

International Evaluation of the Graduate School of Arts

Aarhus University - 2014/2015

Site visit April 14-15, 2015

1. INTRODUCTION

The International Assessment Committee (IAC), comprising Prof. Ann Bygholm (Chair), Prof. Janis Jefferies and Prof. Christoph Lindner, were invited to evaluate the Graduate School of Arts (GSA). GSA provided the panel with an evaluation report (25 pages + 14 attachments) covering relevant aspects of the activities at the GSA. The report and timetable for site visit were sent well in advance of the visit, which gave ample time for preparation.

On arrival IAC were treated with great hospitality and warmth, which enabled interviews, both in person and by video link, with appropriate stakeholders to be conducted in a spirit of openness and cooperation.

The IAC met with a broad range of GSA faculty, administrators, and PhD candidates, and was able to discuss all aspects of the GSA's activities and programmes during the visit.

2. THE ORGANIZATION OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

The Graduate School of Arts (GSA) is coherently organized and well resourced, and has clear administrative functions. The 8 PhD programmes are suitably varied and cover the broad fields of interest and expertise represented by the faculty. There is an emphasis on interdisciplinarity running through the PhD programmes, which is reflected not only in the topics and approaches of the selected PhD projects, but also in the PhD course offerings.

The GSA makes it easy for students to follow courses in any of the PhD programmes, and aims to facilitate intellectual collaboration and exchange across disciplinary boundaries where desired or appropriate.

Despite the strong organization and structure of the Graduate School, many GSA members, supervisors, and departmental stakeholders express difficulty in understanding the School's structure and, in particular, its place within the faculty and its relationship to surrounding organizational units. As a consequence, PhD

candidates are too frequently uncertain about where they belong in the faculty, where their primary institutional or intellectual “home” is, and who is responsible for different aspects of their work. This lack of clarity is also shared by many School and Department (Section) Heads and PhD supervisors.

Recommendations:

- Improving communication between GSA and other organizational units, particularly Schools and Departments (Sections). In particular, more coordination is needed with relevant stakeholders over issues such as (1) PhD courses and staffing, (2) intellectual development and content of the PhD programmes, (3) standardization/agreement of staff teaching hours for PhD courses. In addition, the committee recommends that the GSA works on enhancing awareness of its structure. Consequently, its place within the faculty would be clearer to its members and stakeholders.
- Delineating roles and responsibilities more clearly and explicitly for all activities within the GSA, particularly in the areas of: recruitment, supervision, assessment, and human resource management.
- Standardize calculation of hours for teaching PhD courses.
- Create a PhD common room where the GSA PhD community can meet and spend time informally.

3. CRITERIA FOR ENROLMENT AND EMPLOYMENT

The GSA has two open calls per year for applications and these calls account for approximately 1/3 of student enrolment. The remaining 2/3 are enrolled based on external funding and co-funding. Each program has a standing assessment committee chaired by the programme director that carries out the initial assessment of all PhD students applying for enrolment in that program.

The open calls attract qualified applicants and the selection process is highly competitive. The selection process - which occurs in two stages and involves an appropriate range of relevant stakeholders – seems reasonably transparent and fair. Only a small number of selected applications are international and this poses a problem for the GSA’s internationalization ambitions (see section 4 below).

International applicants who are not familiar with the Danish university system appear to be disadvantaged in the current application/selection procedure. This is mainly due to unfamiliarity with the standards and expectations of the Danish PhD system.

Recommendation:

- More guidance and orientation for international applicants not familiar with the Danish system.

4. PROGRESS MANAGEMENT AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

The GSA carefully and consistently monitors the progress and quality of PhD work. PhD candidates receive good support for their professional and personal development, and they have a strong voice - and are well represented - in the PhD committee.

The GSA organizes a rich and diverse variety of PhD courses, which respond to student needs and initiatives, as well as to current developments in individual fields of enquiry. The generic PhD courses (mainly focused on skills development and professionalization) are appropriate in terms of topic, although feedback from PhD candidates suggest that the coursework itself is often too generic and below the threshold of PhD level.

The committee supports the flexibility that currently exists in the GSA in awarding ECTS for various forms of learning activities, although there remains a need to agree some norms across the Faculty as a whole for calculating the credit.

Student interviews and recorded data indicate that there are high levels of work-related stress, often connected to (1) teaching obligations and (2) candidates' experience of navigating the administrative structure of the GSA and Faculty. All parties recognize that the time available for completing the required aspects of the PhD degree is becoming increasingly compressed. The GSA is sensitive to this issue.

Recommendations:

- Agree on norms for awarding ECTS (especially for conference participation/presentation).

- Continue to improve PhD planner, esp. turn-around time, notifications, and user-friendliness/interface.

- Review content and level of generic PhD courses.

5. INTERNATIONALIZATION OF THE PHD PROGRAMME

a) Outgoing

The IAC acknowledges the openness and ambition of the GSA for internationalization. The IAC welcomed the opportunity to meet with scholars from a range of PhD programmes. They gave us many invaluable insights into their experiences at an international research institution (from America to Japan, Germany to Canada), which is a mandatory part of PhD education at the GSA. Choices about where to travel were also made and influenced by co-supervisors being at the international host institution. Their feedback gave a strong impression that they found their international stays very valuable for their individual research projects. This feedback also outlined that more flexibility was needed in order to fulfil the 60-day requirement. For example, some found that family responsibilities meant that they had to negotiate shorter periods of stay over a longer time frame. Whilst this was negotiated with individual supervisors it would be helpful if greater flexibility could be built into the system as a matter of standard practice. It was also the case that more financial support was required for the international stays.

The committee also believed that there should be more opportunities for returning scholars to disseminate their experience to their peers within GSA thereby building a value added knowledge bank.

Recommendations

- Greater flexibility for accommodating different kinds of international stays.

- More financial support for international stays.

b) Incoming

IAC picked up some issues that needed to be addressed by the GSA in relation to those applicants from overseas who were not familiar with the Danish system. More guidance, transparency and orientation for international applicants was needed via the University website (possibly with interviews from those who had been successful in achieving PhD entry as video clips). This would help potential scholars in making more appropriate and higher quality applications for PhD admission.

We were pleased to learn that the default language for seminars and PhD courses was English thereby allowing international scholars to participate fully with all aspects of PhD provision.

Recommendation

- More guidance and orientation for international applicants not familiar with the Danish system. (Also see recommendation for Section 2.)

6. ASSESSMENT PROCEDURE AND CRITERIA

IAC acknowledges that the GSA is both rigorous and consistent in its assessment of PhD work. It appropriately recognizes new and emerging forms of output such as products that may be seen as a practice based element in submission. The assessment procedure conforms with relevant regulations which may evolve over time should practice based work impact on text only submissions. The scholars that we met were fully apprised of dissertation criteria and formal requirements. Supervisors appeared satisfied with academic standards and the IAC concurs that regulations and standards are maintained for both monograph and paper-based dissertations.

7. OUTPUT

IAC were pleased to note that graduates of the GSA were very successful in securing employment subsequent to the award of PhD. It is worth noting that GSA succeeds in placing candidates not only in academic/research environments, but also more widely in the public and private sectors.

The GSA is explicit in directing scholars to publish peer-reviewed articles and other relevant academic outputs (such as conference presentations) as part of

their PhD education. IAC were confident that adequate support and guidance was given to achieve this.

Nonetheless, IAC found it difficult to interpret the bibliometric data provided in the self-assessment, partly because some of the data were provided in Danish, and partly because the data categories were sometimes unclear and did not always correspond to international norms. However, the output and dissemination levels appear to be suitably high and take appropriately varied forms (which may increase in the future, as practice could result in commercialization and patents, exhibition and other forms of internationally recognised output and dissemination).

8. CONCLUSION

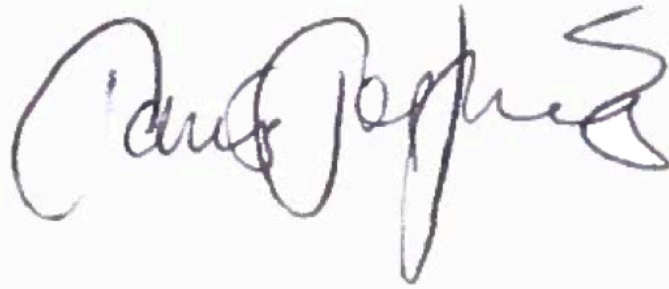
The GSA is conscious of the challenges it faces in refining its structure and improving its communication within the Faculty, but it is pro-active in addressing these challenges and is putting appropriate measures in place.

The IAC concludes that the GSA offers high quality PhD education and training, with an emphasis on professionalization and employability. The GSA is characterized by a spirit of intellectual openness and a willingness to engage all stakeholders in developing a shared vision for arts and humanities research. The IAC concludes that the GSA presents an academically sustainable vision, programme, and membership with strong potential for future growth and further internationalization.

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