

Assessment of the Third Cycle Education in Rhetoric

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General remarks

This assessment is a compliment to the benchmark evaluation by the General Rhetoric Department, Faculty of Philosophy, at Tübingen University, Germany. It is based on the general self-evaluation submitted by professors Mats Rosengren and Otto Fischer, and on interviews first with Rosengren, Fischer, and professor Anna Williams, from the Department of Literature, and second, with Ph.D. student Louise Therkildsen.

The main assessment submitted by Tübingen is comprehensive and this evaluator shares their opinion about the high standard of the third cycle education given at the division of rhetoric. I also agree with the suggestions as how the division can best face challenges and shortcomings identified in the self-evaluation. Considering the thorough assessment made by Tübingen, this complimentary evaluation will refrain from describing the general structure of the division and the legal requirements for third cycle education. Instead, it will start by underscoring the strengths of the division of rhetoric and then focus on pressing matters, matters that also surfaced in the on-site interviews.

Strengths

Rhetoric at Uppsala has a number of strengths that are mentioned in the Tübingen assessment. These general points are worth stressing: the division has,

- a culture of flexibility, openness, combined with high critical standards
- strong, although not always formalized, international collaborations
- significant involvement in doctoral students' research production beyond the thesis, which is shown in co-organizations of events, co-authoring among supervisors and graduate students, encouragement to publish with internationally renowned journals and publishers
- an integrated vision of societal impact.

As clearly stated in the self-evaluation – “Autonomy is a prime concern” – one of the characteristics of the division of rhetoric is the focus on independence, both in regard to the formal outlining of their education and to the training in critical thinking. Senior scholars encourage doctoral students to think and act independently, which both prepares them intellectually for the writing of the dissertation, and practically for their future careers.

Pressing matters

The most difficult challenge is that of sustainability within the discipline. As pointed out in the self-evaluation and in the Tübingen assessment, the division suffers from being a rather small research environment. Even more serious is the absence of a clear strategy of how recruitment of doctoral students can be ensured in the future. The pressing matters that I will address here are more or less related to this situation.

Course work

While rhetoric clearly fosters a comprehensive and in-depth approach to the discipline, the third cycle education suffers from a lack of courses. Rhetoric has addressed this issue in several ways. One solution has been to offer joint courses for MA and Ph.D. students. While this strategy is no doubt necessary and even beneficial most notably for MA students who can find inspiration from more advanced students, it seems less satisfactory for the doctoral students. In light of this, it would be worth pursuing other options further. The self-evaluation lists a number of efforts to meet a high standard in the course work despite a small number of students. For example, the organization of smaller reading courses, developed by the doctoral students in co-operation with a director. Another example is the on-going efforts to create courses through the Scandinavian network of rhetoricians.

These are excellent initiatives that demonstrate the flexibility and openness of the division.

One particular part of the course work was subject for debate, namely credits given for higher seminars. On the one hand, participating in seminars broaden the education in line with the goals and as they are time consuming, it is favorable that doctoral students receive credits for their participation. On the other hand, seminars do not comply with course work as such; they lack specific goals and are not examined properly. In an effort to meet this criticism, rhetoric together with literature have opted for thematic seminar series, developed by doctoral students in cooperation with senior scholars. Even if this does not solve all the issues at stake, it does have several other advantages and respond to learning objectives, notably related to “Competence and skills”.

Work/study environment

The work and study environment are good but could be excellent if the pressing matter of “critical mass” could be solved. In a small environment, it can be difficult to assure all learning outcomes required for a Ph.D. In other words, since the division so far has no clear system for Ph.D. recruitment not only might highly qualified students miss out, as pointed out by the Tübingen assessment, there is also a risk that the intellectual environment runs dry.

It is worth noticing that rhetoric has the benefit of being part of a larger department; doctoral students in rhetoric can and do participate in seminars and events at the division of literature. The division has also taken measures in order to secure more Ph.D. positions. For example, senior scholars have applied for external funding. The Tübingen assessment rightly points out that international collaborations could offer a way to enrich the intellectual environment. Another possibility would be to strengthen collaborations with other Ph.D. students within the Faculty of History and Philosophy and the Faculty of Languages at Uppsala University.

Yet neither co-operations nor applications for external funding can be considered a sustainable approach. It is strongly recommended that the division’s efforts are backed-up by the Department of Literature and the Faculty at large to ensure a steady flow of Ph.D. students. While I agree with the Tübingen assessment that rethinking teaching and administration could be a good

recommendation to face the shortage of doctoral positions in rhetoric, a clear strategy as to how doctoral positions could be distributed among the disciplines in the Department of literature is recommended to ensure the future of third cycle education in rhetoric.

Conclusion

In compliance with the assessment made by the Department of Rhetoric at Tübingen, this evaluator concludes that the third cycle education offered at the Division of rhetoric at Uppsala university follows the highest academic and pedagogical standards set by Swedish law and regulations, and by the academic and intellectual community. The learning objectives set up by the university for the doctoral degree in rhetoric are achieved through course work with rigorous examination, critical academic seminars, critical supervision, participation in international and national collaborations, among others. Graduate students are given the opportunity to participate in the scientific community by publishing in high ranked journals and editors, by contributing to conferences.

The Division of rhetoric demonstrates a capacity to develop strategies to face shortcomings. Certainly, these are mostly short-term solutions, but this is due to the difficult financial situation of the humanities in general.