lectures, social events) should be offered continuously.

On a more fine-grained level, there is also a clear distribution of responsibilities between the Head of the BSS PhD School, the program chairs, the PhD administration, as well as individual supervisors and PhD students. This distribution of responsibilities also includes how PhD students are represented in various decision-making committees and boards. More generally, the BSS PhD School appears relatively well equipped financially, especially given current challenges with university budgets in general.

While the organization of the BSS PhD School works very well in general, we have the following **recommendations**:

- We recommend keeping the current organization of the BSS PhD School. Among other reasons, the current organization is sufficiently flexible to accommodate changes in the departmental structure (if needed). Please note that we are not aware of any intentions to change the current organization, but we would like to commend the current state explicitly.
- While the organization of the BSS PhD School as well as of the specific programs works very well in general, some expectations and practices concerning both PhD students and supervisors are based on implicit rather than explicit norms and rules (e.g., how many manuscripts are expected when submitting a PhD thesis in a specific field). We recommend describing to the PhD students and supervisors more clearly the explicit norms and rules, for example as part of a PhD Study Handbook which can contain specific sections for the single programs, and we recommend encouraging the PhD students and supervisors to discuss and reflect upon reasons for implicit expectations and practices.
- While many programs found good means to deal with different challenges, we recommend that the BSS PhD school initiates and facilitates ongoing best practice exchanges across BSS (among, e.g., the PhD students, the PhD supervisors, or the PhD program chairs).

- While PhD students have different ways to address issues in general (e.g., via union representatives or employee groups), some PhD students expressed that they are not directly represented in some (potentially important) committees. We recommend that the BSS PhD School and the programs provide a clear description for PhD students about how PhD students are represented in which committees.
- Related to the three points above, dealing with COVID-19 has revealed that the organizational communication could in some cases be improved in terms of timeliness, clarity, and feedback mechanisms. We thus recommend that, especially in times of unforeseen events, the BSS PhD School ensures that all information is sent to the relevant stakeholders in English as soon as possible. With regard to decision-making processes in such times, we recommend that the BSS PhD school ensures providing feedback opportunities (before decisions are made) for all involved stakeholders (PhD students, PhD supervisors, PhD program chairs, PhD administration, Head of Departments).

Selection of PhD students

The BSS PhD School attracts PhD students via a mix of open scholarships and project-specific funding. Especially the relatively large number of open scholarships (around 50 per year) sets the BSS PhD School apart from other PhD schools, both nationally and internationally. As reflected in the thorough selection procedure as well as the low dropout and high completion-on-time rates, the BSS PhD School attracts highly skilled PhD students.

While the selection of PhD students works very well in general, we have the following **recommendations**:

- Although we have not heard about any other intention, we would like to encourage the BSS PhD School to keep such a large number of open scholarships.
- We recommend the BSS PhD School to ensure that the calls for the open scholarships are distributed widely, both nationally and internationally.
- We recommend the BSS PhD School to provide a template for open scholarship applications. The reason for this recommendation is to ensure that all applicants know about explicit and implicit expectations about the content of the application.
- In many social sciences, there is currently a trend towards team-based projects. We recommend the BSS PhD School to reflect upon whether they want to integrate more team-based projects, and, if so, how this could be successfully aligned with the open scholarships which seem to target rather individual projects.
- We recommend the BSS PhD School to provide additional data in the next self-evaluation report, namely, the number of enrolled PhD students drawn from Bachelor's and Master's degrees at Aarhus compared to outside applications. The reason for this is that we currently do not know the mix of 'internal' PhD students (Danish and non-Danish PhD students who studied at Aarhus as Bachelor or Master students) and 'external' PhD students (Danish and non-Danish PhD students who did not do so).
When these numbers are available, we recommend the BSS PhD School to reflect upon the mix (as well as upon the mixes concerning gender and Danish/international). Neither do we think that there is a specific percentage reflecting 'the best' mix, nor are we under the impression that any current mix at the BSS PhD School is wanting, but we recommend the BSS PhD School to reflect upon the mix they have.
- We recommend the School to provide an additional statistic in the next self-evaluation report, namely, how the PhD students are nested in supervisors (i.e., how many PhD students do PhD supervisors supervise) and how this relates to the overall number of tenured faculty in the different programs.
When these numbers are available, we recommend the BSS PhD School to reflect upon whether there should be an explicit limit of currently enrolled PhD students per supervisor.

Progress management and quality assurance of the PhD degree program

The BSS PhD School has a very effective system of progress management and quality assurance. This includes various committees aiming to maintain a high quality of the PhD education, software solutions, and the engagement of the people involved. More practically, the organization of the progress management and quality assurance also complies with the existing regulations.

Concerning the progress management and quality assurance, we have the following **recommendations**:

- We recommend the BSS PhD School to provide a clear description concerning the role of secondary supervisors. As the role of secondary supervisors might differ between the programs, the School might consider having descriptions that vary across programs.
- Some PhD students gave the impression that they did not really know how much they could expect from their supervisors. There might be field-specific differences, but we recommend that PhD students know about how many supervision hours supervisors typically make available (both first and second supervisor). Such information will allow the PhD students to get a better idea about whether they receive too little/too much support.
- Some PhD students expressed that they were lacking 'honest' feedback on their PhD progress (until very close to the end). We recommend encouraging PhD students, supervisors, and program chairs to engage in constructive but frank feedback processes (while still keeping a professional, friendly, and solution-oriented relationship).
- We recommend ensuring opportunities for PhD students to learn and reflect about academic and non-academic post-PhD job options. This might include courses or seminars offered at the university, school, or program level as well as encouraging PhD students, supervisors, and program chairs to engage in reflections about the career prospects of the PhD students (e.g., in the MUS/PDR in the second and third year).

Further observations and recommendations

Language of communication:

- Although English is the common language around the PhD program, PhD students reported that in a few instances important communication was conducted in Danish only.
We recommend that the BSS PhD School consistently communicates in English about all matters relevant to the PhD program. If the BSS PhD school forwards information from other stakeholders written in Danish (e.g., calls from private funding organizations), we recommend that the BSS PhD School provides a brief description of the topic in English, especially if the information is relevant for all PhD students or supervisors.

Social integration of PhD students and onboarding:

- The departments (programs) differ with regard to offering or supporting activities facilitating the social integration of PhD students. We recommend that the BSS PhD School ensures that all departments (programs) offer and support some activities. We believe that social integration at the department (program) level is an important part of the educational experience, a view that was also expressed by PhD students.
- Next to social integration in general, we recommend that the BSS PhD School directly or via the programs provides a clear onboarding procedure for new PhD students, both academically and socially. This is especially important for PhD students who did not study at Aarhus University before, and who might thus lack adequate knowledge of informal procedures, cultural aspects etc.

Research stay abroad:

- The BSS PhD School offers financial support if students plan a longer research stay abroad. We recommend that the School retains this incentive. We further recommend that the BSS PhD School considers being more flexible in cases where PhD students cannot go on one longer research stay abroad (e.g., for family reasons), but want to split up the stay into two briefer visits. If such flexibility is effectively granted already, we recommend that the BSS PhD School communicates this more clearly.

Courses:

- We recommend that all PhD courses offered at Aarhus BSS are principally accessible for all PhD students at Aarhus BSS (that is, across programs). Of course, there can be specific requirements for attendance (e.g., knowledge of certain methods or software), but these should be made explicit when courses are offered and should not simply rely on the educational background of a PhD student or the PhD program a PhD student is enrolled in.
- The amount of ECTS that PhD students are required to obtain via courses offered at the BSS PhD School should be aligned with the number and the regularity of courses offered at the BSS PhD School (as well as their accessibility, see above). The implication might be that students enrolled in different programs might have different requirements (e.g., students in some programs might have more difficulties in finding and attending relevant courses at the BSS PhD School as compared to students in other courses).
- We recommend that the BSS PhD School offers a course on research communication (for which PhD students can get ECTS). Among other reasons, disseminating knowledge is a requirement for PhD students.
- We recommend that the BSS PhD School offers a more comprehensive course on research ethics (for which PhD students can get ECTS); e.g., potentially including Open Science principles. Among other reasons, some principles of research ethics (should) apply to all fields within the social sciences, even if some fields are more active in applying these than others.

PhD dissertation:

- We recommend that the BSS PhD School ensures that discipline specific norms can be reached. More practically, this means allowing both monographs and manuscript-based PhD theses. Concerning manuscript-based PhD theses, we recommend that the BSS PhD School continues to refrain from any further specific regulations (e.g., a specific number of manuscripts, a specific number of accepted/published articles), but leaves the evaluation to the assessment committees, who can assess the theses from a field-specific angle. We state this here so clearly, because any further specific regulations might incentivize PhD students and/or supervisors not to aim for the best potential outlet of their work (or to split up their research into several 'smaller' manuscripts).
- We recommend that the BSS PhD School continues to offer an individual bonus to the PhD students who finish on time. At the same time, the BSS PhD School should continue in their efforts to demand PhD theses that are feasible in the given framework (e.g., 3 years for most students including own coursework and work obligations).
- We recommend that the BSS PhD School collects data about the assessment committees, especially their gender distribution and the mix of Danish-based and non-Danish based members. Overall, we recommend that in every committee at least two genders and members working in at least two countries are represented.

4+4 program:

- While most PhD students are enrolled in the 5+3 program, the 4+4 program comes with some specific features. This includes, among other aspects, the kind of work obligations 4+4 students can fulfill (e.g., they are not always allowed to grade), some legal aspects (e.g., they are not always allowed to sign non-disclosure agreements), and differences in the salary they earn. We recommend the BSS PhD School to describe more clearly to PhD students on the 4+4 program these and other features, as well as potential solutions for challenges particularly tied to the 4+4 program.

Teaching:

- Some PhD students expressed that they were lacking support in their teaching preparation. We thus recommend the BSS PhD School to ensure that all PhD students can plan their teaching obligations early, and that they are aware of support in preparing for their first experience as academic teachers. If PhD students take teaching-preparation courses, we recommend that they either receive ECTS for this or that their participation counts as part of their work obligation.

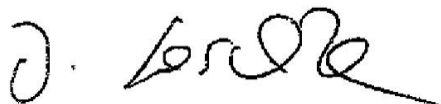
Stress:

- While many PhD students finish on time, some PhD students stated that they felt overly stressed in the last weeks of their PhD, because (they felt that) postponing submission of their PhD by just a few days or weeks would be considered a failure. While we strongly encourage the BSS PhD school to keep up the aim that PhD students finish on time, the BSS PhD School might reflect upon means to ensure that individual PhD students feel safe (and less stressed) when needing a little bit longer. This might be achieved, for instance, by formalizing a brief meeting between PhD students and their supervisors around six weeks before the PhD students need to submit their thesis, where the workload for the remaining weeks is discussed (and any potential requests for brief extensions could be made).
- At our site visit, many discussions about the stress-level of the PhD students were related to the COVID-19 period. The BSS PhD School might thus consider how this cohort of PhD students could be supported with regard to dealing with various stressors. For instance, the BSS PhD School might consider having a particular focus on on-site social events in the near future or to offer specific workshops for PhD students addressing stress, time-management, work-life balance and the like.

Conclusion

Even though we offer several recommendations, **we want to be very explicit about the fact that we see the BSS PhD School as a very strong, very well organized PhD school, with excellent PhD students and graduates.** We are particularly impressed by the high fraction of students who finish their PhD on time. In fact, all our recommendations represent recommendations only that might help the BSS PhD School to maintain and slightly enhance their high quality. **We do not see any major aspect that would dramatically improve the quality of the PhD education in general—simply, because the BSS PhD School is on a very high level already.** We thus hope that the Aarhus BSS Graduate School continues to flourish in the way it is, plus that our recommendations might help in improving it further.

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