

Internal evaluation of the PhD  
program at the Faculty of Social  
Science, University of Oslo

*November 2015*

## **Terms of reference for evaluation of the PhD program**

The background for initiating an evaluation of the PhD program in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Oslo is the requirement that PhD education is regularly monitored and evaluated as part of the institution wide quality assurance system for education. Due to this, the Faculty of Social Sciences has decided that PhD program should be subjected to evaluation in the 2015-2017 period. The Faculty decided that the evaluation should consist of two stages; first an internal evaluation followed by an external evaluation in 2016. The objective of the internal evaluation is threefold: 1) to describe the current status of the program and the seven specializations that make up the program, focusing on its current strengths and weaknesses; 2) suggest areas where there is room for improvement or other issues that the external evaluation should particularly look into; 3) Suggest an approach or design for the external evaluation, including suggestions for data and other sources of evidence that the external evaluation should have access to. This report summarizes the internal evaluation and it has been written by Associate Professor Taran Thune at the Center for Technology, Innovation and Culture.

The internal evaluation has been based on collection and analysis of existing data and information about the PhD program, including data on all the present and former PhD candidates (back to 2007), survey data on PhD candidates assessment of central aspects of their PhD training, documentation in the form of program descriptions, study plans and other information about the program, summaries of meetings between program coordinators and leaders of the seven specialization tracks and the program leadership in the faculty, as well as interviews with PhD candidates, program leadership and administrative coordinators of the PhD program. The ambition of the report is not to describe in comprehensive detail how the program and specializations work, but to describe the most important features of the PhD program in social sciences at the University of Oslo, and its current strengths and weaknesses as a PhD program. The evaluation is based on a stakeholder perspective, in the sense that it assumes that what is seen as the most important aspects and qualities of PhD education differs between stakeholder groups. Professors and academic staff have different opinions about what constitutes a high quality PhD program, which might not always be the same as what the PhD candidates, the leadership and administrations' or prospective employers' find to be the most important aspects of high quality PhD education. Second, as PhD programs have multiple and sometimes opposing ambitions and quality criteria meet, it is often an arena where dilemmas and tradeoffs occur. Evaluating PhD programs therefore entail that one has to look at goal achievements in the plural, focusing on scientific and program quality, efficiency and relevance (Thune et al 2012), and include the perspective of multiple stakeholder groups. The PhD program in the Social Science faculty should also be understood in context of PhD training at the University of Oslo and within the Norwegian PhD training system in general. The features of the program need to be understood in this context, and non-Norwegian readers should consult the evaluation of the Norwegian PhD training system (Thune et al 2012) and the report from the evaluation of PhD training at the University of Oslo for further information.

## **Key features of the PhD program in the Faculty of Social Sciences**

The faculty of social sciences at the University of Oslo has one PhD program (with one common PhD regulation and one PhD program plan) and seven specializations or tracks: Sociology, human geography, political science, economics, psychology, social anthropology and technology, innovation

and culture (TIK). Each of the specializations has their own study plan, which mainly specifies the taught part of the programs. The program enrolls about 40 to 50 new PhD candidates each year, and has a total enrollment in 2015 of 239 PhD candidates<sup>1</sup>. Between 40 to 60 candidates graduate from the program each year.

The PhD program plan specifies overall goals for the program and learning objectives and sets down criteria for admission to the program, structure and size of the taught part of the program (course work), the regulations for supervision of candidates and the criteria and procedures for granting the PhD degree at the Faculty. The Program plan specifies that the overall goal of the program is to educate “independent researchers at a high international level within the social sciences, in accordance with agreed upon scientific and ethical principles. The education shall qualify for research activity and other work that have high demands for scientific knowledge and analytical thinking<sup>2</sup>”. In accordance with the national qualification framework, set criteria for knowledge, skills and generic abilities have been specified. To meet these demands, the PhD-program requirements specify a set of activities and areas of knowledge and skills that are obligatory for all candidates.

In accordance with the national regulation for the degree PhD, the program consists of a taught part (usually 30 credit points or one semester of course work) and 2,5 years of independent research. The economics specialization has a requirement of 45 credit points of coursework and a smaller research part, in accordance with the standard of economics PhD training in Norway. Specifically, the taught part of the program must include training in theory/philosophy of science, scientific methods, relevant theory and scientific dissemination. However, there are very few course offerings or activities for all PhD candidates in the program. Currently, there is a course in research ethics that is common for all PhD candidates (1 credit points) that all candidates besides candidates in psychology take; the rest is organized by the separate specialization tracks. The Faculty wide PhD course in philosophy of science is mandatory, but exemptions are frequently granted. There is limited generic skills training offered by the program. Currently the faculty organizes a joint course in research communication with the Faculty of Humanities.

The number of candidates vary considerably between the tracks (see figure 1 for a breakdown in subject fields), and the specializations are also quite different in how the taught part of the training is structured. Economics has, as mentioned, a larger taught part (45 credit points) than the other specializations. Psychology has more mandatory courses than the other specializations (where 20 credit points are obligatory courses), sociology, political science and human geography have 10 credit points of obligatory courses, and TIK and economics around 15 credit points of obligatory course work. Economics is different than the other specializations in that they have mandatory preparation work that has to be taken at the master level before gaining admittance to the PhD program. In social anthropology most of the courses/training activities offered seems to be mandatory. Obligatory courses are usually a mix of methodology and philosophy of science courses, and attendance in seminars and workshops. Some of the specializations offer training in scientific dissemination (such as psychology, economics and sociology) and most have conference/workshop/seminar presentation as obligatory.

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<sup>1</sup> In total 380 individuals are registered in the database, which means that 141 candidates have not graduated from the program even though their agreements for enrollment in the program is over.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.sv.uio.no/forskning/phd/oppbygging/program-phd.html> (own translation)

The formal responsibility for the PhD program resides in a PhD program council, made up of the PhD leaders from all the specialization tracks, representatives for the PhD candidates and it is led by the vice-dean for research in the faculty. The program council has wide responsibilities for the PhD program including making decisions about the overall development of the program, the study plans for all specializations, regulations of admission to the program, regulation of independent study plans, organization of joint courses and activities, evaluation activities and more<sup>3</sup>. Each specialization track has a PhD leader who has the day to day responsibility for the specialization and all PhD candidates in it (and who also serves on the program council), as well as administrative staff. There is also an administrative coordinator at the Faculty, who among other things is the secretary of the program council.

## Enrollment and graduation over time

The dataset about the PhD candidates in the PhD program has been collected from the administrative register of the university (the FS-system). From the PhD program in social science, data on all PhD candidates enrolled from 2007 to 2015 has been collected (541 individuals). Looking at the whole period (2007-2015, spring term), 37 per cent of all enrollments has been in psychology (figure 1). Economics, political science and sociology have relatively equal numbers, whereas the anthropology, human geography and TIK programs are relatively small.

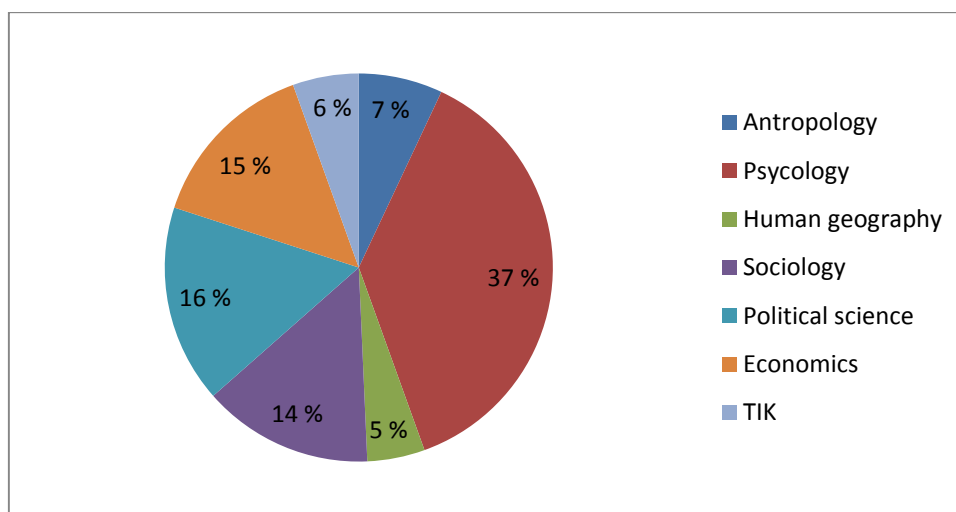


Figure 1: Enrollments in the 2007-2015 period; per specialization (per cent).

Enrollments have fluctuated over the eight years. It was relatively stable on around 70 new enrollments each year from 2007 to 2012, with a marked downturn the two last years (2013 and 2014), with 43 and 47 new enrollments.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.sv.uio.no/forskning/phd/programrad/oppgaver-mandat.html>

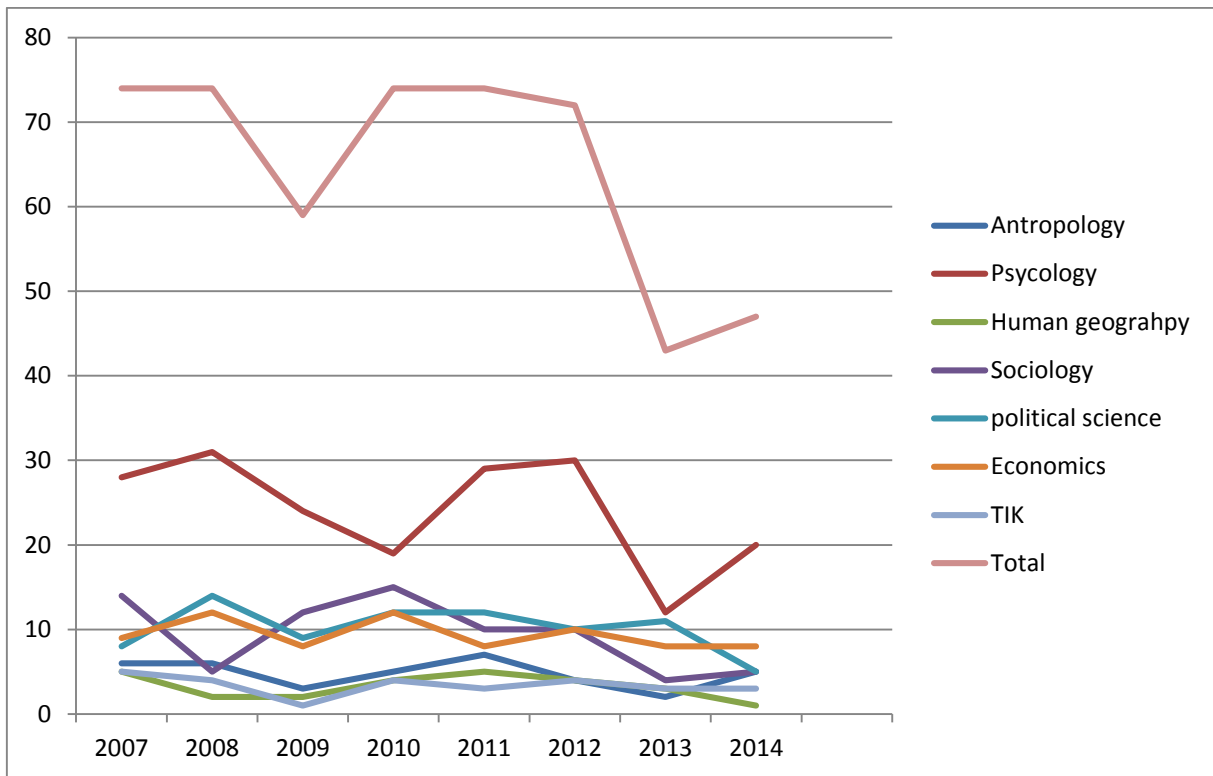


Figure 2: Enrollments in the 2007 to 2014 period by specialization

Slightly more than half of the PhD candidates that have been enrolled in the program in the 2007 to 2015 period are so-called “external candidates”, and 45 per cent are PhD candidates employed as research fellows at the University of Oslo. External candidates are employed in other higher education institutions, public sector organizations (particularly within health care) and research institutes. External candidates have been particularly frequent in psychology (62 per cent of candidates), political science (54 per cent) and sociology (67 per cent of candidates).

As can be seen in figure 3, decreased enrollment after 2012 is due to both decreasing numbers of external and internal candidates.

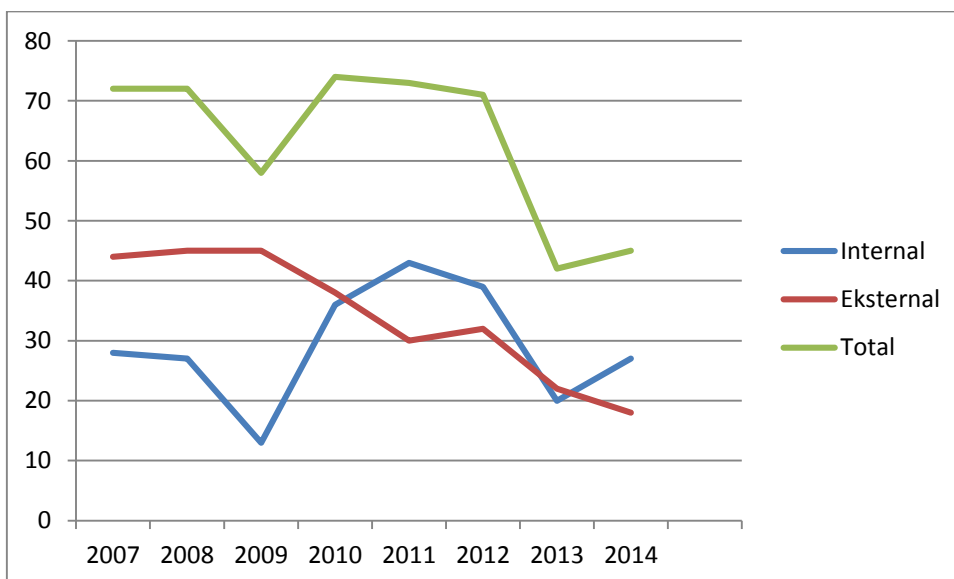


Figure 3: Enrollments of external and internal candidates

Regarding graduation and time to completion, 183 individuals (34 per cent of the candidates enrolled in the period 2007-2015) have graduated from the program (registered by the time they held their public defense).

The percentages of each cohort that has graduated between 3 and 6+ years after enrollment is showed in figure 5. As can be seen, it has been an increase in the number of candidates who graduate after four years and around 65 percent of the cohorts graduate now within a six-year period. These proportions are calculated based on gross time to completion. In the two earliest cohorts in the sample (where data is available), around 30 percent spend more than 7-8 years to complete or never finish at all.

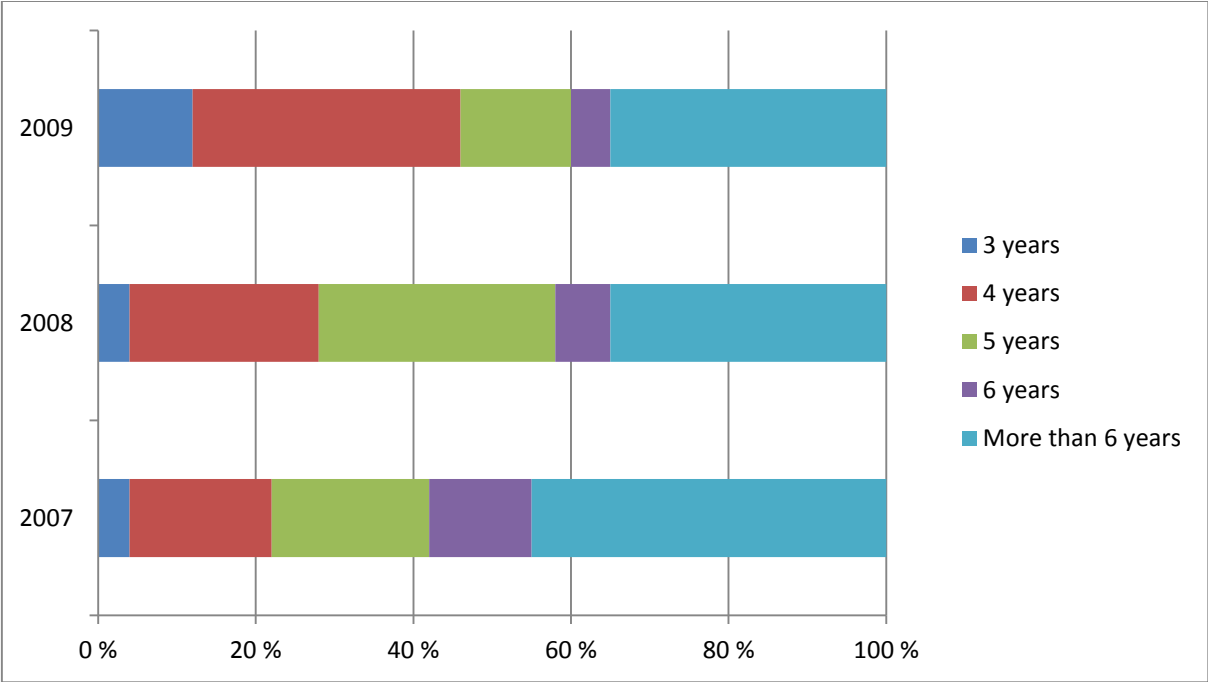


Figure 4: Per cent of cohorts who have graduated 3 to 6 years after enrollment in the program.

### Basic information about candidates enrolled in the program

The PhD program in social sciences caters to a wide variety of academic specializations and has PhD candidates enrolled that work in different employment situations. As can be seen in figure 6, almost half of the candidates in the 2007 to 2015 period have been employed in the University of Oslo (as internal PhD candidates/fellows). Other major places of employment for the PhD candidates are the institute sector, health care sector, other higher education institutions than UiO and the public sector.

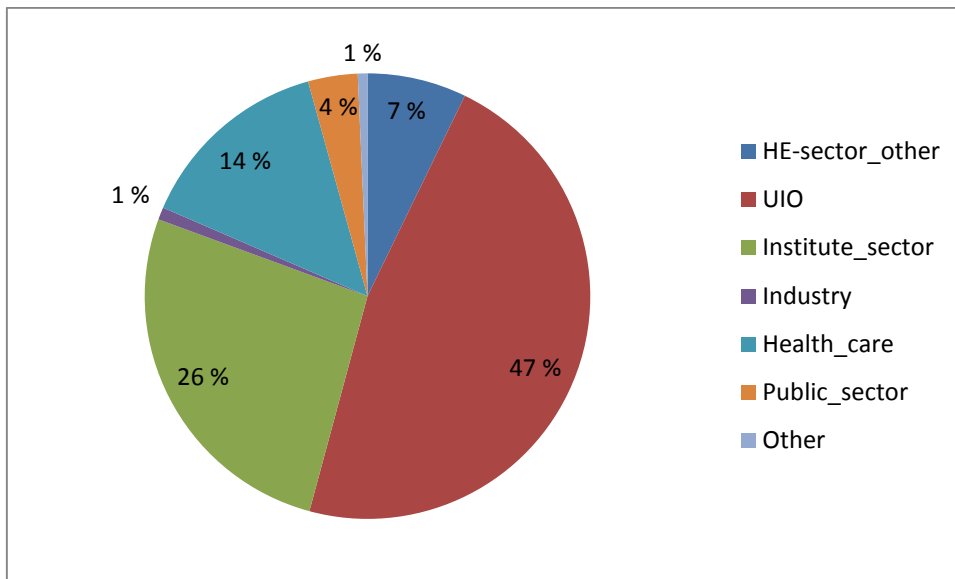


Figure 5: Sectors of employment for candidates in the PhD program from 2007-2015

The majority of candidates have funded their PhD studies through stipends, either a university stipend (funded by the university block grants) or stipends from their employer or other organizations (particularly within health). Some of these stipends might be research project funding received from the research councils or other research funding bodies (regional health organizations etc) received by the candidates' employers.

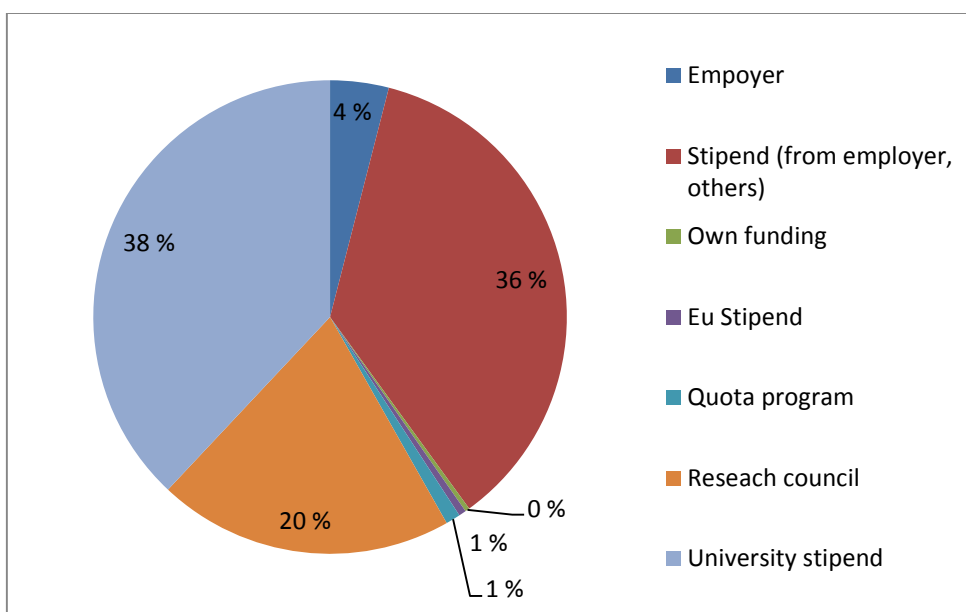


Figure 6: Sources of funding

For a subsample of the data (candidates enrolled from 2009 and onwards) information on gender and age has been recorded. The mean age when starting the PhD in this group (392 individuals) was 32 years of age (min 23 and max 55) with a standard deviation of 6 years. 86 per cent of the group was less than 40 years of age when starting the PhD. Internal PhD candidates are significantly younger when starting the PhD compared to the external candidates.

In the same group (candidates enrolled after 2009), women make up almost 60 per cent of the PhD candidates, and are clearly the majority in psychology, human geography and sociology. Economics, political science and Center for technology, innovation and culture have a more gender-balanced PhD candidate group.

### **Candidates' experience and satisfaction with the PhD program and central elements of their training**

To shed light on the candidates' experience and satisfaction, we utilize data from a survey to all PhD students at the University of Oslo from 2012, and have looked at the responses from the candidates in the social science faculty to this survey. Interviews with candidates currently in the program supplement these data. In this survey, the PhD candidates were asked several questions about their satisfaction with the PhD program (the taught part) and central aspects of their training situation (course work, supervision, support, access to resources, international travel/visits etc). Of particular interest to this evaluation, is the candidates' assessment of the formal training part of the program (course work and training) and supervision.

The PhD candidates were asked to rate their overall assessment of the taught part of the PhD training, as well as training they had received in relation to a set of different areas of competencies that PhD candidates should have some training or knowledge of, in accordance to the qualification framework. For the PhD candidates in the social science faculty, a relatively large part of the candidates were reasonably satisfied with the formal training they had received. Almost 80 percent assessed the taught part of the program to have a high or medium quality (20 percent assessed the program quality to be high), and 13 percent considered the program to have low quality and another 8 percent though the program held a varying quality. There are no significant correlations between individual level variables and assessment of quality of the taught part program, other than the relationship between satisfaction with supervision and satisfaction with the taught part of the PhD training (described further below).

Figure 8 describes the PhD candidates' assessment of training with areas of competencies that they have received training in during the PhD. The candidates responded to a question of whether they have received a thorough training in, or have gained insight into, a range of competencies. As can be seen, more than half of the PhD candidates indicate that they have received thorough training and insight/experience into relevant theoretical and methodological approaches, including ethical aspects of research. A relatively high proportion of candidates agree that they have received training in practical aspects of research, such as project and research management, dissemination of research results and use of library resources.



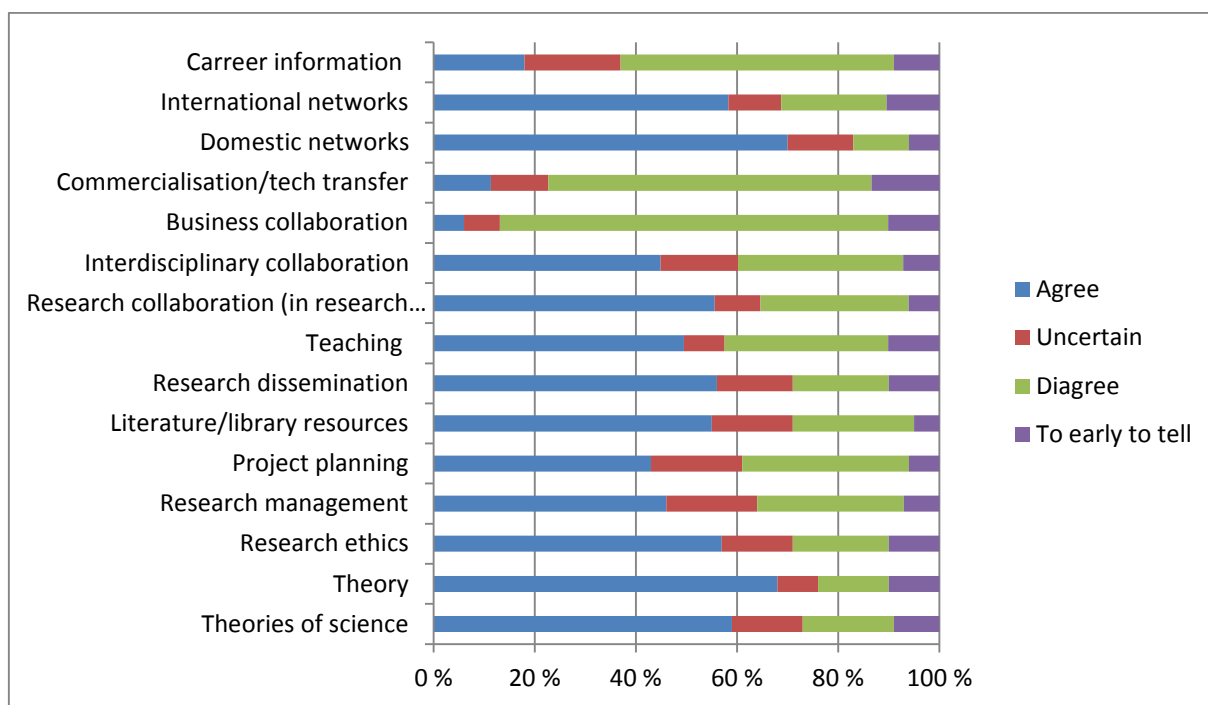


Figure 7: I have received thorough training in/I have gained knowledge of ... (Per cent)

PhD supervision and mentoring is regarded as the most important part of PhD training, as the research part of the training period is the most significant. In general, there is a high degree of satisfaction with supervision received among PhD candidates in Norway (Thune et al 2012). The survey data among the PhD candidates at the University of Oslo suggest the same. Among the social science PhD candidates, 78 percent indicate a satisfaction with supervision to a high or some degree. Another 14 per cent find supervision satisfactory, and 8 percent are not satisfied with the supervision they receive.

The majority of candidates in the faculty have one (faculty) internal PhD supervisor (75 percent) and 20 percent have two internal supervisors. 60 percent of the candidates have one external supervisor. 30 percent have no external supervisors. The norm, in accordance with the PhD regulation, therefore seems to be that candidates have one internal and one external supervisor, alternatively two internal supervisors. It is rare to have more than two supervisors. Compared to other fields of science, it is less common among social science PhD candidates to be connected to a research project run by their supervisor. 40 percent of the respondents claim that their current supervisor was actively engaged in designing the research project of the PhD candidate when they applied to the program. The majority of the candidates in social science must therefore be seen as relatively independent researchers at the time when they start the PhD training.

The frequency of supervision meetings and satisfaction with the follow-up candidates receive from their supervisors tend to be connected. The candidates in the sample seem to receive supervision on a relatively regular basis; around 50 percent receive supervision on a weekly basis or 1-3 times a month (fig. 9). 70 percent also agree that they receive adequate follow-up from their supervisor (fig. 10). However, 20 percent of the candidates do not think they have received thorough follow-up from their supervisor.

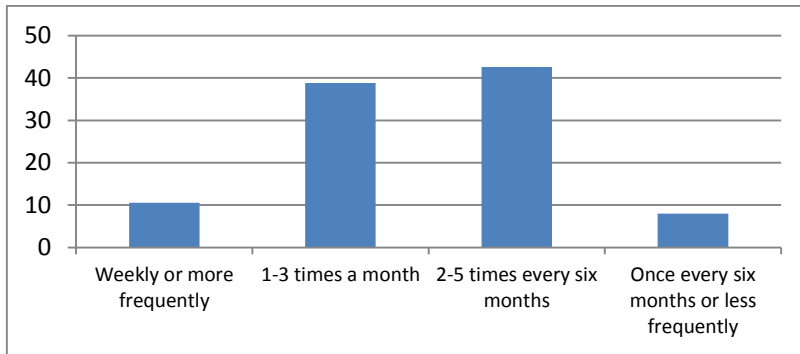


Figure 8: How often do you receive supervision? (in percent)

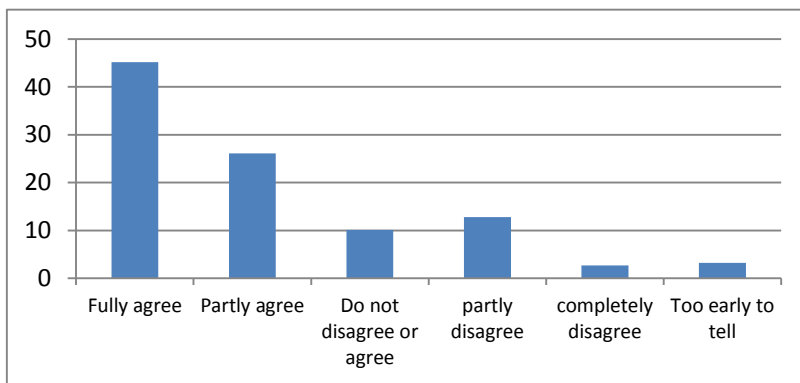


Figure 9: I have received thorough follow-up from my supervisors (in percent)

There is a positive relationship between frequency of supervision, receiving follow-up and general satisfaction with supervision, as can be expected. Further, being connected to the supervisors' research project or having had the supervisor take part in the design of the candidates' project is positively associated with the frequency of supervision and satisfaction with supervision. Also, a positive assessment of follow-up received from supervisor and their satisfaction with supervision is positively associated with the candidates' assessment of the quality of the PhD program overall. This indicates that supervision is the most important part of the training experience for PhD candidates. In this regard, the small but still significant minority of PhD candidates who do not receive frequent and thorough follow-up from the supervisors (around 20 percent of the PhD group that responded) should definitely be a cause for concern. Moreover, the significant differences between candidates that are connected to their supervisors' research and those who are not, is an issue that should be discussed and monitored.

## Experiences and assessment of PhD candidates currently enrolled in the program

To supplement the data collected from around 190 PhD students in the Faculty that responded to the survey in 2012, focus group interviews and individual interviews with PhD candidates in all the seven specialization tracks was carried out in September 2015. In total 10 PhD candidates were interviewed – 7 internal candidates (employed at the university) and 3 external candidates. They were asked to discuss what they saw as strong and weaker aspects of the PhD program and the PhD training experience in the faculty and to raise awareness on areas where they saw potential for improvement.

Overall, the impression was that the PhD candidates are relatively satisfied with the PhD training on general terms. They all feel privileged in the fact that they get a salary to work on their research interests, which means that they can work full time on their PhD dissertation. Most of them also value the highly independent position they are in and speak positively of the lack of bureaucracy and lack of strict steering from supervisors and administration; and as such that they have time to develop as independent researchers. That being said, there is also several PhD students that feel that the “laissez-faire” approach to PhD training is not only positive, and would want more follow-up, clearer demands placed on them and what they see as higher standards in student follow-up and training.

### PhD courses

In general, as is generally the case among Norwegian PhD candidates (Thune et al 2012; Thune & Bruen-Olsen 2009), PhD candidates are not always happy with the taught part or the course part of the PhD training. As described above, the taught part of the program is also organized differently in the different tracks; some have more courses and more mandatory courses, where as other specializations have a higher degree of flexibility in the courses required. Courses in philosophy and methodology of science and research ethics, which are mandatory courses are generally seen as less relevant and interesting than specialization courses.

Some of the same criticism is directed towards the general theoretical and methodological courses that are mandatory in the different specializations; they are seen as too general and not relevant enough for the candidates' research interest. This seemed to be a particular issue for PhD candidates in psychology. In general, PhD candidates tend to prefer as few as possible mandatory courses, and as much flexibility as possible. That being said, it is not the impression that candidates in the faculty are generally unhappy with the courses that are offered. Most candidates that we interviewed were satisfied with the courses, and particularly the external PhD candidates seemed to be happy with the course portfolio and express a higher degree of satisfaction with common courses than university PhD candidates.

However, and in contrast to the criticisms that some courses are too generic, an equally important challenge for the PhD candidates is to find relevant and timely specialization courses. Almost all of the interviewees, and particularly for the smaller scientific fields, express that it is difficult to find good specialization courses; that there is not adequate information about relevant courses on offer outside the university. The regulations about what kinds of courses and what levels/demands courses have to satisfy seem to be handled quite different across the specializations. Courses taken outside the Faculty or the University of Oslo might not always be qualified to credit points; and candidates criticize the lack of transparency and openness in the decisions about what kinds of PhD specialization courses that gives credit points.

Overall, it is an apparent dilemma in PhD training that the PhD candidates already have high skills that demands highly specialized training, and on the other hand, they have limited time to develop necessary skills, which means that courses have to be offered to few students frequently. This is of course very costly. The different specialization tracks at the Faculty of Social Sciences handle this challenge differently. The bigger subject fields have opted for more mandatory course work provide courses internally in the department, which leads to some degree of dissatisfaction with courses based on irrelevance. The smaller subject fields have opted for more flexibility, with the risk of

students not finding courses offered outside the institution. National and international collaboration in specific fields of science, such as the national research school scheme, is important in this regard.

### **Other mandatory components and generic skills training**

In all of the tracks, the training part is also made up of obligatory seminars and for some of the specializations, training within generic skills. Some of the specializations, such as political science, have an introductory module when PhD candidates start (the first semester) which is an “introduction to the researcher role”, where PhD candidates are given a lot of different information about demands, courses, library services etc. Most specializations also have demands for seminar participation (research seminars) where PhD candidates present their work at regular intervals. All tracks practice the so-called midway assessment, where candidates have to submit their work and receive feedback from an opponent. Attendance on the midway and other seminars are usually given a few credit points. Several of the interviewed candidates are critical about how the midway assessment is currently practiced, and that it feels like more of an administrative hurdle than a real training event. Several find that the criteria for when the midway is supposed to happen and what the candidates are assessed on, are unclear. Others are critical to the limited resources and interest the departments put into the midway, which is generally seen as a very important milestone for the candidates.

Generic skills training does not seem to be high on the agenda for any of the specialization tracks. Some of them, such as psychology and anthropology, offer courses in academic publishing, and these are generally seen as very useful. Other training offerings, such as academic English, research management or university pedagogy courses, are seen as relevant but in general, the candidates feel that they do not receive a lot of information about what is offered, and therefore cannot take advantage.

### **Supervision, administrative follow-up and information flow**

As expected, PhD candidates interviewed value the supervisor relationship highly. Most have two supervisors, and all find that the coordination between supervisors is functional. All the interviewed PhD candidates are also happy with the administrative point of contact in their respective departments, and rely to a high degree on this person for information about the PhD period in general. Interestingly, very few of the candidates know who is the academic person in charge for the PhD program in their department, and several find that they do not know who to turn to if there is a problem with their training, supervision or progress. From the perspective of the PhD candidates, the PhD leaders seem to be quite invisible.

Again, from the perspective of the candidates the harshest point of criticism they make is that they feel a lack of transparency and not an adequate information flow at the department level about key aspects of their training. Several comment that it is random if they get information about relevant courses or events from the administrative coordinator or supervisor. This is particularly seen as a problem among the external PhD candidates. A more proactive approach, in the form of introductory courses, newsletter, PhD lunches or similar events are asked for, and it is particular asked for a more proactive approach to informing and including external PhD candidates in the information loop, as they are not at the university on a daily basis.

### **Special challenges for external PhD candidates**

The faculty has quite a big group of external PhD candidates, who receive a bulk of their training outside the university, but take courses and have a supervisor (most often) in the university in addition to an external supervisor who in many situations is the main supervisor. As seen above, these candidates are generally happy with courses and supervision, but are also quite critical about how the departments support them. They do feel like “second rate citizens” in their departments and for the most part feel out of touch with the ordinary academic-social community and the information loop among the colleagues. That being said, not all think this is a major problem because they have access to a high quality research environment elsewhere, but some clearly feel left out of the social and academic community in the department. Some departments, like economics, try to facilitate integration in the academic community by offering work places for external candidates in the department for parts of time (first year), whereas other departments do not have any requirements for attendance and do not attempt to formally integrate external candidates in the academic community. For some departments with a high number of external candidates, like psychology, that might not be feasible for everyone, but how external candidates are supported is clearly an area that needs to be looked into in most departments.

### **The PhD leaders, the program leadership and administration’s perspective**

To look into what the PhD coordinators, PhD administrative personnel and the program leadership thinks are key strengths, challenges and areas where development is needed, we have drawn upon minutes of meetings with PhD coordinators and administration in all the seven specialization tracks in 2013 and 2015, in addition to interviews with leadership and administrative coordinator at the faculty. Table 1 summarizes the PhD coordinators’ assessment of the status of the specialization track, what they see as main challenges and steps that have been taken the last two years to improve the program. Also included in the table is an assessment of what an external program evaluation should focus on.

As can be seen in table 1 (below), most of the program coordinators/head of research and administrative coordinators seem to be relatively satisfied with how the specializations function and the steps they have taken the last years to increase quality and efficiency. Most of the specializations have made changes in how they monitor and follow-up the progress of the candidates with seminar participation, midway assessment seminars, final thesis seminars and supervisor contracts and monitoring. Several of the smaller programs are still concerned about the relatively few candidates who are able to complete studies on time, and still think completion rates and times are important areas of improvement. There is also a common challenge to offer high quality courses and a continuous discussion about what kinds of courses should be mandatory and the form mandatory activities should take. There seems to be a difference between political science and economics that want credit points to be reserved for theoretical and methodological courses of high quality, and where generic skills, seminars and other activities should not be given credit points. The smaller programs (TIK, anthropology and sociology, and to some extent political science) express that it is challenging and costly to develop theoretical courses that is relevant for enough candidates. Most of the programs participate in or have a plan to participate in national or international PhD schools/PhD training networks, and offer specialization courses in collaboration with other institutions.

The specialization tracks are also focusing on supervisor support and training, but few have concrete initiatives to implement supervisor training programs, as this is supposed to be initiated from the university's central administration. Several do however think that it is particularly important to implement some measures of quality assurance of external supervisors. Most of the specialization tracks are also concerned about how external candidates are supported and several tracks have implemented ways of making sure that external candidates are integrated in the academic environment in the departments as well (TIK, economics, political science).

	<b>Economics</b>	<b>Political science</b>	<b>Psychology</b>	<b>Social anthropology</b>	<b>Sociology/Human geography</b>	<b>TIK</b>
Overall assessment of program	Generally satisfied with the program; have taken several steps in changing the program the last few years	Generally satisfied with the program; have taken several steps in changing the program the last few years	Generally satisfied with the program and completion rates Able to recruit international candidates	Reasonably satisfied, strong empirical tradition, high status internationally, apprenticeship model of PhD training, less focus on courses and formal training	Generally satisfied with the program, candidates that complete are highly qualified, sees PhD training in the program mainly as an apprenticeship period	Reasonably satisfied, but still concerns about time to completion and drop-outs High numbers of applicants
Key challenges for the track	Better integration between master and PhD to streamline and make sure PhD candidates have high qualifications	Quality assurance and integration of external candidates and supervisors; Difficult to offer relevant courses in theory Information flow and overview of relevant courses	Heterogeneous group of PhD candidates with different qualifications and interest Many external candidates Challenge to offer courses that address heterogeneous needs External candidates not well integrated Need for more generic skills training	Low efficiency, heterogeneous theoretical and methodological knowledge Few students, makes it hard to offer relevant courses	Relatively few candidates in then program, difficult to offer high quality courses in theory, more interest in methods training Considerable numbers of external candidates and supervisors, not well integrated	Small environment with two specializations Concerns about reducing time to completion
Key initiatives taken the last years	Organizes admission on a yearly basis, attempt to integrate both internal and external candidates, have restructured the course portfolio, and have created new qualification criteria for enrollment to the PhD program, and to increase the integration between master and PhD	Increased structure and follow-up of candidates, with seminars, mid-way seminars, applied for a PhD school in political science		Increased structure and follow-up of candidates, seminars and mid-way seminars Networks with international/national environments	Changes in the program plan, more focus on midway seminar, national collaboration in course offerings	Increased structure and follow-up; midway and end of term seminars Research school in innovation, better integration of external candidates
Issues that needs to be addressed further	International comparison of program quality, international recruitment of candidates, effects of the new program and entry requirements	International comparison/benchmarking of program; both program and specializations needs to be looked into	International comparison/benchmarking of program Qualifications and standard of the candidates	The autonomy and role of the specializations in relation to the faculty wide program	Integration, quality assurance of external candidates and supervisors Time to completion	Time to completion

**Table 1: Summary of minutes of meetings with PhD coordinators and administration in seven specialization tracks in 2013 and 2015**

The Faculty staff responsible PhD education (Vice dean for research and Faculty level PhD coordinator) have also been interviewed. These interviews focused particularly on faculty wide initiatives taken to improve quality of PhD education and the coordination across the different specializations in the program. Several initiatives have been taken to ensure and increase the efficiency and quality of the program. Of particular initiatives mentioned is a working group that has looked at the integration between master and PhD level, supervisor training, quality assurance and evaluation of the program, and efforts to develop new indicators for monitoring efficiency, and efforts to increase learning and good practice development across the specialization tracks.

The impression from the interviews is that coordination across the different specializations is not seen as particularly important. PhD training in the faculty is seen as the responsibility of the different departments, which entails that there are many different solutions and a low degree of standardization on most aspects of PhD program activities. The faculty administration however sees clear advantages in some degree of standardization, of for instance practices connected to admission, organization of study plans and credit points, organizing of key events such as midway seminars and the public defense, to ensure that high standards are maintained throughout the program. Other efforts to promote quality in PhD training, such as supervisor training and mentoring and career advice for PhD students and post docs, have been discussed at faculty level, but the initiative to promote such things are seen as being with the central university administration. The Faculty has however supported the central initiatives, and are waiting for the central administration's plans to manifest themselves. The formal body for making decisions about the PhD program (the program council) in the Faculty functions mainly as an arena for sharing information about how things are done in the different specialization tracks, but the agenda is set down by the Faculty administration.

From the Faculty administration's perspective, the current situation in the program is not seen as optimal. According to this perspective, there is room for improving efficiency and quality by better coordination of some areas of practice across the specializations. For instance, most specializations offer different generic skills courses, organize midway seminars, organize events connected to admission and communication with PhD candidates, but such activities are done differently in each specialization. Coordination and joint initiatives to promote good standards is asked for from the administration. This is not however a uniform impression that this is important. Several of the PhD leaders think that improving efficiency in program administration and increased standardization is not the right way to improve the program. This opinion is not shared by everyone. Due to this difference in opinion, this should be seen as an open question at this point in time.

It should however be taken into account that the status of the specializations is quite different, both in student numbers, structure of the program and the kinds of candidates that are enrolled. Also, some of the programs have made significant changes to the programs in the last few years, both in structure and quality of program offerings, often as a response to scientific panel evaluations (in economics, political science, social anthropology). But these efforts do not seem to have had spillover effects to the whole program so far. An external evaluation should look into the design and practices that each specialization has implemented, and also how good practices can be promoted across all specialization tracks, so that the program overall has high quality.



## **Internal assessment of the program – strengths, challenges and areas of improvement**

### **The organization and coordination of the PhD program at the Faculty of Social Sciences**

As described in this report, the PhD program in the Social Science faculty is a heterogeneous PhD program that represents a network of seven different disciplinary PhD programs. The program specializations are quite different in their approach to PhD training. Some of the specializations have organized training of PhD students in a structured, research school approach, where candidates are enrolled in cohorts and there is high attention to providing high quality and relevant courses in both discipline specific and generic skills. Other programs enroll smaller numbers of PhD candidates, and still organize PhD training in an individualistic model or a master- apprenticeship model. The programs therefore offer very different models of researcher training.

There are mandatory areas of competence that all candidates should master when graduating from the program, but few common courses or training events offered to all PhD candidates in the Faculty. The program is a program in the sense that it has a common PhD regulation and program description, but the specializations function today as smaller, discipline specific PhD programs in themselves. So, in terms of content and approach, the Faculty does not have a common ambition or a set of common tools to develop the PhD program in any particular direction. Rather, according to the current program leadership, initiatives for developing quality should emerge from the disciplines and from learning about good practices and innovative solutions developed abroad, and further cultivated within the disciplinary context.

The current coordination body, the PhD program committee, is supposed to function mainly as an arena for information diffusion and learning, but the extent to which good practices for PhD education have been adopted across the different tracks is a question that needs to be addressed in an external evaluation. Overall, whether the current network model is a good model for PhD training in the Faculty is a question that an external evaluation could address further. A high degree of heterogeneity and flexibility might be positive as it enables a close fit with the needs and demands of subject fields and the PhD candidates, but on the other hand, problems can arise with too varied standards and non-efficient use of resources.

### **Program quality**

The last few years, the PhD program has taken several steps to streamline the administration of the PhD program by promoting new administrative routines and follow-up routines of PhD candidates, partly as response to demands for quality assurance of PhD training. The program has implemented common routines for administration of admission and follow-up of candidates and supervisors. Joint supervision arrangements are in place for most candidates, and milestone arrangements, such as initial, midway and end seminars/meetings seem to be organized for the majority of the candidates. However, not all candidates are satisfied with the degree of follow-up they receive from the departments.

Some of the PhD specialization tracks have had a more offensive approach to PhD training and have developed study plans and program offerings to provide a more structured approach to training PhD candidates by enrolling cohorts of candidates, increase the course demands and obligatory activities

that candidates are supposed to take. Other subject fields, due to their size and tradition for research training do not think that increased structure, coursework and follow-up is the best way to increase quality in research training.

Increased attention to the social and academic environment that candidates are a part of and a broader perspective on the kinds of competencies that PhD candidates need to master are other elements some of the specializations have pursued, whereas the awareness of such issues is more limited in other specializations. Most of the specializations seem to do something to increase the focus on generic skills in one way or the other.

A potential issue that the external evaluation should address is some but not all specializations have currently done substantial changes to promote quality and efficiency, even though there seems to be some degree of experimentation with different solutions. The program leadership considers development of the PhD program as a responsibility of the specializations, which are naturally closer to the field and knows more about good models of PhD training internationally to become inspired by. An equally legitimate point is that some efforts could be made by the Faculty and University level to promote good practices to the benefit of all the specializations and PhD candidates in the Faculty. This is also linked to a discussion about the issue of ensuring that the program is in line with good practices and standards for PhD training internationally. This should be an area where an external evaluation should focus attention.

### **PhD candidates and their satisfaction with the program**

The overview of the candidates and the interviews with candidates clearly shows that the student group is highly heterogeneous. As seen half of the candidates are employed outside the university, which means that the experience and expectations of the PhD candidates are highly different. Overall, most candidates are relatively satisfied with the PhD program, both the courses offered and the supervision they receive. But, there is a significant minority of the candidates that are not satisfied, and their concerns should not be overlooked. We do not have information to say whether this is a general problem, or mainly a problem in some of the specialization tracks, so this should be addressed further.

In particular, the status of the relatively large external candidate group should be looked into. Most of them are also quite satisfied with the program, and many are mature and have a good support environment where they work, but it should give cause for concern that they feel excluded from the academic and social community and feel that they do not receive information about issues that is directly relevant for their training. The external evaluation should pay attention to how internal and external candidates are followed up, supervised and supported in their work to develop high quality scientific output and high-level skills. To do this, it would be advisable to collect data on skills development and occupational status among graduates from the program.

In general, there also seems to be room for improvement in the information flow and communication with PhD candidates, for instance by organizing introductory seminars and improving on electronic communication about courses and events. That being said, it must also be remarked that PhD candidates also should be better at accessing the information that is available already, and that the PhD candidate group also should be involved in improving quality and relevance of courses and activities in the program.

There is no up to date source of information on how PhD candidates evaluate key aspects of their training in the faculty (latest from 2012), and since it would be relatively easy to collect such data, an evaluation of the program should initiate a survey among the PhD candidate group, and make particularly sure that the external candidate group is included.

Another course for concern is the lack of clarity about who is in charge for the quality of the PhD program and the specializations, and where the PhD candidates should turn if they experience problems with training or supervision. The role and responsibility of the PhD leaders should perhaps be made more clear in the communication to the PhD candidates. Strengthening the leadership of the specializations is an area of potential improvement.

### **Enrollment, graduation rates and time to completion**

As seen above the enrollment in the program has fluctuated a bit over time, with decreased enrollments the last two years. Time to completion seems to be satisfactory in general, even though some of the specialization tracks have challenges with long completion times and high drop-out rates. There is a considerable group of PhD candidates that probably will never complete their studies (around 30 per cent), and there is currently no information about whether this is a bigger problem in some groups. As seen above, completion time is about the same for external and internal candidates, but we do not know if drop-out is a larger problem among external candidates. This should be addressed further.

### **Relevance, generic skills and labor market prospects**

At presently, the issue of the relevance of the PhD training for different labor market prospects have not received a lot of attention in the program. As seen, a large number of PhD candidates are employed in external organizations when starting a PhD, and presumably will use their competencies in their work during and after the PhD period. However, particularly for the internal PhD candidate group, who are usually younger and less experienced, offering training in different generic skills and career advice is a good idea. Existing knowledge indicates a good match between supply and demand for PhD competencies in the Norwegian economy and little skills mismatch (Thune et al 2012). There is available data on career ambitions and prospects for the Faculty's PhD candidates, also through so-called "candidate surveys" of PhD candidates that should be subjected to further scrutiny in an evaluation of the program. There is also currently plans for a national monitoring of career trajectories of PhD holders to be carried out by NIFU that the Faculty could look into.

### **Scientific quality and program quality relative to international standards**

The extent to which the PhD program produces scientific output in terms of articles and dissertations that satisfy international standards for the different disciplines, both in terms of the volume and scientific quality of the work, has not been addressed, as this requires subject-field expertise. Likewise, whether the different specializations represent excellent examples of high quality PhD training within their respective fields compared to international benchmarks should also be addressed in the external evaluation.

### **Suggestions for the design of an external evaluation of the PhD program**

Based on the above assessments of the status and challenges of the PhD program, it is recommended that an external evaluation is carried out and that this evaluation covers aspects of the PhD program and all the seven specialization tracks. The external evaluation should assess both the overall program quality (including organization, leadership and communication issues) and the scientific

quality of the program specializations. The quality of the program and specializations should be seen in light of established international standards of PhD education and current examples of good practices for high quality PhD training (eg. LERU 2014). The evaluation should use internationally agreed principles for high quality doctoral education as a yardstick or benchmark for the program evaluation such as the LERU principles (LERU 2007) or the principles for doctoral training suggested by the European commission (European commission 2011). A report from the strategic advisory board of the University of Oslo (UiO 2014) has discussed areas of strategic improvement for the university as a whole is also relevant here, as it suggest areas of improvement in research and educational activities. This report recommends that the University of Oslo should focus more on excellence in education, interdisciplinarity in research and generic skills training for doctoral candidates – all areas of direct relevance for the university’s PhD programs. To what extent is the PhD program in the Faculty of Social Sciences contributing to realizing such ambitions?

This evaluation should therefore be performed as a panel evaluation with experts from the different specialization tracks, preferably by international experts that can look at the quality of the program in light of international standards. This would also be in line with the recommendation from the University’s strategic advisory board to have a more external outlook and to look at the quality of education and research in light of global excellence. This international panel should be assisted by a “secretary” with experience in evaluating PhD programs and who could be primarily responsible for the assessment of the program quality, with a focus on organization, leadership and communication issues. Experts to the scientific panel should be suggested by the different departments.

The subject specialists in the panel would focus on the academic quality of the program and the quality of the scientific output produced in light of international standards, by looking at the training/program structure, examples of good training practices and a sample of dissertations and other publications produced by the PhD candidates. Bibliometric indicators could be relevant as well, particularly in subject fields where paper based dissertations is the norm. Subject specialists to the panel should be recruited from leading experts within the relevant disciplines who have been involved in promoting innovative PhD training in other countries or at an international level – and who could therefore assess both the scientific and training quality of the programs.

The overall question for the evaluation should be: Does the social science PhD program at University of Oslo satisfy international standards for PhD training in general and scientific standards within the social sciences disciplines specifically? To answer this question, the evaluation needs to reflect on the differences in approaches to PhD training that currently exists (research schools, apprenticeship approaches, integrated master-PhD approaches) in the Faculty’s disciplines, and to provide advice on further development of the program as a whole and the specializations. Recommendations for further development of the program should be directed both at the faculty level (Vice-dean for research) and PhD leaders in the departments responsible for the specializations.

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