



FACULTY  
OF SOCIAL  
SCIENCES

STATEMENT FROM EXTERNAL  
EXPERT GROUP

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## **Programme evaluation of PhD education in sustainability 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 sustainability 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 were 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 15 of June 2023, a site visit was conducted at the University of Lund (see the program in appendix).

The external expert group consisted of:

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<sup>1</sup> *Instructions and procedures for programme evaluations by external experts at the Faculty of Social Sciences (2021-02-04, reg. no STYR 2021/117) and Instructions for external experts regarding programme evaluation at the Faculty of Social Sciences (2021-02-04, reg. no STYR 2021/118)*

- Anders Hansson, senior associate professor, Linköping University (chair of the expert group)
- Anja Nygren, professor, University of Helsinki

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

The external expert group analysed the main strengths and challenges of the LUCSUS PhD learning environment and the PhD programme. The evaluation also includes the external expert group's reflections and recommendations for further development of the programme. The evaluation was carried out, based on the following eleven criteria set by Lund University for quality development.

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

The general study plan includes twelve learning outcomes, divided into four sub-groups; (a) knowledge and understanding, (b) competence and skills, (c) judgement and approach, and (d) degree overarching outcomes. The latter means the ability to integrate research fields and show awareness of social diversity and equality.

The learning outcomes can be reflected upon in many ways. One way to grasp whether the study results and qualitative targets and learning outcomes correspond is to review individual study plans. They mirror the supervisor's and PhD candidate's shared view of progression and planning. Another way is to assess the topics of the defended PhD thesis. A third way, especially connected to competence and skills, is to assess to what extent the PhDs manage to defend their thesis on time, get new qualified and relevant jobs and their success in the coming academic career.

The selection of ISPs the panel reviewed bear witness to progressions according to plan, and careful considerations of activities in relation to

learning outcomes. The ISPs clearly explain with concrete examples how every learning objective has been met or is planned to be met. The alumni list, with 21 graduated PhD students since 2008, shows that everyone is employed either in academia or at a governmental research agency. All admitted PhDs completed their thesis within the time frame, and the drop-out rate is zero.

The key results are definitely reached, and there are many explanations for that. *The key strengths of the PhD program*, that are most important for supporting the success in reaching learning outcomes and qualitative results are:

- *A thorough recruitment process:* The process for PhD recruitment involves several relevant stakeholders and the selection process and the selection criteria are careful, scientifically ambitious, and transparent. The programme attracts highly competitive, international PhD candidates, with the on average 60 applicants, and in some cases even up to 100 applicants, for each vacant PhD position.
- *PhDs well integrated into the milieu:* The PhDs are well integrated into the research environment because the PhD projects are often already from the onset an integrated part of a larger project led by the supervisor(s).
- *International environment and research pluralism:* The PhDs are encouraged to select optional courses at other universities and independently explore what intellectual paths to take. LUCSUS' interdisciplinarity, international research culture and wide networks open-up for novel perspectives and multiple methods.
- *A robust and inclusive seminar culture:* A seminar culture enriches innovative thinking and exploration of challenging questions. The LUCSUS seminar culture includes reading group seminars, annual milestone seminars for PhD students, final seminars and PhD engagement in organising seminars.

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

The self-assessment stresses that the learning process is not only supported by supervisors but also by peers and other senior staff members at the centre and other departments at LU. The only in-house PhD course in Sustainability science seems to be important for shaping an identity as an interdisciplinary LUCSUS researcher and introduces many perspectives on sustainability. That course is also designed to support the PhD thesis writing, especially the cover essay. Many of the discussions during the site visit, and the feedback in the PhD survey, revolved around that course. In general, the course evaluations signal that the course is appreciated and supports the participants' learning. However, some PhD students voiced that it was not adapted to their particular needs and lacked relevance, which seem to be the aspects that are carefully considered now when the course is under revision.

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

LUCSUS has four full professors, eight senior lecturers, three assistant professors, eleven researchers and six postdocs and a growing number of docents. With only one exception the current PhD projects are integral parts of already ongoing larger projects that are funded by external grants. This means that the PhD projects, at least on a more general level, have been reviewed by external experts and have been assessed as being of high scientific relevance. More than half of the LUCSUS budget is made up of external grants, which reflects the LUCSUS' researchers' highly competitive research experience and scientific skills. The total amount of external funding has doubled over the last five years.

LUCSUS' overall publication list shows publications in many prestigious and/or central international journals. The topics are highly relevant to sustainability science and the centre's ambition to foster critical perspectives. The publication list clearly shows that

supervisors are very active in research and are highly successful in contributing to publications.

A tension that was discussed during the site visit, and brought up in the self-evaluation, is that the high degree of external funding has a risk of leading to research projects being prioritised over PhD-related issues and educational aspects.

**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**

All the supervisors have taken the mandatory course in supervision, and the supervisors show awareness of the importance of teaming up a mix of more junior and senior supervisors. The acknowledgement of the importance of supervision training is reflected in the fact that several staff members have recently been encouraged to apply for docentships, which in recent years has resulted in seven new docents. The total number of available supervisors is more than enough to support the current number of PhDs. No supervisors are responsible for more than three PhDs, and the role as a main supervisor is relatively evenly distributed among more experienced and less experienced supervisors. The large number of available supervisors that are also successful researchers is a strength.

The tension between prioritising external research projects and PhD projects is a challenge that would need careful attention.

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

Both the self-evaluation, the appendices, and the site visit support the view that the programme meets societal needs and is highly relevant for the PhD students. Many PhD research topics can be applied and/or have a clear connection to societal problems and have for that reason an explicit connection to societal needs. The PhDs get training in how

to communicate research and collaborate with various societal actors, often as an integral part of their own research. A workshop series organized by LUCSUS in 2020 was highlighted as a good example of engaging and training PhDs in trust building, communication, giving feedback, and planning for a career beyond academia. Several PhDs, and alumni, are active in key international platforms, such as the IPCC and IPBES and feature in national and international media. The self-evaluation points out that a challenge may be to address a need for targeted activities that support a career building outside academia and internationally. However, the very low number of alumni outside academia does not mean that the programme is not relevant for the PhDs' needs or lacks societal relevance.

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

The PhDs have many formal channels to influence the planning, implementation and follow up of the programme. They have a representative on the LUCSUS board, the doctoral student council, the Gender, Diversity and Equality (GDE) Committee and the doctoral students' council at the Faculty of Social Sciences (SDR). The positions as main PhD representative and vice-representative rotate.

The PhD survey reveals that 60% of the students agree that they have an influence in the planning, implementation and follow-up of their education, and 20% respond they have a neutral position on this subject. These numbers are also reflected in the very positive general comments by the students during our site visit and interviews. Most students subscribe to the description of an open atmosphere, with no unnecessary hierarchy and strong connections to the supervisors based on personal relationships. These characteristics probably enhance the students' informal influence.

However, 20% responded that they have limited influence in deciding the guidelines of education and limited information about teaching opportunities. In our interviews, we brought up several of the

concerns connected to scant influence to discussion with the staff groups, and the interviews and the self-evaluation report give the impression that many of these issues are currently addressed in a more explicit way in order to even better support that the learning environment is available to all and includes a well-functioning support system

The doctoral students of LUCSUS are employed with set salary stages and have considerable income stability. The LUCSUS PhD students have equal access to funding necessary for their courses, fieldwork, and conferences. They also have at their disposal a certain amount of money that they can use during their four-year enrolment to pay for PhD courses abroad, buy relevant literature, and attend scientific conferences. The PhD students have equal access to workspace and the needed infrastructural and logistic services.

It is important to make sure that also in the future everyone can have equal access to workspace and other relevant resources. The regular provision of introductory information is key to making sure all the PhD candidates are aware of the resources available.

The LUCSUS program is heavily dependent on external funding. It is highly important to make clear strategic plans in order to reduce potential vulnerability in terms of funding in order to enable the continuity of a well-functioning system that supports LUCSUS highly successful PhD programme and its infrastructure.

## **7. That there is continuous follow up and development of the programme**

The LUCSUS doctoral programme organizes continuous follow-up and training in relation to emerging needs of the PhD education. The planning of LUCSUS curriculum takes the new trends and novel perspectives in PhD training on sustainability science and interdisciplinary critical social science carefully into account. In the future, more careful profiling of the programme might be recommendable; this in order to maintain the programme's

innovativeness and capability for dynamic transformations necessary to prevent the risks of becoming mainstream.

The majority of the LUCSUS staff members, supervisors, and PhD candidates informed during the stakeholder interviews that they have very good possibilities for influencing and being engaged in the follow-up and development of the LUCSUS doctoral programme. An open, encouraging, and inclusive planning atmosphere was highly appreciated. The director of the LUCSUS, the Director of the Doctoral Programme, and the supervisors interviewed demonstrated a strong motivation and commitment towards developing LUCSUS programme and LUCSUS PhD training in a way that it guarantees high-quality research and high-quality, research-based teaching also in the future.

LUCSUS Doctoral School seems to be open to incorporate new ideas and topics in its teaching and training programme, whenever well-grounded ideas and needs are raised. Recently, special attention has been paid to PhD training on new rules and processes of scientific ethics and ethical reviews of research projects. The LUCSUS programme implicitly encourages the PhD candidates' future career planning in several ways, including international networking and strategic planning for publishing. However, more explicit PhD career planning could be considered, especially related to more senior-level researchers' support in writing post-doc research proposals and searching for post-doctoral positions at international universities and research institutes, as well as in relevant workplaces outside the academia.

#### **8. That internationalisation and an international perspective is promoted in the programme**

The LUCSUS PhD programme is highly international. The LUCSUS staff members have varied geographical and cultural backgrounds, presenting over fifteen different countries. The PhD candidates come from different countries all over the world. LUCSUS working language



is English, which supports equal opportunities for everyone's involvement.

LUCSUS researchers have wide networks in different universities and with leading international scholars in relevant research fields. LUCSUS provides seminars and workshops, where international visiting scholars present their works and comment on the PhD candidates' thesis projects. The PhD candidates are also actively encouraged to participate in international summer schools and other PhD training courses abroad, as well as to give presentations on their ongoing thesis work at international conferences and research seminars.

LUCSUS provides opportunities for international PhD students and post-doctoral researchers to make research visits at LUCSUS, as well as for LUCSUS PhD students to make short visits or longer stays at different universities and research institutions abroad. The LUCSUS doctoral programme has been involved in several joint international PhD training courses, in which the PhD students get feedback from scholars and PhD students from other countries and are able to build and expand their international networks. LUCSUS has hosted the secretariat for several international platforms, including the Earth System Governance, the Right Livelihood College (RLC) and the European Network of Political Ecology (POLLEN), with active engagement of PhD students.

#### **9. That gender equality and equal opportunities perspectives are integrated in the programme**

LUCSUS teaching programme is highly sensitive to gender issues and equal opportunities. Relevant topics related to decolonization, intersectionality, environmental justice, cultural diversity, and non-discrimination are well integrated in LUCSUS teaching and research. LUCSUS seeks to ensure a gender balanced and intersectional representation at all staff levels. LUCSUS supervisors demonstrated in the site visit interviews a strong commitment to proactive management of divergent expectations related to PhD training and PhD supervision.

LUCSUS has a Gender, Diversity, and Equality Committee (GDE), which addresses issues related to integrity, intersectionality, and equality in both academic and practical terms. Half of the GDE committee members are LUCSUS PhD students. LUCSUS Board approves an updated Gender Action Plan every second year, with clear guidelines for employees and students related to LUCSUS policy on gender equality, equal opportunities, and diversity, as well as on the rules and responsibilities to prevent and tackle any forms of discrimination, including victimization and sexual harassment.

The PhD students surveyed and interviewed showed strong confidence towards LUCSUS as a safe and inclusive work environment, with a high degree of respect and support for social and cultural diversity. The PhD students especially appreciated the strong support for well-balanced work-life practices.

#### **10. That subject-relevant perspectives on sustainable development are promoted in the programme**

LUCSUS promotes high-quality research and research-based teaching with a principal focus on sustainability and sustainable development. LUCSUS educational curriculum is carefully planned and implemented in terms of new trends and perspectives in sustainability science. Both LUCSUS staff members and PhD candidates engage in sustainability issues and actions also outside the regular academic space and educational curriculum in order to enhance the societal impact of their expertise.

#### **Summarised views and recommendations**

LUCSUS is a very successful organization with a distinct position in interdisciplinary and critical sustainability science. The study visit, interviews, appendices, and self-evaluation support the view of a very strong and constructive integration of research and PhD projects and open and supportive relationships between supervisors and PhD students. The overall impression is that the PhDs are very satisfied with the PhD programme and the academic culture that is

characterised by flat hierarchies, openness towards new perspectives, multiple methods, and interdisciplinary and international collaboration.

The large number of candidates applying for the announced PhD positions supports the view of LUCSUS as a highly relevant research environment. There is a growing demand for research in topics and fields at the core of LUCSUS, such as political ecology, climate change adaptation and vulnerability, environmental justice, biodiversity, environmental governance, and indigenous knowledges and transformative alternatives. National and international funding opportunities within these areas are significant and expected to increase in the future.

### **Strengths**

- LUCSUS and its PhD programme have a high international profile, high level of internationalization and diversity of both staff members and PhD students, and a focus on academically and societally relevant perspectives in critical social sciences, including political ecology, climate resilience, energy transitions, and environmental justice, as well as a search for novel perspectives to issues of sustainability and sustainable development.
- The organization's supply of experienced supervisors that are active researchers currently covers the need. Both senior and more junior scholars act as supervisors, and the responsibility related to supervision is distributed relatively evenly. This strategy supports a long-term and robust engagement of supervisors in the PhD advising and mentoring.
- The supervisors are committed to their PhD students, and are also active and successful researchers in their research fields.
- The PhD projects are commonly integrated into larger and externally funded research projects and have high societal and scientific relevance.

- All students have concluded their PhDs on time and the drop-out rate is zero, and all alumni have jobs either in academia or in research agencies.
- The programme has a clear structure and an active and inclusive seminar culture that engages PhD students in a constructive way.

### **Challenges**

- 20% of the students experience that they have limited possibilities to influence the programme.
- LUCSUS offers only one in-house PhD course and it has not been offered in a very regular basis.
- The high level of integration of PhD projects into larger externally funded projects brings many advantages but also several challenges. There are some tensions between fostering independence and following the pre-set structure of an external projects, as well as related to co-authoring papers with supervisors and other project partners.
- Declining share of core funding from the Faculty can make the organization more vulnerable and dependent on external funding.

### **Recommendations**

- The panel emphasizes that it is fundamental that Lund University and its Faculty of Social Sciences provide the needed support in terms of adequate core funding in order to reduce the heavy dependence on the external grants, and to facilitate well-planned recruitment of staff personnel, and necessary infrastructure and logistical services. Only in this way, LUCSUS PhD programme will be able to maintain and enhance its position within increasingly competitive PhD education markets in the world. Currently, LUCSUS PhD programme has a highly prestigious position within the existing PhD programmes of sustainability science in Europe. However, this

position cannot be taken for granted. Therefore, necessary core funding, strategic recruitment of future personnel, and provision of adequate academic services are key issues to keep LUCSUS in its internationally prestigious position and to reduce its high dependence on external funding and exposure to vulnerabilities that such kind of dependence involves.

- It is highly important to carefully consider how to maintain LUCSUS position as an internationally well-known organization, with a highly prestigious PhD programme in sustainability science, in the future. This is especially as sustainability sciences' popularity and relevance are increasing, which has resulted in the fact that nowadays more than fifty sustainability centers exist at universities all over the world. The panel recommends that LUCSUS carries out careful strategic planning in order to maintain its highly relevant research niche and to strengthen its profile within critical social sciences and the rapidly shifting landscape of sustainability science in the (near) future. The core issues here are a strong focus on innovative theoretical approaches, cutting-edge conceptualizations, highly qualified interdisciplinarity, and the development of multiple methods and novel methodologies, adequate for the research topics in question. LUCSUS current profile in critical social sciences, with focus on topics that are highly relevant for interdisciplinary natural sciences and social sciences and humanities, as well for external societal actors, makes its an internationally highly attractive PhD programme.
- Concerning the LUCSUS-offered core course “Sustainability Science and the SDGs” (SGR016F), the panel recommends that the course will be offered more regularly in the future, and that it will be redesigned in a way that it focuses on the core issues in sustainability science. Although the course receives relatively high grading in the student evaluations, many PhD students would like to have a more coherent course that systematically explores the key topics and approaches in sustainability science.

The course could also be actively marketed for students in other disciplines within social sciences and humanities.

- There are some tensions that emanate from the fact that most PhD projects are integrated into external projects, including co-authorship, developing independence vs. concluding external projects, and prioritizing project-related activities vs. teaching and administrative duties. These tensions can probably be mitigated by high-qualified management of expectations. Thus, it is important to make different stakeholders' expectations more explicit and maintain an inclusive dialogue among members of the research project groups, in the supervisor-student interactions, and at departmental meetings.

## Appendix: programme for site visit

*Evaluation of PhD education in Sustainability Science, LUCSUS*

*Site visit by external expert group 15 June 2023, Lund*

9.00 Introduction of the institution and external experts

Experts Anders Hansson (Linköping University) and Anja Nygren (University of Helsinki), PhD Director of PhD Studies Mine Islar and Head of Department Emily Boyd

9.30 Interviews with supervisors Kimberly Nicholas, Torsten Krause, Emily Boyd, Barry Ness, Guy Jackson and Murray Scown, Mine Islar

10.30 Fika

10.45 Interview with PhDs Jonas Alleson, Lina Lefstad, Bernard Ekumah, Fabiola Cordova, Juan Samper, Sara Ullström

12.00 Lunch for the committee

13.15 Site visit of offices and seminar rooms

14.00 Experts own self-work time

15.00 Fika

15.15 Feedback and wrap up of the day