International Evaluation
Final Report, March 2014

1. Introduction

On December 12, 2013 the Doctoral School of the Humanities, Aalborg University, appointed

Prof. Dr. Susanne Metzner, Hochschule Magdeburg-Stendal,
Prof. Sten Runar Ludvigsen, University of Oslo, and
Prof. Johannes Wagner, University of Southern Denmark, Chair.

as members of the international evaluation panel. The university provided the panel with an Internal Evaluation report (pp. 52, attachments pp. 201). The panel visited Aalborg University on January 29 and 30 and held meetings with the Doctoral School, the Dean and the Heads of Departments, the Heads of the Research Groups, representatives for the PhD students and of the supervisors. The exchanges on the meetings were open and constructive and the different stakeholder groups were very cooperative to respond to all questions of the panel. The panel appreciated the friendly and professional spirit in the meetings.

The Doctoral School presented to the panel a list of eight evaluation criteria which formed the structure of the internal evaluation report. The panel will consider the criteria in its deliberations. They are Recruitment and Completion, Academic Climate, Supervision, PhD courses, Stays at foreign research institutions, Teaching obligation, The PhD thesis, Employment.

On the basis of the written self-evaluation report and the meetings with the different internal stakeholders, the panel feels well-informed and considers to have the necessary information to formulate the following recommendations.

2. Overall impression

The Faculty of Humanities at Aalborg University has through local, national and international PhD programs until 2007 build up experience and capacity for running Ph.D. education. The period for this evaluation is from 2007 to 2013 and covers the period where the national strategy for PhD education in Denmark had changed and faculties were expected to establish doctoral schools at the faculty level. The strategic aim of the first period has been to achieve critical mass, to establish cooperation national and internationally and to establish procedures for quality in all areas of the PhD education. The Doctoral School has grown exceptionally since 2007 and tripled the number of PhD students from 52 in 2007 to 156 in 2012. Some of the growth, e.g. in Music Therapy, has been made possible due to large external funding and cannot be expected to hold for the future.

The school has five groups of actors. They will be discussed in the following evaluation.

1. Doctoral School
2. Doctoral Programs

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3. Research/Knowledge groups
4. Supervisors
5. Students

The Doctoral school itself seems mainly to take care of the administrative side of the PhD education and organizes recruitment, financing, enrollment, evaluation, supervisor training, and generic courses. The academic side is taken care of by the doctoral programs, research/knowledge groups and supervisors. The cooperation between all parts of the Doctoral School and the students appears to be professional, friendly, fruitful and very active. The panel is impressed by the work of all stakeholder groups of the Doctoral School which have achieved much in the few years of the School's existence. They have developed capacity and experience for developing and execute different PhD activities and within some field with rather large scale. The activities have been generic courses, education for supervisors, domain specific courses and courses in methodology. All together the doctoral school offers a large variety of educational activities and access to participation in collective and collaborative research activities.

While the administration is taken care of by the school and the academic leadership seems to be located in the research programs and the supervisors, the management function seems not to be clearly distinguished. We think that the division of labor between the different actors involved could be developed further. The leader of the PhD school's main function could be to focus not only on form, structure and processes but more on content. Administrative tasks should be fulfilled to a higher degree by the different PhD programs and research groups.

3. Dean and Head of Departments

In the meeting with the panel, the Dean and the Head of Departments expressed their positive opinions of the PhD School. According to their view, the school has now entered a maturity phase after some years of strong growth since 2007. The future enrollment target is set at 40 new students yearly. This equals the figure for 2011 which is the maximal yearly enrollment up to date.

According to the Dean and the Heads of Departments, the strategy of the faculty in the near future years is to align the administrative tasks of the school stronger with the academic side after the years of strong growth. The leader of the Doctoral school participates in the faculty board meeting, which takes place bimonthly, thus having the possibility to bring up issues from the Ph.D. school.

The panel asked about the funding situation of the students. The faculty does not cover full grants for any PhD students. The students are funded according to different funding models or study without a grant. So students who have full academic grants (e.g. research project money) study alongside industrial students who are employed by local companies, international students who work in their homelands (e.g. Music Therapy), international students who live in Aalborg, part time employees of the university and unfunded students. In other word, the student population across the school is highly diverse which creates a range of challenges for the PhD school.

The actual work to secure funding for students has very different forms, e.g. done by the senior researchers (the future supervisors) as part of a project application to an external funder or by the Head of the School in cooperation with internal and/or
external stakeholders when industrial PhDs are created. It is the ambition of the faculty to distribute seed money to researchers to help and encourage them to build strong, nationally and internationally visible research environments, 'light houses,' which are able to attract external money and excellent PhD students. The faculty does intend to offer a limited number of full grants in the future.

The panel is concerned about the intended further growth rate and the general funding situation in which the university contributes with 'seed money':

The two larger programs, HCCI and Music Therapy belong to the Department of Communication and Psychology which is by far the largest department in the faculty. Nearly 2/3 of the PhD students in the School belong to this department. The smaller Doctoral Programs belong to the two other departments which are cross faculty departments, meaning that they also have Ph.D. students from social sciences. As a result, the size of the programs have different maneuverability due to student numbers and funding possibilities of the involved departments.

A strong load is carried by the senior researchers in the faculty who need to generate funding for their future PhD students. Seed money is certainly not enough to build robust academic environments and the faculty and departments should consider fixed based financing. The faculty seems to ask its senior researchers to act entrepreneurial as known from other University systems, however without making the research leaders independent as in these other systems.

The funding situation is opportunistic in that external funding will follow another logic than an academic institution that is responsible for a broad array of research and teaching on one side and for anticipating future needs of research in developing fields of science on the other side. The faculty will in this situation not always be able to implement an own strategy for research development but is depended on what external funders see fundable. Typically, traditional fields in Humanities - but as well in Social Sciences - are not always “sexy” enough to attract the sort of big funding that can finance PhD grants. The academic strategy is therefore vulnerable to popular trends in funding.

These financial frames are an unfortunately reality for all Danish universities which are chronically underfunded with respect to establish strong PhD environments in the Humanities and Social Sciences. The doctoral school and the faculty must be aware, that by relying heavily on external funding, the university puts its own independent research strategy at risk.

Some of these issues seem to be based in the targeted growth rate which risks to stress the system both financially as well as with respect to administration of the various forms of grants and funding.

Recommendation:

To develop a clear content based strategic orientation for the PhD school and in collaboration with the programs and research group decide on what’s the main priorities considering internal balance as well as the external visibility of the originality of ongoing research.
Clarify the relationship between the leader of the PhD school, Head of Departments, research group's leader and main supervisors for the creation of the structural conditions for the PhD students and their programs.

4. The levels of Doctoral Education

4.1. The Doctoral School

The first on-site meeting in Aalborg was held with the chair and the staff of the Doctoral School.

The panel experienced the administrative level of the school as efficient and busy. The school takes care of the general administrative needs of all programs. The Doctoral School handles recruitment of new students, enrolment, travel, budget, and offers general courses. The head of the school has to juggle different funding models, be an active fundraiser, evaluate the supervisor, develop procedures, take care of students' career development, and is part of the national PhD school network. The school seems for the time being mainly to be an administrative structure to which the students have little relation once they are enrolled. The Head of the School chairs the study board where the doctoral programs are represented as well as the PhD students among other issues, the study board evaluates the PhD courses.

The panel is concerned with respect to the workload that is dropped on the Doctoral School's leader. Much of the work that is done deals with unique situations and/or individual problem solving. Some general guidelines – wherever possible - would help to reduce complexity. The panel is highly impressed by the efficiency of the school's organization but suggests strongly that the faculty invest more resources into the Doctoral School so the head of the school has the time to build robust procedures for the daily tasks, as well as to develop stronger academic relation with the students to follow their development more closely (see below). In short, to develop the school strategically which include monitoring the boundaries for the PhD school nationally and internationally.

Recommendations

- Due to the fast growth, the procedures seem to be 'handheld' and not fully standardized. The school should now enter a phase of greater stability after some years of growing and should standardize the most frequent administrative procedures as soon as possible to establish stable routines and the need for frequent improvisation. This should be a highly profiled target of the school's strategy.
- The apparent overload of the administrative unit has to do with the relatively steep growth over the last years and with the high variety of differently funded PhD students. The estimated future intake of 40 new PhD students yearly and the high complexity of problems connected to different student groups seems to large to be handled successfully and the panel recommends a slower growth at least for a period.
- The school has little contact with the students after they have been enrolled. The panel recommends regular meetings between the head of school and groups of students, maybe in connection with their semiannual report.
However, since this would increase the workload of the chair significantly, the semiannual reports might be changed into annual reports.

- To create greater cohesion between students across the programs, the school could form cohorts i.e. establish obligatory courses for students which have been enrolled at the same time. A welcome course with practical information and discussion of the project could be held shortly after admission, writing courses and methodology course could be offered at the end of the first and second year to strengthen the relation between students of the same cohort.
- All information about procedures, upcoming events, etc should be available on the webpage in Danish and English. To take a PhD degree from a foreign university is a big challenge for international students and it cannot be underestimated how much need for information and contact they have. This should be a short term goal for the school.

4. 2. Doctoral Programs

The PhD students at the Doctoral School of Humanities are enrolled in one of five Doctoral Programs: Music Therapy; Human Centered Communication and Informatics; Discourse and Contemporary Culture; Education, Learning and Philosophy and SPIRIT, a cross disciplinary program in culture and globalization. The meeting with the head of the programs gave very valuable information to the panel with respect to the differences between the 5 programs and the challenges they each face.

Initially, the panel had difficulties to see the raison d’être of the programs apart from their role in the national course network. But the meeting with the program leaders as well as with the research programs gave good arguments to keep the programs and encourage their cooperation with the research groups.

The programs take care of the academic organization. As mentioned above, the programs vary from each other in size and in the ways they are organized. HCCI is the largest program. Its intake of new students equals in most years the combined number of the other programs. Music Therapy's students work very often in their home countries and come only to Aalborg in connection with summer courses. SPIRIT had a consistent low intake over the years while the intake of some of the other programs had few years with intake spikes. The diversity of the programs creates very different scenarios between the programs. HCCI can afford to organize courses inside the program. Music therapy - being an internationally rare breed - is forced to teach their own courses. The other, smaller programs need to think in terms of national and international cooperation to organize courses. The different programs need to meet their challenges in very different ways and clearly need different models to fulfill their goals.

An additional challenge is the coordination of activities between the campus in Aalborg and Copenhagen. The School should recognize more that there are many PhD students and supervisors in Copenhagen. The travel costs and travel time should be acknowledged and more courses should be offered in Copenhagen. Forms of blended learning might be useful.

The heads of the Doctoral Programs see as their task to help create a PhD culture by providing meetings, courses and cooperate closely with the research groups (see
below). The panel understands that the ability for individual and local management of the programs with high sensitivity to its size and structure is essential.

The programs take as well part in the national coordination of PhD courses which some programs could use more productively.

Recommendations:

Given the diversity between the programs the panel suggests that PhD schools could strengthen the connection between the programs in two different ways. First have a PhD day for all the students each year, and secondly develop generic courses that run in regular way in two year cycles. This could include courses in specific methods that are used across the programs.

4.3. Research Groups

The Internal Evaluation Report lists a very large number of Research/Knowledge Groups at the three involved departments (p.12). This was initially confusing for the panel. But the panel understood that the groups form productive research environments in which the PhD students are embedded. The Groups are the entrepreneurial academic level and organize research practices as e.g. workshops, courses, topical meetings, in short relevant practices in the research process.

The tight connection of Doctoral Programs and Research/Knowledge Groups seems to be the greatest asset of the PhD education at Aalborg University. The panel sees it as very positive that the students are required to be member of a research groups and several students reported that they actually are part of several groups. However, double membership should be monitored in relation to the students' progress and focus. The program level and the level of research groups seem to cooperate well. The loose coupling between the levels in the doctoral education balances a flexible division of labor between the Doctoral School on one hand and the Doctoral Programs and Research/Knowledge Groups on the other. The programs prevent the environment of the PhD students to be too inward-looking which might be the case if the program level is abandoned. This model of the doctoral education seems to fit the size of the faculty well.

Research/Knowledge Groups provide research and teaching (courses) for the students. Typically students will belong to the same research group as their supervisors and will change affiliation if they shift to another supervisor (see below).

In the Department of Communication and Psychology, home of the Doctoral Program HCCI and Music Therapy, the Knowledge Groups are funded and therefore more autonomous in realizing own events than the Research Groups in the Department of Culture and Global Studies where funding has to be acquired from the department. The panel has the clear impression that funded Research Groups cooperate well with the doctoral programs in offering academic opportunities for the students. Unfunded research groups seem to be more vulnerable than funded ones.

Recommendation:

The Research/Knowledge Groups create many of the activities to which the PhD students need to be exposed to. Here scientific norms, expectations and standards are communicated. We think that the Research/Knowledge Groups can even be strengthened further as part of the PhD students' learning and working environment.
4.4. Phd supervisors

Some supervisors expressed the view that, at least superficially, there has not changed much with the formation of the Doctoral School. The school is viewed as just another bureaucratic installment while the supervision work is the same as it has been before. However as a consequence of the establishment of Doctoral Schools, PhD education has changed from colleague supervision to student supervision. Likewise have the academic hierarchies changed because there are now many different types of PhD students. This is a rather important cultural shift that needs to be recognized by the whole faculty.

The supervisors express their satisfaction to belong to a local school instead of a national PhD school. The local school allows for proximity, cooperation between researchers and between the PhD students. However the situation is different for the PhD supervisors and students who are located at the Copenhagen Campus of Aalborg University.

Supervisors have to produce applications and provide a large part of the funding needed for PhD students. This work should be acknowledged even if it is not always successful. In addition supervisors argue that they cannot handle all the boundary issues around all the PhD students. This involves a number of administrative issues which could be taken care of at the level of the programs or the PhD school.

Especially since at least some supervisors are self-recruiting (by writing successful applications), supervisors should be certified by general training courses and by experience exchange seminars. There is certainly a need for discussing challenges in supervision with other colleagues. Some of the seminars should include PhD students - not necessarily by those supervisors who participate in the seminars - to make the students’ perspectives on supervision relevant.

As already mentioned earlier, some Research Groups to which supervisors and PhD students belong are better funded than others. This could be remedied by the Dean and the Heads of Departments. There seem to be little money even for internal exchanges between the two campus locations. Music Therapy has a large number of foreign PhD students but apparently no travel budget for visiting them. If Aalborg University wants to keep Music Therapy as an internationally known ‘lighthouse’ the conditions of funding these activities might need to be revised.

Recommendations:

The panel recommends that the cooperation between both campus placements (Aalborg and Copenhagen) becomes a high priority and that virtual but also physical meetings with students and supervisors happen regularly.

Currently, supervision by a single supervisor seems to be the norm. To give students a broader offer of supervision, the school should promote co-supervision for all students. Co-supervisors would typically be from other research groups or relevant colleagues from outside Aalborg University.

The Faculty should clarify the supervisor’s role for the boundary activities of the PhD students. This could involve for example legal and financial issues.
Increase the education of supervisors both for new supervisors and for experienced ones.

4.5. PhD Students

The PhD students see themselves as part of a research group and to a lesser degree as enrolled in a Doctoral program or a Doctoral School. In other words, they experience the Doctoral School as remote and relevant for enrolment or for securing funding (e.g. in industrial PhDs) but not so much for their daily work.

The common form of the PhD thesis is a monograph. Outside Aalborg University, the paper based thesis has become more and more common since it allows the students to produce international journal publication as part of the PhD thesis which may have a strong impact on their future careers. The students are interested in a paper based thesis but there is more information needed. The Doctoral School should clearly define standards for paper based theses (e.g. the number of papers, publication status of the submitted papers, length and form of the introduction). Preferably the school should set a target norm of how many paper based theses are expected in the coming years and define ways of motivating supervisors and students to use the paper based model. This should be done in strong collaboration with the different program, but needs to be a priority within the whole faculty.

By the ministerial order for the PhD system, the students are required to spend some time in another research environment than where they are enrolled. This rule has been created to encourage PhD students to experience other research environments and tradition as their home university. This provision may not in the same way be relevant for foreign PhD students as for 'local' students. The School should consider not to enforce this request to hard for foreign students. Related is the funding situation which seems to be even harder to solve than for the Danish students.

Recommendations:

Start the discussion of PhD formats (papers and monographs) and how standards could be developed within each genre.

The students experience a possible change of supervisor as a 'very tough process' since they not really know 'whom to turn to'. The school needs to provide more information about the procedures involved when shifting supervisors.

The students are unsure about the quality standards for the PhD dissertations. They experience standards as defined implicitly. The School needs to reflect how quality standards can be made more transparent for all students. Specialized seminar for the foreign students might be helpful here.

International students need many resources and still have problems. Remember that everything is new for international students. The departments' websites should be in English or bilingual Danish/English as any information to the students.

There exists a successful mentor system between students but it should be strengthened and developed as formal structure for the school and the programs.
5. Conclusion and Discussion of the evaluation criteria

Recruitment and Completion.
Recruitment seems accidental due to the economic models.
Completion rate seems to be acceptable but due to the very different types of PhD grants and PhD students, possible factors working on completion rate are very difficult to assess.

Academic Climate
The internal evaluation reports only small numbers of respondents. The panel has the impression that the academic climate is vivid and thriving, especially on the level of Research/knowledge Groups. That means as well that its robustness or fragility depends on the groups. This is the case both for the permanent faculty members as for the PhD students.

Supervision
As reported in the internal evaluation and confirmed in the interview with the PhD students, the students are content with the quality of the supervision they receive. Most of the supervisors have expertise within the areas in which they supervise. If not, other members of the faculty or supervisors from outside Aalborg University are recruited. The supervision is a key factor for the success of the programs and the school. Its seems that the cultural shift in the relationship between supervisor and PhD students as well as the volume and the high variation of PhD projects create a need for increased supervision capacity. One step towards such capacity might be an obligation for all students to have two supervisors.

PhD courses.
The number of PhD courses taken in Aalborg and in other institutions varies between the different programs. The internal evaluation gives not enough information about the portfolio of courses offered. Approximately the students take at average 50% of their courses in Aalborg. The school and the programs can develop a more transparent strategy in which they signal which courses and activities should be performed in Aalborg and which courses can/should be taken nationally and internationally. This can in short term give the school a more visible profile in the Nordic region.

Stays at foreign research institutions.
Too few students are able to organize a stay abroad. The main reason is lack of financial resources for such activities. Those who are able to organize a stay abroad find this very stimulating.

Teaching obligations.
The internal evaluation as well as the interviews give no evidence that the teaching obligations inflicts on the PhD students' progression. This is the case for the PhD students that do their PhD on full time or the students that the time schedule is planned for a different speed of completion. The PhD's have their teaching in areas and domain which are relevant for their PhD work.

The PhD thesis.
44 monographs, 2 paper based and 2 hybrid theses were delivered between 2009 and 2012. This is somewhat surprising since the general trend in northern Europe points to
papers based thesis as the rule, not the exception. Aalborg University needs go through a radical transformation towards a different ratio between paper-based and monographs as PhD genres. The external members of the assessment committees report about the scientific quality of the submitted thesis. According to this assessment, the doctoral theses at Aalborg University comply with international standards.

Employment.
The panel has not been able to assess the employment of graduates from Aalborg University's PhD program.

Conclusion and main recommendations:
To clarify a content-based strategy for the PhD School with a few prioritized areas in which Aalborg University has the ambitions to reach and keep high international level. This will impact both the scale and scope of the PhD school.

To improve the supervision capacity in and across knowledge areas within the programs. This due to the fact that many students do interdisciplinary PhD theses.

To clarify the relationship between the PhD school, the departments and the programs for the responsibility for strategic development and for boundary regulation of the PhD school.

To establish strategic initiative to support the towards an increased number of paper-based thesis. Creating transparency of different scientific standard would be part of such an initiative.

To establish new formats for supervisors' continuous learning and reflection of supervision skills and to qualify recruitment of new supervisors.

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Signed on behalf of the committee

(Johannes Wagner)