

## **Final Report from the Board of Reviewers: “Utbildning kulturanthropologi, avancerad nivå + forskarnivå”**

### **Introduction**

During the spring of 2022, a Board of Reviewers (hereafter, the Board) was appointed by the Department of Cultural Anthropology (hereafter, the Department) on behalf of the Faculty of History and Philosophy at Uppsala University (UU). The Board's mandate has been based on the document “*Course evaluation at the Faculty of Arts, Uppsala University 2019: Information to the board of reviewers*”. Key tasks stipulated in the document include:

The board of reviewers will evaluate the education offered by the department within the field of study under scrutiny, according to the established principles of peer reviewing. The evaluation will be based on the self-evaluation that the department puts together as well as a visit to the department.

To carry out its task in accordance with the above mentioned mandate, the Department shared with the Board three self-evaluation reports: one for the MA level and two for the Ph.D. level (received on September 1, 2022). In addition, the Board got access to approximately 700 files and documents among which the most important are a series of numbered attachments to the self-evaluation reports (i.e., 42 for the MA level and 29 for the Ph.D. level). In preparing our evaluation and visit to the Department, these documents have been highly useful. The comprehensive material shared with the Board has allowed us to:

Deep dive into specific issues; understand the development of courses; see historical trends; grasp the Department's diversity; attain a general overview; and get a good sense of the Department's research and teaching.

We commend the Department for having been transparent with the Board; this openness has greatly aided our work. In preparation for our on-campus visit, several digital meetings were held amongst Board members in addition to email communication amongst Board members and between Board members and the Department. Before visiting the Department on October 4-5 (*platsbesök*) and based on the various documents obtained by the Board, we developed a detailed questionnaire to serve as a guide for our interviews with various Department representatives.

During the Board's on-campus visit, we interviewed the former and current Director of Studies at the MA and Ph.D. levels, selected permanent staff involved in MA and Ph.D. supervision and programs, selected MA students (3 persons), and selected Ph.D. students (5 persons). Again, the Board members appreciate the openness with which we were met at the Department as well as the staff and students' availability and readiness to answer questions.

Our visit to the Department confirmed the Board's sense of the significance of the discipline of anthropology at UU and more broadly. We experienced a positive, generative, and common spirit at the Department and a devotedness to strive for high quality and excellence in anthropological teaching, supervision, and research. The Department-associated Engaging Vulnerability (EV) program and the Forum for Africa Studies (FAS) project are exceptional accomplishments, which indicate how high ambitions can translate into internationally outstanding and cutting-edge research environments. It is our impression that there is an overall good connection between research and education at the Department for both the MA and Ph.D. programs. This is to a large extent thanks to the Department being

excellent at acquiring large-scale projects, launching various initiatives, and obtaining external funding. In this sense, the Department “punches above its weight”.

We recognize that the Department’s leadership signals a willingness to improve the Department through various kinds of changes. In recent years, several measures have been taken by the Department to push its education programs forward. In the spirit of supporting these positive trends and developments, we identify areas for improvement and share our suggested measures, which we would encourage the Department to consider. The Board’s report covers the following areas and ends with some general conclusions:

- a) General impressions and cross-cutting issues.**
- b) MA level.**
- c) Ph.D. level.**

#### **a) General impressions and cross-cutting issues**

##### ***Transition, communication, and information***

In its self-evaluation, the Department highlights an ongoing transition, from having established itself as a highly successful development-oriented research and teaching environment to engage more directly with relevant labor market topics and societal challenges in Sweden and internationally. This transition process reflects a general trend across academia in the Nordic countries, where policymakers and funders increasingly emphasize the importance of job opportunities for candidates in the humanities and social sciences.

We commend the Department for being sensitive to such trends and its initiation of a transition process. In addition to strengthening the prospects for anthropologists at the job market, such a transition may also be strategically important for a (comparatively speaking) small department. To invigorate the process further, the Department could to a larger degree connect with the EV program and ASG project, though, without losing its specific identity as a Department and its visions. A sense of an ongoing departmental transition, however, does not seem to be recognized more broadly by staff and students, we realized when carrying out our interviews.

When reviewing the Department’s webpage, we note that more attention could be given *both* to highlighting job opportunities for MA students *and* providing substantial information about research projects, publications, and activities carried out at the Department. There is, for instance, little or no information available about the research conducted by the Department’s researchers. This prevents various stakeholders as well as prospective and current MA and Ph.D. students from finding updated information about ongoing research and initiatives taken at the Department. MA students, we learned during our visit, have a feeling of lacking information also regarding the Department’s webpage, even though it ideally should work as a window into the Department.

##### ***Suggested measures:***

- Dedicate resources to update and maintain information on the webpages to highlight research, publications, and other activities, as well as job opportunities for MA students. This could, for example, include portraits of MA students who finished their studies and got a job either inside or outside academia.
- Dedicate time for staff and student involvement to find strategies to engage with the challenges and opportunities involved in the transition process.
- Create an alumni network to connect students with one another and with the Department after they have finalized their studies at the Department.

### ***Flexibility/fluidity***

Taking into consideration the Department's strong suits, the self-evaluation reports, supporting material, and on-campus interviews, we note that flexibility emerges as a keyword. We got the impression that there is a strong sense—and even an ideal—of flexibility in respect to the MA and Ph.D. programs. Such flexibility manifests in allowing for great diversity and individuality in individual MA and Ph.D. trajectories; i.e., in terms of time to complete a thesis, length and timing of fieldwork, and in regard to when coursework is carried out. Flexibility allows MA and Ph.D. students to tailor their individual study trajectories and adjust those to their specific preferences and life circumstances. Flexibility, however, also appears to generate a sense in students of fluidity and vagueness regarding timelines, planning, and structure. This sense of fluidity was expressed during our interviews with MA and Ph.D. students, who voiced uncertainty regarding the sequencing of courses and the scope of their fieldwork.

### ***Suggested measures:***

- The Department should carefully consider in which ways a model largely defined by flexibility might have a negative impact on MA and Ph.D. students as regards their abilities to plan, navigate, and complete their education.

## **b) MA level**

### ***Study plan (individuella studieplan)***

After examining the many MA program documents, the self-evaluations, and interviewing students and staff, the Board finds that the structure of the MA program is well-established. The program, however, also gives a somewhat opaque impression, which was supported by student's experience of a program defined by flexibility and even fluidity. Students voiced difficulties in identifying the beginning and ending of modules, especially those focused on fieldwork and thesis writing. Fluidity also emerged as a concern when the Individual Study Plan (*Individuella Studieplan*, ISP) for MA students was discussed during our interviews. The ISP seems neither to be applied consequently for all students nor followed up continuously/regularly. The application of the Study Plan (ISP) at the MA level appears as more of a bureaucratic measure than a helpful tool for students to govern their MA studies.

### ***Suggested measures:***

- Consider more structured alternatives to an educational model largely defined by flexibility, which generates uncertainty in students regarding time use and completion of various stages of their education.
- Unless applied thoroughly for all MA students, the Study Plan (ISP) at the MA level could be discontinued. Doing so would mean to eliminate a source of confusion that adds to an unproductive sense of fluidity.

### ***Fieldwork***

A major issue in respect to the MA level, the Board learned, concerns the prolonged time students take to finalize their thesis. According to documents shared with the Board, out of 40 MA students enrolled during the period from 2018 to 2022, only six finalized their studies within the designated timeframe (i.e., two years). The Board recognizes that the corona pandemic has had a negative impact on the MA program at the Department—just like the pandemic has had anywhere else in Sweden, and beyond. Yet, the Board also observes that

the tendency to delayed MA thesis writing is a concern, which predates the pandemic. Low completion rates and limited flow (*genomströmning*) of MA students thus is a problem, which needs to be addressed by the Department, not least in the light of general higher education expectations in Sweden concerning streamlining, efficiency, and completion rates, while a high pedagogical and scientific standard is maintained.

A critical point for delays in the MA process seems to be related to the point in time when students return from their fieldwork. During the interviews, students referred to the fieldwork period and the thesis writing process as marked by fluidity rather than by a clear structure. They seemed overwhelmed by the material they gather during fieldwork and, therefore, hesitant to take on the task of processing and analyzing field data. While students are introduced to several courses at the Department focused on fieldwork, ethnography, and methodology, they expressed a need for further knowledge about how to systematize and identify analytical tendencies in their material, for instance, by indexing data. The Board got the impression that an anthropological study is portrayed at the Department as a somewhat mystified—and even mythical—exercise that may not necessarily be conducted within a defined timeframe.

Fieldwork is crucial to anthropology generally and hence also to this Department. Though, fieldwork seems to have become an inflection point, which determines whether MA students are able to finalize their studies on time. While a matter of collecting, processing, and analyzing data, fieldwork also concerns students' social working environment. Fieldwork might be an individualized—and even solitary—experience which could be augmented by the flexible MA model applied at the Department. In the Board's view, the fieldwork challenges faced by students are critical to address.

***Suggested measures:***

- A more structured framing of the MA fieldwork to clarify for students when various fieldwork-related phases begin and end.
- A revised, further elaborated, and more hands-on ethnographic fieldwork course, which allows students to conduct a minor fieldwork. Students would thereby be better introduced to how to prepare their data collection, organize minor fieldwork and, moreover, process and analyze qualitative in-depth material. Such a course could even help students to figure out how to identify tendencies in their data to generate arguments of wider scientific validity.
- Launch an institutionalized online fieldwork café for MA students, as well as for Ph.D. students, while in the field to facilitate social networking amongst students and prevent atomization while gathering data. Such a café could offer a space where students could share their experiences across educational levels.

***Thesis writing***

Students can write their MA thesis at any point in time during a two-year period, i.e., a 45 hp/credits comprehensive course. This gives leeway to the students in their writing process but also seems to result in delayed hand-ins related to the thesis, ultimately leading to many students not finishing their thesis on time. These problems seem to arise because students tend to write, conduct fieldwork, and take courses at different times and thus work individually rather than in groups. Such individualization easily creates a disconnection between students, leading to a working environment that may be experienced as lonely for the students and a teaching situation that may be challenging for supervisors.

The Department is already addressing these problems and considering a change in the structure of the MA program. The Board learned that the Department is debating whether to break down the thesis writing course into phases various, each of which would give credits,

and set up clear milestones for the MA thesis writing process. By so doing, the thesis writing process would be transformed into a 15hp first phase, followed by a 30hp second phase, or alternatively a 15hp phase followed by a second and third 15hp phase. Such a change would conserve the Department's desire to offer students freedom of choice while at the same time enabling a thesis writing structure based on milestones. Thus, the Board agrees there is a need for restructuring the MA program, as identified by the Department.

***Suggested measures:***

- Streamline the program course structure to include set times for certain milestones in fieldwork and thesis writing.
- Have a set time for the thesis writing course with an increased number of supervisor follow-ups.
- Break down the thesis course into multiple phases each of which would give credits.
- Strengthening the monthly MA seminars, which are appreciated by students.

***Courses***

The Department offers a broad range of courses in anthropology, which particularly are covering the classics. Such courses are pertinent for an education in anthropology, yet the Board observes that courses could be developed further to connect classic readings more substantially with ongoing debates in anthropology, the humanities, and social sciences.

The Board, therefore, would suggest that the Department's courses focused on classic anthropological texts are brought into dialogue with current issues such as interspecies studies, the Ontological Turn, Science and Technology Studies, feminist anthropology, workplace ethnography, migration and climate studies, postcolonialism, decolonialism, and thematic concepts. Upfront anthropological themes and topics are explored at courses and seminars offered by the EV program, though, these might not be attended by the Department's MA students.

***Suggested measures:***

- Aim at consolidating a teacher team in each course rather than applying a one teacher—one course model. This would allow for course dynamics and more diverse perspectives.
- Bring into dialogue classic anthropological texts with newer and more recent conceptualizations in anthropology to broaden students' horizon and ensure that courses are continuously updated and, thereby, not turning static.

***Course information***

The Board notes a lack of clarity amongst MA students concerning course information provided on the teaching platform Studium/Canvas. Students appear somewhat unfamiliar with the platform and how to navigate the course platform and the uploaded information. The Studium/Canvas information provided by the Department on MA courses to the Board, however, appears to be comprehensive and the course instructions on the platform detailed. Such a discrepancy between the views of the students and the Department about course information should be addressed.

***Suggested measures:***

- Course coordinator dedicates time at the introduction of a new course to walk students through all the relevant course pages on Studium/Canvas. This would mean conveying information directly to students about course syllabus, readings, instructions, lectures, seminars, assignments, final essay, make-up assignments, re-examination, etc.

### ***International track—Swedish track***

The Board notes that international fee-paying MA students and students admitted through the Swedish system do not seem to complete their studies at the same speed. While everyone seems to be equally treated, students voiced concern regarding the different conditions under which students take and complete their education. Fee-paying students are under pressure to finalize their studies in due time, while those students who have been admitted via the Swedish track, reportedly, can allow a more relaxed approach to the MA studies timeline.

#### ***Suggested measures:***

- While a common timeframe is formally in place for all students, we suggest that the Department works systematically to harmonize perceptions of the duration of the MA studies timeline for all students, regardless of whether they are fee-paying or admitted through the Swedish track.

### ***Work opportunities***

Another problem identified by the Board concerns students' feeling of limited knowledge about their post-examination opportunities. Students seem to feel that it is unclear what the labor market may offer, and which challenges they may encounter, after finalizing their MA (see also suggested measures under a) above).

#### ***Suggested measures:***

- Bring back the labor market day, which the Department used to host pre-pandemic, to inform students about the opportunities available after finishing their degree.
- Facilitate an alumni network where students get an opportunity to staying in touch with one another and networking after they have finalized their studies and left the Department.
- Have a designated space on the Department's webpage where anthropologists share their work and job market experiences.

### **c) Ph.D. level**

The Board finds that Ph.D. students are dedicated and progressive in their research projects and have access to committed supervisors who encourage and support the research process. Apart from these observations, we would bring forward two matters: *first*, the ambivalence between the Ph.D. students' role as researchers on the one hand, and their role as employees at a department (including involvement in tasks alongside the research project) on the other, and *second*, that few Ph.D. students finish their dissertation within the expected timeframe.

#### ***The role of the Ph.D. student***

The Board finds that the individual responsibility for compiling a thesis is clear for Ph.D. students. Their responsibilities in contributing to a good working environment and workplace community, however, does not seem to be as clear; or might even be thought of as uninteresting. The Board is to some extent surprised that the Ph.D. students do not seem to value the working environment and the various merits they can acquire besides their thesis work by engaging with their department. The doctoral students even appear to underestimate their own importance for creating a good working environment. This might arise partly from a strong focus on their role as researchers and partly from a lack of communication around workplace responsibilities. The Department needs to highlight both the opportunities and obligations that come with a Ph.D. position.

***Suggested measures:***

- Clarify employee responsibilities of Ph.D. students and their role as colleagues at the Department, for example, regarding teaching and other departmental tasks.
- Increase Ph.D. representation in various forums, such as the equal opportunity group or working environment committee. Emphasize the importance of Ph.D. students' perspectives.
- Continue to communicate possible career paths to Ph.D. students, for example at "career days" and increase contacts with those operating outside academia by establishing an alumni network.
- Discuss with the Ph.D. students the importance of gathering other merits besides the thesis itself when preparing for a future career whether within or outside academia.
- Strengthen the mentorship structure and resume the discussion about its purpose.
- Continue to offer Ph.D. students the possibility to teach in both Swedish and English.

***Thesis time and fieldwork***

According to national educational regulations, a Ph.D. program would include 48 months of study (i.e., gross time). This timeframe seems to be contested by a sense, or belief, saturating the Department that time extension is necessary for the completion of a doctoral education.

The average effective time taken to complete a Ph.D. program at the Department is about 7 years. In the self-evaluation report, it is stated that the net study time is shorter for Ph.D. students who were admitted to the program in recent years. This positive change concerning the time consumed for finalizing a Ph.D. was also emphasized by staff when the Board visited the Department. From the interviews, however, we got the impression that not finishing a doctoral program on time is perceived with ambivalence amongst Ph.D. students and staff; they see delays partly as problematic and partly as "natural"/normal, in the sense that doctoral research is assumed to be stretched over a longer period than stipulated.

A key part of Ph.D. students' thesis work is fieldwork, and as discussed in the section focusing on MA students, we identify fieldwork and Ph.D. students' return to the Department after the conduction of fieldwork to be a critical point for their education and thesis writing. The length of fieldwork is a matter of importance, as it results in Ph.D. students being absent from the workplace for a considerable period. We understand that the norm for fieldwork at the Department is one year, but that a discussion is going on regarding advantages vis-à-vis disadvantages of a one-year period of fieldwork versus two shorter periods of fieldwork.

The Department should provide more continuous support for students to help them understand how a preliminary analysis of their material could be carried out and integrated into the fieldwork period. Doing so, would mean more thoroughly elaborated routines regarding supervision at a distance. The supervision log relates as a practice, which already is used at the Department to guide Ph.D. fieldwork.

The allocated time to academic staff for supervision of a Ph.D. student is 160 clock hours per student, which we perceive to be rather generous. This number of hours allocated to a supervisor, moreover, covers tutorial sessions, reading of thesis text, commenting on drafts, and participating in the doctoral student's seminars as well as organizing the Ph.D. defense.

***Suggested measures:***

- Consolidate the Committee of Supervisors around the perspective/approach which means that the Department provides the resources needed to carry out the Ph.D. project within the given time frame of 48 months.
- Communicate requirements of scientific quality in parallel with reflections of what could be accepted as "good enough".

- Some Ph.D. students experience late feedback from supervisors. Even if these can be seen as isolated cases, it is recommended to structure and increase transparency concerning the time allocated to supervision, for example, through the individual study plan.
- “Demystify” anthropological methods and analysis, for instance, by holding workshops based on teachers’ experiences and research. This could be a joint practice with the MA level, i.e., a so-called elevator course.
- Continue the discussion of how to structure fieldwork and the length of fieldwork to facilitate student’s overview of the fieldwork period. Dividing fieldwork into two shorter periods might even stimulate the working environment positively.
- The supervision log could be strengthened and used more systematically.
- Consider an institutionalized online fieldwork café for Ph.D. students, as well as MA students, while in the field. The café would allow students in the field to touch bases across MA and Ph.D. levels and at different times during their fieldwork.

### ***Thesis work—coursework balance***

Another part of the prerequisites for finishing the Ph.D. thesis on time is finding a balance between coursework and thesis work. The self-evaluation report for the Ph.D. level states that these two requirements should be conducted in tandem, albeit with an emphasis on coursework in the beginning. Ph.D. students seem to assume that they are expected to complete *all* their coursework (60 hp) within the first year. They recognize that this seldom happens, but the expectation itself (whether internal or external) may cause stress, especially given that the first year ideally also should allow students to prepare their upcoming fieldwork.

We also note that some collective Ph.D. courses (thus, not *läskurser*) have been adjusted to accommodate individual circumstances of students (e.g., being on fieldwork, taking a course outside UU). Some courses thus have been stretched over an extensive period because they were adapted to individual student plans.

Such flexibility has its advantages, primarily by allowing Ph.D. students to finish the assigned course together with other students. However, this flexibility also has some disadvantages. Courses that go on for a long time can spill over to other commitments and thereby take time from and direct attention away from other tasks that Ph.D. students should complete (e.g., other courses, preparations for fieldwork). On a general level, the flexibility appears to undermine students’ impression of the Ph.D. program as a period consisting of a specific set of tasks that are to be completed within clearly specified starting and ending times. All of this may contribute to the idea that it is almost impossible to complete a Ph.D. within the given timeframe of four years net study time.

### ***Suggested measures:***

- Discuss the relation between coursework and thesis writing with the Ph.D. students to work out realistic study plans. Schedule one or two courses for a later phase in the Ph.D. education.
- Ph.D. supervisors could be more actively involved when doctoral students select courses and plan their education.
- Strengthen the structure of the Ph.D. program by introducing/clarifying milestones for when courses and other tasks are to be completed.
- Consider relating the 50% and 80% salary rise to achievements in coursework and thesis work, as is the routine in some other departments at UU.

## **General conclusions**

The Board members appreciate to have been appointed to evaluate the Department's MA and Ph.D. programs. The Department has greatly supported our work and met the Board with transparency. The Board would emphasize the importance of anthropology as a discipline in the Swedish scientific and pedagogical landscape and, moreover, the pertinence of fieldwork for anthropological and ethnographic research and education. The Board recognizes the devotedness with which the Department continuously attempts to stimulate anthropology as an independent and demarcated discipline in Sweden.

In our report, we have aimed at sharing constructive suggestions and realistic measures, which could be carried out rather immediately at the Department to improve and enhance the MA and Ph.D. programs. While advanced level education (MA and Ph.D.) is well-functioning at the Department, the Board finds that there is room for improvement, as indicated in our report. Thus, we hope our suggested measures will be carefully considered when revising the MA and Ph.D. educations.

The Board would direct attention towards the ways in which this relatively small Department at UU could be strengthened by an expansion of the number of permanent staff. While those already employed at the Department are doing an impressive work, the Department, and in turn the MA and Ph.D. programs, could be invigorated by the hiring of additional permanent staff. With more staff, it would be possible for the Department to implement our suggestions more systematically and comprehensively such as consolidating teaching teams for various courses, restructuring the MA and Ph.D. supervision, launching a hands-on fieldwork course, turning fieldwork and data processing into a more focused exercise, reversing a non-productive sense of flexibility/fluidity pervading the Department, and energizing further the Department's transition process.

A larger number of permanent staff, moreover, would open opportunities for ensuring a closer collaboration between the Department and the Engaging Vulnerability program, as well as the Forum for Africa Studies. Such closer collaboration could enrich the Department's MA and Ph.D. programs and even allow for long-term sustainable solutions of the highest international scientific and pedagogical standards.

## **Board of reviewers**

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