



Faculty Board

## Development plan for research educations in Human Geography and Human Ecology

### Background

The research education programmes in Human Geography and Human Ecology at the Department of Human Geography and the Division of Human Ecology (henceforth, the Department) were evaluated by an external expert group during spring 2023. The group consisted of:

- Martin Gren, professor of Human Geography, Linnaeus University (chair)
- Merritt Polk, professor of Human Ecology, University of Gothenburg
- Ross Purves, professor of Geographic Information Science, University of Zurich

The evaluation was based on a self-evaluation by the Department, a written input by the doctoral students and a site visit to the Department by the external expert group. On this basis, the external expert group submitted its evaluation on 23 November 2023.

The preparation of this development plan started with general discussions of the external expert group's recommendations, first at a common meeting for the whole department, subsequently by the faculty in the supervisor collegium (handledarkollegiet) and by the doctoral community. The doctoral community provided a written input. On this basis, the Director of PhD Studies prepared a draft development plan, which was discussed in the supervisor collegium and in the doctoral community. A revised draft was circulated to the

faculty and the doctoral students for comments. The final development plan was presented for and approved by the Department board on 2 April 2024.

The Department would like to thank the external expert group for its constructive assessment. Staff, faculty members and, not least, the doctoral student community should also be thanked for important contributions to the assessment process and the preparation of this development plan.

### Concrete measures

While emphasising that there “always are potential development opportunities for a research education”, the external expert group sums up its overall findings this way:

Our conclusion is that both PhD-programmes educationally function relatively well, and that PhD students’ study results correspond to learning outcomes and the PhD degree criteria for Human Geography or Human Ecology. The Department is recruiting well qualified and motivated PhD students, and the programmes are successfully leading to completed PhD educations. (43)

The external expert group makes five overarching recommendations, which will be addressed individually below. In addition, the group presents some more specific recommendations and ideas. The Department view some of these as specifications or subsets to the overarching recommendations. Others are seen as separate and cross-cutting and will be addressed in the Section 6 (“Other suggestions”).

The Director of PhD Studies is indicated as responsible for all action points, sometimes with the addition of other functions at the Department. This is to indicate responsibility for initiating and finalising actions only. All actions will be developed in collaboration with and between the faculty and the doctoral community, and proposals will be anchored in the Department board.

In preparing this development plan, the Department has attended to the external expert group’s concluding caution, which the Department also find should be a guide in implementing the development plan:

Recommendations and development opportunities easily land on the document level, how to increase formal transparency, how to

build a common structural standardized educational order. While some (further) formalisation and development is recommended, the educational work involved should be balanced and certainly not distract from the good work already being done at the department by both PhD educators and students. And beyond formalities there are also creative visions, passionate ambitions, flexibility, and educational thoughts that dare to travel beyond existing institutional and disciplinary taken-for-granted confinements. This is especially possible, as well as an asset, on the department's PhD programmes. (48)

### **1. Documents and processes**

Recommendation: "Improving the use of existing documents and processes by updating them to be more specific to the programme, and using existing processes more effectively to give feedback and monitor progress" (43).

The external expert group further recommends systematic design and update of subject-specific courses (with consideration for variation in the doctoral students' educational background), articulation of a more consistent and transparent pedagogically informed supervision strategy (including the use of individual study plans) and investigation of coordination options between the programmes.

#### ***Development actions***

- Revision of general syllabi for the research education programmes to remove inconsistencies, create structural alignment between the Department's research education programmes in Human Geography and Human Ecology (and similar programmes elsewhere in Sweden), and ensure discipline-specific content and identity. This should include considerations on how to accommodate for different educational backgrounds of doctoral students.

*Timeline:* To be ready 1 September 2025

*Responsible:* Director of PhD Studies

- Consider how the Department will offer subject specific courses and revise/create syllabi for courses offered by the Department. Considerations on discipline-specific, shared core knowledge should be central to this work.

*Timeline:* To be ready 1 September 2025

*Responsible:* Director of PhD Studies

- Systematic discussions of supervision processes (incl. possible synergies with first- and second-cycle supervision) and the use of individual study plans as a learning tool in the faculty and between the faculty and the doctoral student community, possibly leading to written policies/recommendations.

*Timeline:* 2025, with reportable results in 2026

*Responsible:* Director of PhD Studies

- Document key processes and elements of the research education programmes in the form of guidelines. Guidelines on greenlight reading, obligatory seminars and monograph/compilations thesis should be prioritised.

*Timeline:* Ongoing, with reportable results in 2025

*Responsible:* Director of PhD Studies

## **2. Discipline specific content**

Recommendation: “Defining more discipline specific content to the PhD programmes, and giving both sets of PhD students a shared core set of knowledge and learning objectives” (43).

### ***Development actions***

- The Department find this recommendation to be central but views the recommendation as integral to the development actions under “Documents and processes” (Section 1) and “Mid- and long-term strategies” (Section 4). Therefore, the Department will not take separate action on this recommendation.

## **3. Seminar activities**

Recommendation: “Extending and enabling existing self-organised offerings and Departmental seminars to put these on a more solid footing” (43).

### ***Development actions***

- Systematise, document and develop seminar activities in a way that articulates responsibilities (and possible compensations), enables continuity and allows for flexibility in relation to shifting needs in the doctoral community.

*Timeline:* Autumn 2024 and spring 2025

*Responsible:* Director of PhD Studies with Research Responsible

#### **4. Mid- and long-term strategies**

Recommendation: “Reviewing and reflecting on the mid and long-term strategies of the programmes in terms of expertise, growth and direction” (43).

The external expert group further recommends that the Department should critically reflect on what constitutes an “international perspective” in the programmes, more explicitly articulate how gender and equal opportunities are integrated into the programmes, and consider how transparent and continuous follow up and development of the programmes can be achieved. In addition, the external expert group recommends that particular attention should be given to the longer-term expansion of the Human Ecology programme.

##### ***Development actions***

- Develop written strategies for the Human Geography and Human Ecology research educations. Gender and equal opportunities dimensions should (also) be addressed in the Department’s Gender Equality and Equal Opportunities Committee.

*Timeline:* 2025

*Responsible:* Director of PhD Studies with Head of Department

#### **5. Important societal challenges**

Recommendation: “Developing a shared vision that pays attention to important societal issues” (43). The external expert group further specifies this to “recommend a review of both PhD programmes in order to investigate how the research educations in Human Ecology and Human Geography can further respond to the unprecedented urgent planetary situation we are facing, i.e., the climate and ecological emergency/breakdown. This review should consider both how research in the Department can contribute to this area, and the possibilities of taking real climate action” (47-48).

##### ***Development actions***

- Most doctoral research at the Department engages with important societal challenges. However, the Department find it problematic to

develop shared visions on this in relation to the research education programmes. As emphasised by the doctoral community, this could impose (or be seen to impose) limits on the doctoral students' academic freedom.

While sharing the concerns voiced by the external expert group, the Department will not take action on developing a shared vision on societal challenges in relation to the doctoral education programmes specifically.

## **6. Other suggestions**

Beyond the five main recommendations and the more specific suggestions that can be related to these, the external expert group presents some additional development ideas/suggestions.

a) Regular PhD retreat (for students and supervisors)

- The Department will consider this idea, but not include it as a part of the development plan.

b) Review of teaching policy to ensure that PhD students have equal access to teaching possibilities

- The Department will ensure that information on teaching possibilities (and pedagogical training) is included as a separate item in the welcoming of new doctoral students and regularly followed up on. Possible inequalities should also be addressed in the Department's Gender Equality and Equal Opportunities Committee.

*Timeline:* Autumn 2024

*Responsible:* Director of PhD studies with Director of Studies

c) Consider initiating a board for the programmes

- A programme board with decision-making power is not possible within the existing structure. The department board (with doctoral student representation) has this function. However, the Department will consider ways to make better use of the existing structures to ensure good communication between the faculty, doctoral students and department management in the running and development of the research education programmes.

*Timeline:* 2024-2025

*Responsible:* Director of PhD Studies and Head of Department

d) Internal website for programmes

- As part of the general revision of the Department's website, public as well as possible internal webpages for the doctoral education programmes will be updated/made.

*Timeline:* Autumn 2024

*Responsible:* Director of PhD Studies with Communications Officer

e) Review and potentially update of research areas and groups to strengthen foundation of programmes

- The Department expects that issues related to the broader research profiles of the Department will be part of discussions in relation to revisions of syllabi (general and courses) and the formulation of strategies. However, the Department find that a review and potential update of research areas and groups should not be driven by the doctoral education programmes. Therefore, the Department will not include this as part of the development plan.