



## Program evaluation of PhD education in Gender Studies: Statement from external expert group

### Assignment and external expert group

The assignment of the external expert group (see composition below) has been to evaluate PhD education in Gender Studies. The evaluation is based on Lund University's eleven criteria for quality enhancement, with support from the Faculty of Social Sciences' instructions<sup>1</sup>. The assignment includes raising the strengths, challenges and development opportunities of the learning environment and the programme.

Prior to the evaluation, the expert group was given access to LU Box with a large number of documents from the department and the faculty, including the department's self-assessment and input of students/doctoral students.

On May 19, a site visit was conducted (see the program in appendix).

The external expert group:

- Professor Helma Lutz, Cornelia Goethe University, Frankfurt (chair of the expert group)

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<sup>1</sup> *Instructions and procedures for program evaluations by external experts at the Faculty of Social Sciences (2019-09-19, reg. no STYR 2019/1232) and Instructions for external experts regarding program evaluation at the Faculty of Social Sciences (2019-09-19, reg. no STYR 2019/1262)*

- Professor Harriet Silius Åbo Akademi University

### The main strengths and challenges of the program, and the external expert group's reflections and recommendations

*(The external expert group statement is to include an analysis of the main strengths and challenges of the learning environment and the programs. The statement is also include the external expert group's reflections and recommendations for development, based on Lund University's eleven criteria for quality development. The criteria below can serve as headings in the statement.)*

#### **Strengths of the PhD education**

The main strengths of this PhD programme consists of an outstanding design, structure, content, implementation and follow-up. It reflects the excellence of the department and the research environment. The reasons for calling this programme excellent are the following:

- The academic culture* of the department offers not only a supportive work environment (for example regular meetings of the candidates with one or both supervisors), but also informal meetings and the work of the supervisors (engagement, support, respect and kindness) contribute to the outstanding academic culture.
- The structure* of the programme with well designed and implemented milestones facilitates learning for the PhD students. Although the many features of PhD training in Gender Studies owe their assets to the generous PhD education policies of Sweden, Gender Studies at LU has succeeded in developing them to perfection.
- The content* of the programme reaches international standards in Gender Studies, due to the high expertise and experience of the supervisors and teachers.

- d) During the site visit it became clear that the embracement of *educational diversity*, meaning a large variety of thesis subjects, of methodologies (qualitative, quantitative, discourse analysis, critical ethnography, etc.), and a diversity of theoretical and empirical approaches make this programme unique. In particular, the students benefit from a richness of expertise in qualitative methodologies. In addition, there is a diversity among the accepted PhD students concerning gender, sexualities, age, origin (global South and global North), and ethnic background. These characteristics show a conscious effort to support *internalization*. It became clear that the department has been successful in creating a collegial, caring and ‘safe’ atmosphere for their PhD students.
- e) The department has also been successful in *delivering* completed PhD projects; there are very few dropouts.

In summary, the Gender Studies department at Lund offers a very well structured, content rich as well as an impressively well documented programme, which the expert group evaluates as **outstanding**.

### **Challenges for the PhD education**

- a) It became obvious during the site visit and in the self-assessment that there is not enough *administrative support* concerning the compliance with the requirements from the faculty at the departmental level, for example concerning the time-consuming requirements of documenting PhD supervision conversations and other elements (this was portrayed as an acceleration of demands). PhD supervisors invest much more time in the programme as a whole, in addition to extensive supervision. The consequence is that they cannot spend time for their own research to the extent that they are entitled to.

- b) Another challenge is *the size of the PhD group*: the group of students is very small in international comparison, which makes educational sessions vulnerable to unforeseeable incidents, e.g. sick leaves, parental leaves, etc.

### **Recommendations**

- a) The department has shown readiness for training **five (5) PhD students at faculty funded positions** in the coming years, instead of two now. The expert group endorses fully a larger admission. The reasons for this suggestion of the expert group are:
1. The present low number of faculty funded PhD positions imposes a challenge to critical mass and a risk of occasional over-spending of academic resources.
  2. The high number of applicants (almost 150 yearly) testifies to the attraction of Gender Studies at LU.
  3. The labour market in Sweden for PhD graduates is broad and large why there is no risk of over-production of PhD degrees.
  4. For the number of five main supervisors, a group of four for each of them is still in international comparison not a high number. The expert group finds it fair to give the professors and docents opportunities to transmit and enlarge their expertise.
- b) The expert group would welcome **extra resources** from the University for administration and implementation of the larger PhD programme, given that the teaching and supervision capacity among senior scholars at the moment is on its very limits. In addition, new resources are needed for communication and collaboration within the

university, among other Gender Studies units, and with the larger society, given the excellence of the PhD training at LU. It would be beneficial for the University to highlight the PhD programme, which is way ahead of most PhD programmes in Europe. This programme is a model for many other Gender Studies PhD programmes nationally and internationally.

- c) With retirements taking place, the department is now in a transition period. Therefore, it is in immediate need of **strategic resources** to reach optimal conditions from which to develop its larger PhD commitment.
- d) One of the assets of Gender Studies at LU is the globalised focus with international PhD students and visiting scholars. In order to make internationalisation efforts less time-consuming, the expert group encourages the University to offer **streamlined practices** in relation to both in-coming and out-going PhD students.

## Introduction

The doctoral programme in Gender Studies at Lund University began in 2006. During 2006-2020, eight PhD students have gained their PhD. So far, there has been only one non-completion. Currently, eight PhD students constitute the active group of doctoral students. In total, 16 PhD students have been enrolled in the programme. Four of them are externally funded (one double-degree, one dual degree and two have means of their own). Ten PhD students are or have been funded by the department via basic faculty funding.

The figures indicate good results, most obviously due to the huge amount of applicants in the open calls for admission. The department attracts every year around 150 applicants for the funded PhD students positions, which we find most remarkable. The admission process is well developed, implemented and described in detail. The number of both completed degrees and

current students is rather low, taking into account the number of competent available main supervisors (3 professors, 2 docents).

The extensive and illustrative self-assessment, complemented with substantial proof given in appendices, is impressive and an evidence of an excellent programme.

### **1. That the actual study results correspond to learning outcomes and qualitative targets**

In the self-assessment report, Gender Studies at Lund University reflects on nine learning outcomes, which we evaluate in the following:

*Knowledge (1) and understanding (2):* The most important way to ensure the learning outcomes and qualitative targets is the structuring of the programme into four seminars: a) The thesis outline seminar; b) the midway review seminar; c) the final seminar and d) the green light seminar.

During the first year, PhD students complete courses equal to minimum 30 credits. To be admitted to the programme, applicants need to have obtained at least 30 credits in Gender Studies beforehand either at Lund University or at Gender Studies in Sweden or abroad. The first year studies include faculty-wide courses like Kick-start to academic life, Philosophy of science for the Social Sciences, and Research ethics.

Furthermore, the department offers an introductory course, a methodology course and a faculty-wide course called Gendering the Classics, which was evaluated by the students as essential for their own development and path breaking in Gender Studies. We consider this course a real asset, which should reach out to a wider audience within in the faculty and university. For PhD students with limited background knowledge in Gender Studies, and for theoretically oriented ones, a specific advanced course on Feminist theory would be a further strength.

A course in teaching and learning in higher education must be part of the course work or the departmental work. Several

optional courses are also offered. In addition, the Gender Studies PhD students take an individual course tailored for their individual PhD project. All these seminars, courses and the independent works contribute to the set of learning outcomes.

Moreover, a clear benefit to the range of courses is that the HR division at LU offers courses and workshops on presentation techniques, productivity and stress management, and career paths. This is equally true for the kick-start course delivered by the LU library. The students complete an introductory course to Gender Studies, which introduces them to the doctoral curriculum. The function and importance of the Individual study plan are well addressed in the Introductory course. Appendix 24 states “the course contains information on the organisation of the department of Gender Studies and the educational path through the doctoral program”.

In sum, the design, structure, implementation, and the results of the programme correspond to learning outcomes and qualitative targets, which can be summarized as outstanding.

*Competence(3) and skills(4)*: The extremely well-structured programme with clear milestones, well explained duties of supervisors and students as well as the offered courses and regularly discussed and updated individual study plans ensure very good results. In addition, participation in conferences, but even more important for the PhDs’ further career, the involvement in e.g. the work of writing research applications, contribute to their competences and skills.

*Ability to present own and other scholars’ research (5)* is well trained through departmental and other seminars and conferences, to which each student contributes. The department’s own course on communicating one’s own research is excellent and gives broad insights and skills.

*Ability to identify need for further knowledge (6)*: The supervisors and the head of department are very sensitive to

identify knowledge and skill gaps, which are addressed by the offer of trainings throughout the thesis-writing project, as well as in workshops and seminars within the department's research frame and research themes. A proof that this works well is that many of the graduated PhDs have continued their research endeavours and participate in larger projects.

*Capability to contribute to societal development (7):* Gender Studies PhD students are in general exceptionally well equipped to contribute to societal development and to the handling of social differences and varieties, because the discipline itself embraces this goal and the discipline has a long emancipatory tradition; activist engagement and knowledge production often go hand in hand. The PhD students at Lund have ample possibilities to train these skills through e.g. public debates. In addition, those who participate in teaching at BA or MA levels get crucial training in transfer of feminist knowledge. Public debates and activism also train students in cooperation with the larger society, and different societal contexts offer possibilities to deal with different societal developments. For dual/double degree students there are challenges to participate in the acquisition of teaching experiences and in public debates, but the department finds ways to offer them teaching possibilities and secures the extension of their learning experiences.

*Judgement (8) and Approach (9):* Throughout the programme, PhD students are confronted with the requirement to take an ethical stance in all research, both while planning and conducting research and when presenting results. A course in research ethics is obligatory during the first year of study and research ethics are considered carefully in dialogue with a student's supervisors and during various workshops. According to the self-assessment, the PhD students generally reflect upon the role of research in society, the need for ethical codes of conduct, the clarification regarding their role and responsibility as researchers, and their studies and practices. Appendices

provide examples of ethical reflections on the role of research by PhD students. Ethical dilemmas are further developed by the department's own introductory course in relation to the faculty's ethics course. Finally, ethical skills are also developed via the contributions of diverse traditions within the field, as is the case for a variety of disciplinary and interdisciplinary traditions, bridging traditional methods with new developments in different methodological fields. The expert group finds the importance given to ethical issues exemplary, building upon experiences in Gender Studies milieus in and outside of Sweden, where the field of Gender Studies is characterised by an extensive tradition of ethical exploration and debates.

## **2. That the program focuses on students'/doctoral students' learning**

The design of the programme, the process of the PhD studies and the continuous evaluation of individual outcomes and progress do focus entirely on the learning process. The PhD students learn to critically reflect on and analyse gender, society, culture and science.

## **3. That the program is based on a scientific and/or artistic foundation and proven experience**

The curricula and syllabi are based on high quality literature and research training procedures, which are internationally recognised. The PhD students in Gender Studies at Lund University get a broader acquaintance with the Social Sciences than those PhD students, who do a programme with a more limited or specialised focus on Gender Studies, for example a doctoral student in Literature taking a PhD programme exclusively in the discipline of Gender Studies. We find that the Lund programme addresses an important part of the Gender Studies field, which is most relevant on the societal level.

**4. That teaching staff, including supervisors, have appropriate expertise in terms of subject, teaching and learning in higher education and subject teaching as well as other relevant expertise, and that teaching capacity is sufficient**

The supervisors are well-established professors and docents with very good publication records and long, valuable experience of doctoral training. They are publishing on various arenas and in differing fora, thereby giving example and likewise becoming role models to students. They are also all formally trained in doctoral supervision. The additional teaching staff, are experts in their field, and have good pedagogical skills. The teaching capacity among full time senior scholars is, however, on its very limits.

The expertise of teachers and supervisors is exceptionally well suited for doctoral training and in an international comparison, on an outstanding level. In addition, the students are taught how to write research applications and organized courses are provided for them; moreover, the students receive career advice from supervisors. In all of this, the students are included in discussions about what kind of support they need and what kind of support they need for research and teaching activities.

It needs to be underlined that the teaching staff is excellent in many ways: they are not only taking care of the students' writing and ideas, but also of their personal well-being and their (physical and psychological) safety. They do this by establishing supportive relationships, a caring culture in acting with each other, by taking over responsibility for them and involve the students in academic debates in formal but also informal settings. The students underlined the continuing support they could rely on during the COVID pandemic and gave examples how the staff engaged in supporting and cheering them up. In addition, the work of the department's own safety officer assures e.g. that the students take breaks and supports their self-care.

**5. That the program is to be relevant for the students and doctoral students and meets the needs of society**

The programme is very well designed to meet the needs of society and the future careers of the PhD students. This is obvious in the appendix that documents the careers of the students that have gained their PhD from the Lund programme. The programme also prepares the PhD students for dissemination of feminist knowledges and practices and for contribution to social change as well as for meeting up-coming societal needs.

**6. That the students and doctoral students have an influence on planning, implementation and follow up of the program**

The doctoral students have ample opportunities to influence planning, implementation and follow up of the programme as they are represented in the department board, are observers in the standing Elections committee, and constitute a PhD students' collective, in interaction with the department. In addition, in a small department as Gender Studies at Lund, also informal contacts ensure a smooth way for influence. Such bodies as The Doctoral Student Union and the Doctoral Students' Ombudsman, which are rare in most countries, are guarantees for more formal influence.

The department aims at an open, transparent and inclusive decision-making in all aspects of the programme. In addition, the fact that most PhD students are employed by the university and enjoy what could be compared to the status of civil servant, and belong to a trade union, gives them benefits unusual in other countries – which is impressive. We find that the Lund students, as is the case with other Gender Studies PhD students in Sweden, are exceptionally privileged concerning influence on all parts and elements of their studies in comparison to PhD students in most other European countries. This became further obvious in the students' observations and evaluations of their

situation. During the meeting with the expert group, the students with a non-Gender Studies background emphasized that they very much appreciated the access to foundational knowledge. A more advanced course on feminist theory would be a further asset.

**7. That an appropriate study and learning environment is available to all and includes a well-functioning support system**

The department has varied measures to include the PhD students in the learning environment and has established a formalised support system, which is very well documented. The excellent system of offering PhD students opportunity to teach or take part in academic administration (maximum 20% of full-time) makes them an integral part of the department's overall research and teaching environment. We find it very considerate that students do not have to teach during their first and last year of study. The department offers non-experienced teachers, i.e. the PhD students who teach the support of an experienced teacher as a mentor. While the participation in teaching in principle does not extend to the non-employed PhD students, the department is very aware of this discrepancy. They look for and find ways to include the dual or double-degree students in some of the teaching in order to minimise the differences. However, the discrepancy is quite visible in the documents, probably more so formally than in real life.

In addition to the excellent system of salaried doctoral studies, the department offers PhD students a lump sum of 50.000 SEK for conferences, fieldwork, etc. This arrangement is generous and saves time and effort for the students. Once a year PhD students' psychosocial work environment is discussed.

The department recognises the stress that PhD students might experience in spite of all the care offered to them, e.g. because of the time limit or because of threats made against Gender Studies and the particular issues they are targeting in their research. The

responsible ones try to be proactive and offer support whenever it is necessary. As already mentioned, the department has a safety officer who is responsible for the work environment, a yearly socio-psychic survey and the dealings with the students' individual problems. Together with the head of department, the safety officer is also dealing with for example hate mails and other kinds of public or private offences against the students. We presume that both the faculty level as well as the university level support the department in situations of threat (e.g. hate-speech, insults or physical threats). All the above-mentioned measures and examples are admirable evidence of an appropriate study and learning environment and of a well-functioning support system.

The PhD students are extremely satisfied that they are given the freedom to choose their topic, with the intellectually stimulating environment and that their work as students is valued.

#### **8. That there is continuous follow up and development of the program**

The follow up and development of the programme are accomplished at several levels. The Board of Supervisors engages in follow up and development continuously. The interaction between individual students and supervisors with different roles and disciplinary backgrounds provide valuable input. In addition, the department's leadership evaluate the programme on a more formal level. The Board is a space for collegial dialogue on challenges and dilemmas. The PhD students are also represented when changes in the programme are discussed. The organisation of the Board of Supervisors is well documented in appendix. The Examiner of Individual Study Courses, which now is a more formalised and remunerated position ensures support for following up and development.

### **9. That internationalization and an international perspective is promoted in the program**

The programme per se includes crucial insights into international perspectives, e.g. the current focus on de/post/colonialism. This focus is one of the department's assets and enjoys wide international recognition.

The PhD students are encouraged to participate in international conferences (this is documented in the Individual Study Plan) and to take part in Gender Studies cooperation in Sweden with international scholars at courses, seminars and conferences.

Many spend a semester at a university abroad. The amount of financial support available for each PhD student is an important incentive and an excellent favour. This applies also to the free language check of English-language articles and book chapters, and to the free language editing and proof reading of doctoral dissertation manuscripts for the students. In addition, all regulatory documents for the programme are translated into English, which is a further proof of the internationalisation of the programme. The existence of international PhD students who make up around half of the PhD student body implies both hands-on everyday internationalisation for students and staff as well as a well-functioning international environment.

The department maintains good and varied cooperation with foreign universities both in research projects and in doctoral training. We foresee continuous internationalisation to be promoted, and we find the department's efforts so far to be outstanding.

### **10. That gender equality and equal opportunities perspectives are integrated in the program**

As external experts, we would expect and take for granted that gender equality and equal opportunities are fully integrated into the programme, both formally and informally, in Gender Studies. In other words, we would regard this as self-evident. However, we were surprised by the broad extent to which equality and

equal opportunities were dealt with in the documents. We congratulate the department as well as Lund University for the strong emphasis on gender equality and equal opportunities. As we expected, these perspectives are consciously reflected on and they include diversity and non/anti-discrimination aspects on a much higher level than the programme evaluation assignment presupposes. The department aims to be free from sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, and discrimination based on age or disability. All of these are not just empty words, but measures are taken to guarantee the students a safe work-environment.

#### **11. That subject-relevant perspectives on sustainable development are promoted in the program**

Feminist scholarship has played a pioneering role in the creation and establishment of a tradition of eco-feminism since the late 1970s. The department has developed this tradition by the contribution of scholars working on e.g. crisis and precariousness in regard to various realms, including climate change and sustainability from a global perspective, as well as by those scholars (doctoral students and supervisors), who work within topics of de-growth, indigenous knowledge, and Crip theory. Several on-going doctoral projects are relevant to Sustainable Development. How to develop sustainable ways of working within academia is also a topic in the department's internal strategies and often discussed in staff meetings, ranging from food served at events organised by the department to its travel policies.

#### **Summarized views and recommendations**

We find that PhD education in Gender Studies is an outstanding programme on an international level. The programme should be given appropriate credit for this success and the University would benefit from showcasing it as a model, in Sweden and abroad.

In order to maintain and develop its excellent standard, we recommend that the following is made possible for the department:

- To establish five faculty funded PhD positions in Gender Studies.
- To get sufficient new financial resources for the implementation of the enlargement and for maintaining the high quality.
- To get strategic resources for dissemination of its successful programme.