External evaluation of the PhD-programme of the Faculty of Social Sciences at University of Oslo

1. Introduction

The Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Oslo (UiO) is, in accordance with the university's quality assurance framework, obliged to evaluate the PhD-programme every 6th year. The evaluation process comprises two steps – one internal evaluation and one external. For the external evaluation the faculty appointed the following members representing work life/sector, a parallel Norwegian university, an international/Nordic university and a PhD-candidate from a neighbouring faculty at UiO:

Dr. Siri Brorstad Borlaug, Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and Education (leader)
Prof. emeritus Inger Hilde Nordhus, Department of Clinical Psychology, University of Bergen,
Prof. Christoffer Green-Pedersen, Department of Political Science, University of Aarhus,
PhD-candidate Jarl Kleppe Kristensen, Centre for Educational Measurement, University of Oslo.

The mandate of the external evaluation group was to evaluate to what extent the programme achieves its goals and whether the faculty's and the departments' actions to develop the programme are suitable. The following goals and actions are set in the annual plan for the faculty for the period from 2022-2024:

- *A further development of the PhD-programme's compulsory faculty courses*
- *Developing voluntary generic-skills courses for the PhD-candidates*
- *Strengthening the integration of the externally funded PhD-candidates in the faculty's academic environments*
- *A further development of the work on data protection and privacy in connection with doctoral work*
- *Evaluating measures to strengthen the PhD-candidates' psychosocial work environment*
- *Further developing the mandatory seminar for PhD-supervisors*

The external evaluation is based on an internal evaluation of the PhD-programme[1], and on-site group interviews with externally funded PhD-candidates, internally funded PhD-candidates, PhD-supervisors, staff at the compulsory faculty courses, PhD-coordinators – administrative and academic staff and administrative staff at the faculty.

In the report we first describe the key features of the PhD-programme and of the individual tracks to give a background, then we address the points of the mandate. We have added two more issues which we found to be important: completion time and internationalisation. We conclude the report by offering some main recommendations.

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[1] See: https://www.sv.uio.no/forskning/phd/kvalitetssystemet/dokumenter/internal-evaluation-sv-phd-program-final-2022.pdf

1.1. Key features of the PhD programme

The Faculty of Social Sciences is multi-disciplinary, encompassing rather diverse disciplines and fields ranging from psychology where some parts are closer to the life sciences and medicine, to the more qualitative discipline social anthropology. It is a rather large social science faculty: In 2021 there were 510 scientific man-years, 326 PhD-candidates and 4950 students.[2]

The faculty has one PhD-programme with seven tracks. It runs compulsory faculty courses common for all PhD-candidates. The seven tracks are rather autonomous and diverse, and based on the departments and centres at the faculty. These are: sociology, human geography, political science, economics, psychology, social anthropology and technology, innovation and culture (TIK). They differ in terms of size and organisation of the PhD, and each track has developed their own course component. Some tracks also have chosen to create their own additional requirements for admission and article-based thesis. In 2021 the overall programme had a total enrolment of 326 candidates. The five last years the enrolment has varied between 48 candidates in 2019 and 87 in 2021. Enrolment also varies between the tracks, as indicated in Table 1 below.

		2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	Total
Sociology & human geography*	Total	10	12	7	8	13	50
	Internal	8	7	6	4	11	36
	External	2	5	1	4	2	14
Political science	Total	8	6	9	7	24	54
	Internal	7	2	4	1	15	29
	External	1	4	5	6	9	25
Economics	Total	10	6	5	4	6	31
	Internal	8	3	5	3	4	23
	External	2	3	0	1	2	8
Psychology	Total	20	28	23	37	36	144
	Internal	4	3	7	20	13	47
	External	16	25	16	17	23	97
Social anthropology	Total	5	14	2	0	4	25
	Internal	3	9	1	0	4	17
	External	2	5	1	0	0	8
TIK	Total	4	9	2	3	4	22
	Internal	2	5	2	3	4	16
	External	2	4	0	0	0	6
Total enrolment		57	75	48	59	87	326

*Sociology and human geography are two separate tracks of the PhD programme, but both are offered by the same department. In some statistics they report jointly. Source: internal evaluation report

As the table shows, psychology had the largest number of PhD-candidates enrolled between 2017-2021– a total of 144 candidates, while TIK had 22 candidates.[3] There is also large differences in terms of the PhD-candidates' employment relations. Most of the PhD-candidates in psychology have their main employment outside of the department, while this is not the case for PhD-candidates in social anthropology. The differences in number of candidates as well as workplace environment, necessarily imply that the different track experience different types of challenges.

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[2] Tall og fakta - Det samfunnsvitenskapelige fakultet (uio.no)
[3] The relative high number of enrolled candidates in political science in 2021 is mainly due to ERC and RCN grants.

In terms of formal structures, the faculty has a PhD-council led by the vice-dean for research which includes scientific PhD-coordinators from the seven tracks. The council has the formal responsibility for the PhD-programme. An administrative coordinator at the faculty level is designated to the role as secretary of the PhD-council. In addition, the administrative PhD-coordinators for each track meet once a month. Each track has also its own PhD-council composed of a PhD-coordinator and PhD-candidates (from 2022). The faculty and the different PhD tracks have to adhere to the national qualification framework.

2. Track characteristics

As a background information, we outline here what we perceive as the main features of the seven tracks based on the internal evaluation, the faculty and department/centre webpages, and interviews with the coordinators. It should be noted that some of the webpages, especially the English version, were incomplete or in one case even missing.

A PhD at the Faculty of Social Science consists of one semester of course work (30 credits) and 2.5 years of independent research, altogether three years. However, internally funded PhD-candidates have often a four-year contract in which one year is dedicated - most often – to teaching. There are also possibilities to extend the period of the PhD by compensating the candidates for time spent on teaching. This gives the tracks some flexibility. The course work is composed of 10 credits mandatory course work offered by the faculty, and the rest is either provided by the tracks or other national and international course providers.

Economics
Most of the PhD-candidates at the Department of Economics are employed at the department. The deadline for application is in January and candidates start in August where they all participate in an information meeting, aiming to create a sort of class sentiment. PhD-candidates are required to take 45 credits of course work (the other tracks have 30). The department has established a collaboration with BI the Norwegian Business School, which among other entails seminars every other week. The candidates have to participate at least 16 times at the seminars and present their work two times. In the 3rd semester the PhD-candidates present their work so far for the mid-term evaluation, receiving feedback from two external opponents. Supervisors are expected to be present. The department also has a policy that externally employed PhD-candidates should have their physical workplace at the department the first year of their PhD.

Political Science
The department has almost a 50-50 ratio of internal and externally employed PhDs. Admission of externally employed PhD-candidates takes place two times a year, while enrolment of internal candidates is based on available funding. PhD-candidates have to participate in design seminar, mid-term evaluation and a trial defence. The mid-term evaluation takes place either the 3rd or the 4th semester and is a meeting between the candidate, head of research, administrative coordinator and the members of the department's PhD-council. The supervisor and co-supervisors are invited to the meeting.

Psychology
This is the largest track, and around 2/3rd of the candidates is employed outside the department. The department has admission to the track two times a year - timed together with the faculty's introduction course (see below). The intension is to give the candidates a sentiment of belonging to a common cohort. The PhD-candidates have to participate in obligatory research seminars and present their work at a mid-term evaluation with comments from an opponent (external or internal). The

main supervisor and seminar leader are responsible for inviting an opponent. The main supervisor is present as a rule; other colleagues may be invited.

Social Anthropology
The department has admission to the track two times a year but has a relatively low proportion of externally employed PhDs. All candidates have field work as part of their research. After the field work period, often in the 5th semester, the candidate has a mid-term evaluation where the PhD-coordinator, the main supervisor and two opponents - often from the internal staff - are present. The candidates also have to give a lecture or a seminar. The department has collaboration on an international PhD programme together with the University of Aarhus, University in Edinburg and KU Leuven.

Sociology and Human Geography
The department has admission of externally employed PhD-candidates two times a year, while enrolment of internal candidates is based on available funding. PhD-candidates in sociology and human geography follow the same plan. The first and the last year they have a "dissertation seminar" where they present their projects for fellow PhD-candidates and the PhD-coordinator. The mid-term evaluation takes place in the 4th or the 5th semester depending on the duration of the grant. An opponent (often internal), other PhD-candidates and a seminar leader comment on the thesis work. The supervisor is expected to be present and eventual co-supervisor are encouraged to participate.

Technology, Culture, Innovation (TIK-centre)
The centre has admission of externally employed PhD-candidates two times a year, while enrolment of internal candidates is based on available funding. This is the smallest track in terms of candidates and has two main directions – Science and technology studies (STS) and Innovation. The latter is part of the research school NORSI – a collaboration between 28 Nordic higher education institutions. PhD-candidates have to participate and present their work at three seminars where fellow PhD-candidates and a PhD-coordinator are commentators. The mid-term evaluation uses two opponents, followed by a discussion. Supervisors and PhD-coordinator are present, and the seminar is open. PhD-candidates also have an "end-seminar", approximately three to four months to submission of the thesis.

3. The compulsory faculty courses

All PhD-candidates have to attend the faculty's compulsory courses. These consist out of five courses with a total of 10 ECTS. The courses are: Introduction to the PhD-programme, Research Ethics, Research communication, International publishing and Philosophy of social sciences. The Introduction to the programme course provides an introduction to the university and offers the opportunity for networking among the PhD-candidates. The ethics course gives an overview of research ethics, both in general and related to specific disciplines. At the International publication course, the candidates are required to develop a plan for where their research should be published, and the course in research communication teaches the candidates how to handle inquiries from the media and to disseminate research. The last course Philosophy of social sciences, given each spring, gives 4 ECTS. The aim of this course is to provide candidates with theories and tools to reflect upon where they place their own research within the philosophy of science, as well as to get an understanding of the perspectives that other research fields are based on. After years of considerable critique, the course changed in 2020.

According to our informants, the courses have several roles and aims. Most informants appreciated the introduction course. In line with the recommendations from the previous evaluation in 2016, the course seems to generate a welcome feeling and a network across the different tracks. While the mandatory course on research ethics, research communication, and international publication appear to work well, the course on philosophy of science still seems to create considerable dissatisfaction among the PhD-candidates and the scientific track coordinators. None of the interviewed candidates said that they would have taken the course had it been voluntary, notably some had taken the old version. Those who had taken the new version were more positive towards the course. While it was clearly the impression that the course had improved substantially, and the current teachers are highly committed, considerable challenges remain, among other things due to weak coordination among the teachers and the high candidate/teacher ratio. It was also clear from the interviews that the different tracks had little ownership to the course.

The panel clearly recognises that learning about different approaches to social science is an important goal for a PhD-education in social science. Yet, the heterogeneity of the PhD-programme and the number of candidates, makes one unified course on philosophy of science an ambitious undertaking. The course aims at generating understanding and knowledge of other fields' epistemology, but this requires resources - for instance for work in smaller groups in addition to lectures, and commitment as well as ownership on the side of the departments.

Recommendations

1. **Perhaps the dean and the leaders of the tracks should decide either to invest/commit themselves more to the course or discuss thoroughly how the course can be better organised. Right now, it seems that the course very much depends on a large effort from the teachers who do not really have the resources to succeed.**
2. **More involvement from the tracks or a preparatory set-up from the faculty could also help connect the course better with the sub-disciplines.**
3. **The relevance of the course and the multidisciplinary element can be emphasised more in the information from the faculty**

4. The generic skills courses

The external evaluation report from 2016 pointed to a lack in generic/transferable skills training and recommended that the faculty should develop courses targeting such skills. The faculty responded by developing a range of courses including Career Planning Workshop for Early Career Researchers, Academic writing for PhD-Candidates, How to register your projects with the NSD/Sikt, Library day, Risk Management in research projects, Introduction to NVivo, Too many demands at the same time?, and University pedagogy for PhD-candidates.

Although these courses have addressed the needs of the PhD-candidates to some extent, the internal report from 2022 points to some remaining areas of improvement, such as literature search, university pedagogy, project management and academic writing. As most of these are already covered in the courses offered, it seems that candidates as not sufficiently informed about what is currently available, as noted in the internal evaluation report.

In line with these remarks, the awareness of the generic skills courses varied substantially among the PhD-candidates we interviewed. Overall, the externally employed candidates did not know that these

courses are part of a structured programme of generic skills courses that the faculty offers at regular intervals, and they perceived the information about the courses as fragmented. Candidates who have attended courses described them as useful but expressed a wish for clearer information. Among the internal PhD- candidates, the generic skills courses were generally well known and overall seen as useful.

Both groups mentioned the course on academic writing specifically as highly relevant and useful. Some noted that this course is so important that it should perhaps be compulsory and/or give course credits, though there was some disagreement concerning the idea of making it compulsory. The internal PhD-candidates also mentioned the course on university pedagogy could be part of the mandatory course package, again with some disagreement. This would be most relevant for internal candidates on a four-year contract that includes teaching obligations.

The PhD-candidates further expressed a need for a course or workshop on how to write the introductory section to an article-based thesis (kappe). The supervisors also highlighted this. The Department of Sociology and Human Geography provides such a seminar, which might serve as a template for further development at the faculty. As there are different traditions regarding the kappe, this likely requires adaption at the level of departments/centre.

Most of the PhD-candidates will find employment outside UiO. There may be a need for a greater emphasis on the importance of generic and transferable skills which the candidates acquire during their dissertation work. While there are already courses for this, it might be a good thing to suggest to the candidates at what time during the thesis work such courses may be appropriate – in particular how they may translate their skills into a CV-format.

Recommendations:

1. **The faculty should ensure that all candidates are sufficiently informed about the generic skills courses.**
2. **The faculty or departments/centre develop a course or workshop on writing the introductory section to the thesis (kappe).**
3. **Develop a suggested timeframe for when it may be appropriate to enroll in specific courses on generic and transferable skills (e.g. writing a CV).**

5. Integration of externally employed PhD-candidates

There is a considerable variability across departments and research environments in the ratio between candidates who are employed by the departments/centre and externally employed candidates. In addition, some research environments have larger groups of PhD-candidates in general, as compared to other environments.

The integration of externally employed PhD-candidates has been a long-standing challenge. It was emphasised in the 2016 evaluation, which suggested the possibility for residency or required attendance at seminars and improved information flow. The internal evaluation report 2022, also address the challenge of integrating externally employed PhD-candidates. These issues imply that the comparison between units will reflect such contextual differences.

Since the externally employed candidates may vary according to residency regulations and institutional contexts, perceiving them as one homogeneous group appears challenging. However,

measures should be taken to make attending the PhD-programme more equal across employment status. Increased social, academic and even physical integration may all have positive effects on progression and completions time.

In terms of social integration, all the interviewed externally employed candidates refer to getting a grip of rights in the role of being a PhD-candidate, and what may be offered by the academic units, as problematic. Common examples are the question of being included in mailing lists or being invited to academic events as well as social gatherings. This also relates to specific practical issues, such as problems getting a key card to access buildings. Although many have established contact and companionship with internally employed candidates, there is often a comment on how to better establish sustainable and overt lines of reciprocal contact between the candidate and their respective academic unit. Still, there is an explicit "we-ness" expressed in both PhD groups towards one another.

The institutional framework as internally employed candidates, seems to have a protective function as compared to the external candidates. Interestingly, the internal candidates also acknowledge dilemmas that externally employed candidates may have. The internal candidates explicitly acknowledge the administrative faculty and department level when referring to receiving relevant communication and support in practical matters.

There are also some challenges in the formal relation between academic units and the employers of the external PhD-candidates. Some external candidates find that employers do not provide sufficient time to concentrate on their project, which in turn may delay the submission of the thesis. These issues should be clearly defined *a priori* as part of a formal agreement between the academic unit and the external institution.

Recommendations:

1. **Measures should be taken to communicate and secure that the PhD-programme at the faculty conceive of their candidates as being equal in terms of need for accurate communication and joint procedures to strengthen the psychosocial environment in the program.**
2. **As an example of more concrete measure to be taken, we recommend that buddy arrangements and other network activities should be better integrated in the programme, and across tracks and disciplines.**
3. **The faculty should consider defining more precise guidelines for external PhD-candidates. This would provide a clear signal to the institutions where external PhD-candidates are employed. Such guidelines may also put a pressure on the academic units to solve practical issues around mailing lists and access to key cards. More explicit rules around supervision of the external PhD-candidates might also alleviate some of the challenges around supervision that the self-evaluation report identifies.**

6. Data protection and privacy

The internal evaluation report shows that 87% of the PhD-candidates who responded to the survey claimed they had gained insight to research ethics through the compulsory course offered by the faculty. This course addresses general ethical problems, rules and regulations and standards for

research integrity, and the candidates need to prepare a brief ethical assessment of their PhD project.

The issues of research ethics, data protection and privacy are high on the agenda, and we therefore asked the candidates about the training and information. They report that there is an online course on GDPR-related issues, but the candidates did not find this very informative. Most are required to apply for approval from NSD and in some track this is a requirement in the mid-way assessment. The voluntary courses on project management and how to register your project at NSD/Sikt were perceived as useful, especially by the externally employed candidates.

However, the information about GDPR and requirements for NSD approval seems fragmented and there was substantial variation between the different tracks. Several of the candidates reported they got the information about this from their supervisor. In the fall of 2022, the faculty implemented common routines to ensure that the candidates have the necessary approvals and assessments for their work. Thus, this issue has been addressed by the faculty. However, all parties involved in the PhD-work should be informed about this.

> **Recommendations:**
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> 1. **The faculty includes the importance of GDPR and registration at NSD in the introduction course**
> 2. **The tracks implement and inform about the routines for ensuring approvals and assessments**

7. Psycho-social work environment

The psycho-social work environment of the PhD-candidates is a returning challenge. The latter years has in particular been challenging due to the Corona pandemic, which made it difficult to sustain a good working environment and measures to strengthen it. We may still see some effects of the pandemic, as some gatherings are still not back on track. Given this it is challenging to evaluate the psycho-social work environment. However, on a general level, social events are important mechanisms to integrate candidates, in addition to the academic seminar and courses (as pointed out above). The interviews indicate that the candidates appreciate the introduction course with the following social gathering. To this all candidates, both external and internal employed are welcome. Given that the faculty do not encounter the challenges related to employment issue, it could be that such an event could be part of other courses like the Philosophy of science course, which may also strengthen the cohort feeling of the candidates.

Recommendation:

1. **The faculty can arrange social gatherings in conjunction with obligatory courses**

8. PhD- supervisors

Although the mandate asked for an evaluation of the mandatory seminar for PhD-supervisors, we will here mainly address the general role and conditions for supervising and supervisors' role in securing progression. One of the reasons for this is that we met few supervisors who had taken the course.

There is no explicit rule at the faculty that candidates need at least two supervisors, so there may be candidates with only one. However, according to the internal evaluation report it is common to have two, and most have one internal supervisor and one external. Neither are there any clear rules for how often the PhD-candidates should meet with supervisors, while most have 1-3 times a month, some have less.

The panel finds the role and the responsibility of the supervisors in securing progress still unclear, as also pointed out by the evaluation in 2016. Although the faculty has introduced a mandatory seminar for PhD-supervisors, we have the impression from the interviews that this is taken by staff new to the role, while the more experienced ones may not see the need. Although the faculty has a guideline for what supervision entails[4], we got the impression that there are few clear norms of what it implies to be a supervisor and it is mainly up to the individual to carve out this role. This may be challenging for an external supervisor who often has the role as co-supervisor. Although, clarifying the role is probably one of the intentions of the mandatory course, there still seem to be very different perceptions of what supervision entails. We also found it puzzling that some tracks do not require both supervisors to be present at the mid-term evaluation.

Supervisors have an essential role in securing progression and progress, and we believe that this role needs to be more formalised and standardised. First, the faculty can require that all PhD-candidates have two supervisors, and this should be a rule. Not all relations are fruitful and having two supervisors may moderate potential tensions between candidates and supervisors. Second, the interactions between the supervisor, the PhD-coordinators and other supervisors should be tighter. One central obligatory passage point is the yearly progress report. This seems to be an administrative routine, at least in some tracks, and could be used more actively to discuss standards for progression (which may be many) and create norms for good supervision at the tracks. These meetings should also include the co-supervisor.

Recommendations

- **Two supervisors should be a common rule**
- **In relation to the yearly reporting, the tracks arrange a meeting between all supervisors and co-supervisors to discuss progress and potential measures. This may strengthen the professionality of supervision as an academic activity.**

9. Completion time

Completion time seems to have improved but was influenced by corona lockdowns and should still be a focus area. Not finishing on time can have major personal consequences for the individual candidates. Therefore, it is important not to have a culture where "everyone takes a bit longer". From a comparative perspective, the conditions offered in the Norwegian programme - three years with no teaching obligations or four years with teaching, do not appear ungenerous, so bringing the completion further down seems a realistic and important goal. Making finishing on time a strong norm for both supervisors and candidates would seem important. This might be facilitated by a numeric target for average completion time or the number of candidates who do not finished on the planned time. Establishing an early-warning system – for instance by using the yearly reporting more actively, might help keeping attention on completion time and facilitating a culture of finishing on

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[4] Veiledning - Ph.d. - Det samfunnsvitenskapelige fakultet (uio.no)

time. Also, clearly expressed expectations towards candidates' participation in academic seminar and social events may help here.

Recommendations

1. **The faculty can aim at establishing a culture of submitting the thesis on time, for instance by setting a numeric target or by establishing an early-warning system**
2. **The track should express a clear expectation to the PhD-candidates' participation in academic seminars, perhaps even make it obligatory**

10. International mobility and networks

The internal evaluation report indicates that many PhD-candidates do not feel well-integrated into the international research environment. This might be a result of the pandemic, but as the internal evaluation also argues, the PhD-programme seems to have an important challenge here. Being part of international research is a key element of a PhD-education. The candidates expressed that international mobility is challenged by among other things having access to funding. However, having a research stay abroad is often an expectation across doctoral programmes, and should be encouraged, unless strong private reasons speak against. For instance, shorter stays within Europe do not necessarily imply high transaction and financial costs and are thus more feasible. The faculty could also explore ways to support the candidates financially.

Several of the tracks report challenges in developing and offering theory courses. One possible approach could be to use the international network and relations of the academic staff to identify suitable theory courses abroad, which could contribute to development of international network and mobility.

Recommendations

1. **The faculty and the tracks can clearer express an expectation that PhD-candidates have a research stay abroad**
2. **The faculty can explore ways to support candidates financially**
3. **The track can make use of their international research networks to identify appropriate PhD-courses given at other national and international institutions**

11. Main recommendations

The evaluation report offers several recommendations for further development of the PhD-programme at the faculty level and within the tracks. The panel would, however, like to use the opportunity to give some main recommendations for what the faculty should give priority to the coming period.

1. **Develop mechanisms to ensure quality and securing progression of the thesis**
   a. **The faculty can encourage the tracks to establish clear norms and routines for supervision**

      b. The tracks could use the yearly progress report as an opportunity for having a dialogue with all supervisors

2. **The faculty should consider setting up more precise demands and guidelines for external PhD-candidates to support the tracks in their interaction with the external employers.**
3. **The faculty should consider either to invest/commit themselves more to the Philosophy of science course or discuss thoroughly how the course can be better organised.**
4. **The faculty should systematise and improve communication and information about the generic skills courses**

Oslo/Bergen/Aarhus 16.12.2022

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