

Evaluation of the PhD programme at the Centre for Gender Research, Uppsala University

The report by the external evaluation panel

1 November 2022

Background

During the spring term 2022, The Faculty of Arts at Uppsala University, as a part of its PhD training quinquennial evaluation cycle, appointed us Anu Koivunen, Professor, Gender of Studies, at the School of History, Culture and Arts Studies at University of Turku, Irene Molina, Professor of Human Geography at the Institute for Housing and Urban Research at Uppsala University, and Michael Nebeling Petersen, Associate professor of Gender Studies, at the Department of Nordic Studies and Linguistics at University of Copenhagen, as evaluators of the PhD training program at the Centre for Gender Research. This report is a result of the evaluation process carried out by the panel during the fall of 2022. For this purpose, the panel held two planning meetings in advance, several meetings in situ during the two days visit to the Centre, and one meeting after the visit. The method used for the evaluation consisted on reviewing the material sent to the group by the Head Office of the Centre, conducting interviews in situ with the staff working at the Centre, analysing the material and finally writing the report. The material sent to the evaluators included a 21 pages long Self Evaluation Report, the General Study Syllabus in Gender Studies, the Handbook for PhD Studies, the ASF, the prototype Individual Study Plan, and the course outlines of several recent PhD courses. On the 4th and 5th of October, the evaluation committee visited the Centre in Uppsala and held in total six interview meetings with all the staff involved in the programme, including all the PhD candidates. We have organised our report in nine sections: General assessment, Curriculum and PhD courses, Supervision and Individual Study Plans, Doctoral dissertations and assessment practices, Management, Recruitment and student body, Work environment and research culture, Collaborations and internationalisations, and, finally, a summary of Recommendations.

General assessment

In our general assessment, we consider the PhD programme at the Centre for Gender Research to provide high-quality researcher training. The programme offers the PhD students an education of high academic quality and pedagogical rigour in an inspiring, lively and innovative research milieu, and lives up to its outspoken goal to be “a truly interdisciplinary education”. The programme clearly meets the goals of the higher education regulations, also distinguishing itself positively among Swedish, Nordic and European programmes in the field. As both the self-evaluation report and meetings in situ with PhD students, supervisors and management testify, high professionalism, ambition, reflexivity and commitment to continuous development of quality characterise the programme. The panel was impressed by the systematic efforts and many practices of developing collaborations and fostering an interdisciplinary research culture, involving and engaging all teaching and research staff, including the PhD students. Training and education of students are at a high international level. The evaluation and assessment of student work and doctoral dissertations are transparent. Another distinctive strength in these times is the institutional commitment to work-life balance and the well-being of both PhD students and supervisors.

While manifesting a variety of practices and efforts to foster interdisciplinarity, the self-evaluation report pays special attention to the practical challenges faced by some co-funded/co-supervised PhD students. These issues pertaining to different disciplinary traditions, research cultures and formal regulations require collaboration where the interests of the PhD students take centre stage. Above all, they underline the importance of Individual Study Plans as a guiding and binding document, alleviating student anxieties and preventing institutional conflicts. As a further point of development, we recommend that the Centre reviews its recruitment practices to increase diversity among PhD students and, in continuation, among research and teaching staff. The PhD programme and the research culture it is embedded in has great potential to recruit students internationally. To ensure equal opportunities among PhD students and to generally enhance , we recommend that all PhD students, even those not speaking Swedish, will be offered possibilities of teaching and gaining pedagogical skills and experience as well as developing methods to ensure a more diverse student mass.

Curriculum and PhD Courses

The learning outcomes for the PhD programme in Gender Studies are detailed in the General Study Syllabus in Gender Studies, and the self-evaluation report details how the programme resources, guides and supports the students in learning the craft of research. In our assessment, the actual study results correspond to the expected study results, meeting the national goals of the Higher Education Act and the Higher Education Ordinance. Beyond thesis work and supervision, the PhD training offered at the Centre entails coursework, attending various regular seminars and relevant research group activities, both national and international workshops and conferences, giving and receiving peer support.

PhD students in Gender Studies are required to take PhD courses worth 60 credits. The Centre offers courses on Feminist Theory and Feminist Methodology, but due to the small size of the programme, the number of courses available at the Centre annually are not sufficient to cover the requirement of the curricula, and students are encouraged to seek courses elsewhere, both nationally and internationally. A difficulty in this regard is that though there is a considerable number of courses offered at other departments, there is no comprehensive, centralised source of information. One often well-functioning solution is to allow and support individual reading courses serving the particular and variegated research topics of the PhD candidates,

Another solution is to secure the availability of relevant and diversified courses through collaborations. In this regard, the Centre collaborates with the Gender Studies programmes at the universities of Stockholm and Södertörn, and internationally the Centre is part of the U4+ network (with Göttingen, Groningen, Ghent and Tartu) consisting on biannual Gender Studies summer schools for PhD students. Nevertheless, there is further need for developing collaborations with Swedish, Nordic and other European universities in order to improve the access to courses, to secure quality and to ensure that the PhD students reach the 60 credits required at the end of the program.

Supervision and Individual Study Plans

Established in 2016, the programme has admitted 14 PhD students, including 4 new students starting in the autumn of 2022. During the short history, the progression and completion rate have been excellent. While the overall number of PhD students may be seen as small in international comparison, in the Swedish and Nordic context, the programme is strong – also

in terms of permanent staff of four professors and 2,75 lecturers. The academic competence among the permanent staff is very high, and the scope of expertise large. Educators, hence, have appropriate scientific and pedagogical competencies, and the supervision capacity is adequate.

Each PhD student has two or more supervisors, and the supervisory teams are built to best support each PhD student's needs but also to take into account the staff workloads and career development needs. Our meetings with both students, supervisors and management highlighted the key role of Individual Study Plans (ISP) as guiding documents clarifying and making explicit and transparent the roles within supervisory teams, while also serving the important task of monitoring student progress. The role of ISP is crucial in managing potential problems, and the history of interdisciplinarity and co-supervising and co-funding students across faculties appears to have convinced the Centre of its key role.

The bi-monthly Supervisors' Forum for all supervisors associated with PhD students at the Centre provide the supervisors with peer support regarding pedagogical and administrative issues, and ensures a collective responsibility over all PhD students and an agreed understanding on shared principles and practices, which is especially important in a collegium with varied disciplinary backgrounds.

Doctoral dissertations and assessment practices

The production and examination of the doctoral dissertations follow the requirements of national guidelines. The programme supports PhDs done by thesis (monograph) and publication (compilation thesis). So far, five dissertations have been completed, whereof one was a compilation thesis. The dissertations are diverse in terms of disciplines and fields of study, reflecting the interdisciplinarity of the programme.

The PhDs are assessed and monitored systematically and in four different stages, that is through coursework, interim assessments, the thesis and a public defence. The programme clearly meets the goals of the higher education regulations in relation to assessing and monitoring the dissertations. PhD students are required to take PhD courses equivalent to 60 credits, in which they will discuss their work and their progress is monitored and discussed. The coursework is planned on an individual basis and takes place both at the Centre and at other institutions.

The work and dissertations are further monitored, evaluated and assessed during the interim assessments. That is the 60% and the 90% seminars. At these seminars, the doctoral dissertation and the research are assessed by an external opponent. The seminars also train the student to explain and discuss their work and to receive and engage with criticism. All the senior staff at the Centre are required to attend the seminars, which ensures both versatile feedback and collective monitoring of progress and evaluation. The final dissertation is assessed by an exam committee that consists of 3–5 examiners with maximal 1 person from within Uppsala University. Finally, the dissertation is defended in a public defence, where the PhD student will defend and discuss the work with one external opponent, the committee, academic colleagues and general public.

Assessors and opponents all have Associate Professor status or above and they have relevant expertise and have not prior been involved in developing the PhD student's work in any way. The assessors and opponents are chosen in accordance with Faculty regulations. The national and international assessors and opponents are chosen by the supervisors in collaboration with the PhD student, and the committee and opponent for the final defence are ratified by the Faculty.

Management

The PhD programme is managed by a clear, multi-sited structure. On-site meetings with various personnel groups convinced the review panel of a well-functioning management structure. The Director of Graduate Studies is responsible for administrative and pedagogical management, participates in the management group of the Centre, and conducts annual review meetings with PhD students. The director also participates in the Directors of Graduate Studies Faculty Forum, securing links to programmes across the Faculty. Furthermore, PhD Forum within the Centre offers an established venue for students to raise concerns and take up any issues with the Director. The panel is convinced that the management is organised so that PhD students will be able to influence the planning and execution of their education.

While funding PhDs is generally difficult and the Centre has only since 2020 received faculty financing for doctoral students, the management at the Centre has been successful in securing external funding through collaborations.

Recruitment and student body

All PhD positions are publicly advertised, some positions are 'open' within Gender Studies and some are defined in advance, the former typically generating a high number of relevant candidates, while the latter has hitherto resulted in fewer applicants. The Centre ensures that an appropriate number of high quality applications are submitted before the recruitment process starts. The PhD students are admitted based on their CV, samples of their written work, a PhD project outline and an interview. The selection of candidates are carried out by two senior staff members and one PhD student with support from the HR.

While the Centre obviously attracts and recruits highly qualified and disciplinary diverse candidates for the PhD positions, it is also evident that the student body could be more diverse. In terms of recruitment of international students, it appears that one of the key reasons for this is the expectation and requirement to teach in Swedish, which excludes international students. In other words, there is a discrepancy between the university's and the Centre's ambition to increase internationalisation, but at the same time giving Bachelor education only in Swedish. International PhD students coming from abroad see their chances to start a teaching career very limited. In order to secure the interest of high-quality international PhD candidates and, in the following, PhD students, we recommend the programme developing possibilities of teaching in English.

In terms of recruitment of a more diverse student body beyond national affiliation and to meet the Faculty regulation about ensuring diversity and gender equality, furthermore, we recommend the Centre developing ways to ensure a broader recruitment of students in terms of ethnicity, gender, and other markers of difference. To avoid reproducing the profiles of existing faculty, the programme might consider using external assessors in the hiring process, to reflect critically on hidden biases in both the evaluation of candidates' merits and project plans, and to set up concrete criteria for diversity in both senior and junior positions.

Work environment and research culture

The distinctively positive aspects identified in this evaluation include the welcoming atmosphere in the Centre as a work environment and the clear division of roles in the administration. The staff operates on the principle of "open door policy", which gives the students less stress and more fluidity for dedicating their time to research and attending courses.

The staff at the Centre is very much present on campus, including the PhD students and their supervisors, which fosters social interaction on a daily basis. The opportunities to come together are also facilitated by the access to the spacious and warmly decorated staff room where all the members of the staff may lunch and take breaks together.

There is a sense of lack of a strong hierarchy in the sense that students have effective both formal and informal channels to get their voices heard. This is experienced, among other occasions, in the seminars, where there is a culture of giving the floor to the students in the first place. The Centre applies a conscious policy of care avoiding sick leaves due to overload of work, encouraging students to use weekends as recovering time and having alert routines that HR is involved to manage.

The Centre applies a system of mentoring, in which the students from earlier cohorts welcome and guide new beginners in their introduction to the studies. Apart from that, the PhD group has created an association of PhD students at the Centre. It is supported by the heading of the Centre, though not economically supported, an issue that we recommend to be reconsidered in the future.

One important innovation for practicing interdisciplinarity and fostering research culture involving both senior and junior staff as well as PhD students are the thematic research groups, which are currently six in number (Science Education, Family-Kinship, Queer Studies, HumAnimal Studies, The Technologization of the Everyday, and Gender and Culture). The groups' activities and intensities vary, also depending on external funding, and we wish to highlight the importance of all PhD students feeling kinship with at least one of the groups.

Collaborations and internationalisation

The Centre works with the goal of internationalisation systematically and in a sustainable fashion. Beyond the multi-faceted and diverse research collaborations characterising the research environment at the Centre, the PhD programme collaborates with PhD programmes across the Nordic countries and beyond, enabling and promoting the students' networking internationally. Students are encouraged and financially supported to attend international conferences and summer schools. Furthermore, they are encouraged and financially supported to spend periods of study abroad at relevant institutions. The Centre is a hub of many international projects, hosting international guest lecturers and also guest PhD-students. As reflected in the PhD students' research and project topics, global and international perspectives as well as perspectives of equality are fundamentally integrated in the programme and research milieu.

Recommendations

To summarise, we offer the following recommendations as acknowledgement of the many key strengths of the PhD programme and as suggestions for further development

- continue to foster interdisciplinarity systematically, focusing on PhD students learning and well-being, cherishing everyday practices and innovating administrative solutions to potential problems
- continue and intensify developing core courses in collaboration with other universities and informing students of upcoming courses.
- continue to support PhD students' initiatives, also allocating funding
- continue to foster the active research culture, engaging all supervisors in seminars and PhD defences, as key to ensuring a high-quality researcher training and to strengthening a shared sense of responsibility
- ensure that the thematic research groups are relevant to all PhD students
- ensure equality in career development by offering teaching opportunities at the Centre to all interested PhD students, also to non-Swedish-speaking ones
- develop methods to counter upon (hidden) biases in the hiring processes to ensure a more diverse student mass. This could include using external assessors in the hiring process, to reflect critically on hidden biases in both the evaluation of candidates' merits and project plans, and to set up concrete criteria for diversity in both senior and junior positions.

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