

Utbildningsutvärdering med extern bedömning  
vid Göteborgs universitet

# **BEDÖMARUTLÅTANDE FÖR FORSKARUTBILDNING I FÖRETAGSEKONOMI OCH EKONOMISK GEOGRAFI VID EKONOMIHÖGSKOLAN**

2021-03-25

## Introduction

This report is the outcome of a comprehensive evaluation process (forskarutbildningsutvärdering) of the PhD education for Business Administration and Economic Geography at Gothenburg University. An assessment committee consisting of two external scholars and one internal PhD candidate undertook the evaluation. The aim was to assess the academic and pedagogical quality of the programme, as well as assessing the relevance of the PhD candidates for the broader society. The evaluation was to be written in a way that contributes to the long-term development of the PhD education. Hence, the focus areas of this report involve the quality, learning environment, education, culture, practices and career options. The assessment was by the department set to include the following:

1. De faktiska studieresultaten motsvarar lärandemål och högskoleförordningens examensmål
2. Undervisningen sätter doktorandernas lärande i centrum.
3. Undervisningens innehåll och form vilar på vetenskaplig grund samt beprövad erfarenhet
4. Lärarna har aktuell och adekvat ämnesmässig, högskolepedagogisk och ämnesdidaktisk kompetens samt att antalet lärare står i proportion till utbildningens omfattning och innehåll
5. Utbildningens olika delar är relevanta för doktorandernas forskarutbildningsbehov.
6. Doktoranderna har inflytande i planering, genomförande och uppföljning av utbildningen
7. En för alla doktorander tillgänglig och ändamålsenlig studie- och lärmiljö föreligger
8. Kontinuerlig uppföljning och utveckling av utbildningen genomförs
9. Det är en tydlig rekryteringsprocess för att attrahera högkvalitativa kandidater.
10. En för alla doktorander tillgänglig och ändamålsenlig studie- och lärmiljö föreligger
11. Kontinuerlig uppföljning och utveckling av utbildningen genomförs
12. det finns processer och kriterier för antagningen av doktorander med bäst förutsättningar att genomföra utbildningen.
13. Utbildningen säkerställer doktorandens karriärmöjligheter.
14. Doktoranderna har tillgång till en aktiv forskningsmiljö med tillräcklig metod- och teorilära, ämnesdjup, ämnesbredd, och omfattning
15. Doktorandernas möjlighet till samverkan både med forskare nationellt och internationellt samt med det omgivande samhället
16. Alumnens och arbetslivets skattning av utbildningens relevans
17. Eventuella upplevda svagheter som inte tydligt kan hänvisas till något av kriterierna.

The assessment has a specific focus on the strengths and weaknesses of the PhD programme aiming at providing ideas for how/what to change and/or improve.

The **assessment committee** consisted of:

*Shelley Kotze*: Doctoral Candidate, Economy and Society, Gothenburg University. She is current doctoral candidate in human geography, with research interests in public administration organisations and private-public-partnerships, walking methodologies for education, and has recently published an empirical evaluation of an international PhD exchange programme.

*Jacob Östberg*: Professor of Advertising and PR at Stockholm Business School, Stockholm University, Sweden and the Professor Representative (ämnesföreträdare) of the marketing section. He earned his PhD in 2003 at Lund University, Sweden. Since then he has taught at the Business Schools at Lund and Stockholm University, and as Visiting Distinguished Professor of Marketing, Aalto University School of Business, Helsinki, Finland, and visiting scholar at Bilkent University in Ankara, Turkey. His research focuses on consumer culture and in particular around how meaning is created in the intersection of marketing, popular culture, and consumers' lived lives. In particular, Östberg has been interested in questions around gender and masculinity in a Nordic setting. His work has appeared in a broad set of academic journals as well as in several books and book chapters.

*Stine Jessen Haakonsson*: Associate professor, Department of Organization, Copenhagen Business School. Stine has a background (PhD) in Economic Geography and has done extensive research within the fields of Economic Geography and International Business. Her current research is on: a new geography of innovation, organizing global innovation, catch-up strategies, science parks, and green transition. Furthermore, Stine is affiliated the Chinese Academy of Sciences and heading Social Science at the Sino-Danish Center in Beijing.

**The assessment process**: On 14 December 2020, the assessment committee had its first meeting with Vice-Head of Department Stefan Sjögren and PhD Programme Officer Kajsa Lundh from Department of Business Administration. At this meeting, the assessment committee was introduced to a number of relevant documents for the evaluation. Following this meeting, the committee decided on a list of interviewees for the site-visit in January. Due to Covid-19, the site-visit was organized virtually. The virtual site-visit was held on 25-26 January following programme in the table below:



The common characteristics for the two schools are their focus on: academic quality; learning and pedagogical development; inclusion of the PhD candidates in the programme development; working environment and working conditions. These elements are systematically assessed by the department on a continuous basis, which was also obvious from the documentation provided by the department ahead of the assessment.

The two PhD programmes follow a similar structure, in which a PhD candidate must obtain 90 högskolepoäng through course attendance. Half of these are from obligatory courses within the specific field of study. For the PhD candidates in Business Administration, the obligatory courses run in the department and the new students are enrolled as a cohort in which all take the courses in the first two semesters. For Economic Geography, which is a lot smaller in number, the obligatory courses are offered in collaboration with other universities in Sweden or across the Nordics, e.g. the NordIB PhD course. The remaining 45 högskolepoäng can be planned by the PhD candidate themselves in collaboration with the supervisor, preferably in areas that are specifically relevant for the PhD topic. Each PhD has a budget of 30.000 SEK for travelling for course/conference attendance.

During the PhD programme, the PhD candidates formally present their work in progress through giving three seminars: 1) a planning seminar, 2) a mid-term seminar, and 3) the final seminar. The thesis is finally assessed at the defence. During the three seminars, the PhD candidates are assessed by department staff who give oral and written feedback. The feedback is organized in a template provided by the department. Some examples of completed templates were providing within the documentation package received by the evaluators, and it has been noted that the feedback varied a lot. Some of the feedback reports from faculty were very detailed and contained suggestions to how to improve the paper, which possible paths forward etc., whereas others were much shorter e.g. writing 'revisions needed'.

The PhD process is organized in the PhD Planner called Individual Study Plan (ISP). The ISP is an online tool to be filled in on an annual basis by the PhD candidate and supervisor. It is a living document where progress is written into throughout the four years.

GU has a strong international reputation within the field of Economic Geography, still there seems to be only 3 permanent staff qualified to assess PhD dissertations.

After the PhD (see the document on Alumni uppföljning) most of the candidates stay in academia – either at GU or in other Swedish universities. A few of the candidates have moved abroad, for example, one PhD graduate from 2019 is now holding a position at Oxford University. According to the report by HandelsConsulting from 2010, the graduates get jobs within a few months after finalizing their PhD and all graduates are in employment, with approximately 50% staying at Gothenburg University. Moreover, the societal relevance of the PhD candidates seems to match the job-market.

The table below shows the number of PhD candidates and applications:

Utbildning forskarnivå FEK - sökande och antagna, totalt och internationella*							
<i>*Studenter räknas som internationella om de har en kandidat- eller masterexamen från ett annat land än Sverige</i>							
<b>Företagsekonomi</b>							
<b>Antal sökande</b>							
	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016*</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020*</b>
Totalt	410	160		166	41	337	
varav internationella	369	145		146	33	288	
<b>Antal antagna studenter</b>							
Totalt	6	10		3	1	9	
varav internationella	3	6		0	0	4	
<b>Ekonomisk geografi</b>							
<b>Antal sökande</b>							
	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016*</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018*</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020*</b>
Totalt	35	30		23		18	
varav internationella	32	27		15		14	
<b>Antal antagna studenter</b>							
Totalt	1	1		1		0	
varav internationella	0	0		0		0	
<i>*ingen antagning</i>							

The table above also shows the attractiveness of the programmes for international candidates with the high number of applicants. The share of international applicants has been relatively stable since 2014. However, in the recent years most enrolled candidates are not international. Due to Covid-19, there were no new recruitments at PhD level in 2020. The overall department budget for PhDs has declined over the past years both for internally and externally funded PhD projects.

<b>MSEK</b>		År	Utfall Budget			
		2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
	RR 1 txt	Utfall	Utfall	Utfall	Prognos T2	Budget 2021
Lönekostnader (anslag)	Kostnader	21,0	17,8	16,1	13,3	13,3
Lönekostnader (externa bidrag)	Kostnader	5,4	2,3	3,1	2,3	2,4
<b>Totalt</b>		<b>26,4</b>	<b>20,1</b>	<b>19,2</b>	<b>15,7</b>	<b>15,4</b>

The 'Handlings och verksamhetsplan 2020' by Gothenburg University states a high priority of internationalization and cooperation with the wider society. The university has broadly an ambition of maintaining its international profile and the school has been triple crowned. At the same time, the programme has an ambition to involve the PhDs in the decision-making bodies of the department. Looking at the minutes from the meetings and at the 'sprogpolitik' of the university some ambiguity emerges as all of this is written in Swedish only. In general, decision-making has been decentralized to the departments and the programmes seems to have benefitted from this. At the department level, Stefan and Kajsa are the 'dynamic duo' for coordination and information sharing.

## Utbildningens främsta styrkor och svagheter samt bedömargruppens reflektioner och rekommendationer

A PhD programme is a complex entity that collects a diverse set of academic staff with a diverse set of PhD students under a structure that should ideally be strict enough to make sure that certain levels of quality and progression are guaranteed, but also loose enough to allow for each individual PhD projects' idiosyncrasies. Given that core competencies for both academic staff and PhD students are abilities to think critically and to abstract from individual cases to analyse a totality, it is only natural that many of the interactions we had during the interviews – especially with the PhD students themselves, both past and present – tended to focus on areas where there is room for improvement. Still, as a general comment, we would like to state that the general sentiment that we gathered from our interactions with the administration, the PhD students, and the academic staff is that the respective PhD programmes work rather well.

We will now go through the respective areas that we have been specifically asked to assess. In doing this we have taken into account the various criteria for the PhD programmes that have been presented to us in the official documents.

I avsnittet om bedömarutlåtande finns i GU:s vägledning också följande information:

*”Bedömargruppen bör även rapportera eventuella upplevda svagheter som inte tydligt kan hänvisas till något av kriterierna. Fakulteten/institutionen kan också vid behov kommunicera med bedömargruppen om några av kriterierna, delar av dem eller andra områden är av särskilt intresse.”<sup>1</sup>*

Samt:

*”Bedömargruppen sammanfattar i ett bedömarutlåtande vad som behöver utvecklas för att utbildningen ska möta ovan nämnda kriterier. Bedömargruppen kan också uppmärksamma goda exempel i utbildningen. Vidare kan bedömargruppen med fördel också ange möjliga lärosäten/utbildningar för benchmarking med syfte att främja det kommande utvecklingsarbetet.”*

### 1. De faktiska studieresultaten motsvarar lärandemål och högskoleförordningens examensmål

It is our conviction that the PhD programmes without a doubt live up to this most basic criterion. The following comments and suggestions are thus not of the character where the *raison d'être* of the programmes are put into question. Rather, the comments are aimed to find areas where there is room for improvement beyond what is stated in högskoleförordningen.

### 2. Undervisningen sätter doktorandernas lärande i centrum.

The programme in Företagsekonomi has a rather rigid structure during the first years. PhD students are seen as cohorts that are following roughly the same course structure, especially with regards to the mandatory courses. This has benefits, in terms of both PhD students and supervisors having a clear idea of what they are expected to do, but it comes at the expense of

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<sup>1</sup> Sådana områden kan t ex vara jämställdhet, internationalisering och/eller hållbar utveckling. Inspiration till andra områden kan eventuellt också fås via [Verktyg för inventering och utveckling av forskar/utbildningskvalitet](#). Om ytterligare områden ska bedömas bör bedömargruppen förses med relevant underlag för dessa.

not always catering the programme to the needs of the respective PhD students and their projects. Incoming PhD students, for example, have rather diverse backgrounds and this is not particularly accommodated for in the course programme offered to the students at the early parts of the programme. The ambition of the school to have a neat and ordered programme thus potentially displaces the student's learning from the centre of attention.

The programme in Economic Geography has a looser structure, partly on account of there being fewer available courses. This forces each supervisory team to more carefully cater the structure of the programme to each individual student, which emphasizes students' learning in a different way.

### *3. Undervisningens innehåll och form vilar på vetenskaplig grund samt beprövad erfarenhet*

Our assessment has not in any way indicated that the PhD education does not rest on a solid scientific ground. Despite the relative breadth of företagsekonomi as a subject – which could lead to questions about what scientific criteria to employ – the PhD students as well as the supervisors indicated that they had a common understanding of what constituted respectable scientific criteria.

### *4. Lärarna har aktuell och adekvat ämnesmässig, högskolepedagogisk och ämnesdidaktisk kompetens samt att antalet lärare står i proportion till utbildningens omfattning och innehåll*

The general sentiment is that the school provides enough resources for each PhD student to find supervisors and other relevant academic faculty to communicate with throughout the programme. The PhD students specifically pointed to the visiting scholars and the larger network that both the permanent and the visiting faculty opened up to as significant in making sure that enough competencies were available. Research is conducted in a broad array of areas at the school and it is impossible to keep all the competencies in-house. The extended network therefore becomes of essence. This is also a potential weakness, however, as the extended network does not necessarily feel the same responsibility towards helping PhD students. The extended network might also be less familiar with the specific criteria for PhD projects both locally at the school and more generally in Sweden.

### *5. Utbildningens olika delar är relevanta för doktorandernas forskarutbildningsbehov*

The PhD students were positive towards their independent PhD projects and the elective PhD courses that they were allowed to attend, not least those offered elsewhere. The Företagsekonomi students were less enthusiastic about the mandatory courses and could not always clearly see how they contributed to their PhD education.

### *6. Doktoranderna har inflytande i planering, genomförande och uppföljning av utbildningen*

The harder structure of the PhD programme in företagsekonomi naturally leads to less influence in the planning of the education, at least during the first part of the programme. This was, however, not singled out as a problem since the students were aware of this structure beforehand. Beyond that, the PhD students indicated that they were able to influence the programme in a sufficient manner.



Despite this, the conversations with PhD students suggested that there are issues related to the planning and execution of the PhD education that leads to stress and frustration. Specifically this has to do with delays in the data gathering and writing up phases, not least when these delays led to time pressures in terms of the contract running out. Issues of having problems with collecting data and/or writing up the results are intrinsic to doing research and cannot thus be avoided altogether. It seems, however, that it would be advisable to find a structure so that the PhD students would not feel alone in facing these issues.

*7. En för alla doktorander tillgänglig och ändamålsenlig studie- och lärmiljö föreligger*

For the Economic Geography programme the academic environment was singled out as particularly conducive for having an ongoing dialogue with a broad set of colleagues. In general the PhDs feel very integrated in the group and that the doors to permanent faculty are always open for them as they are situated in neighbouring offices.

For the företagsekonomi programme the academic environment seemed to be more varied where some indicated that this was very positive and some indicated a relative lack. From our conversations with various groups it appears that the experience of a meaningful academic environment is highly dependent on both the PhD student's relationship with their respective supervisors and the supervisor's relationship with the department as such. In some instances the PhD students felt like part of a group and in some instances they felt rather alone. Some indicated that they felt like the workplace climate was such that one could knock on anyone's door and ask for advice, and others indicated that they did not feel as comfortable in seeking out help and advice from those not directly involved.

Point 8 and 9 are very similar:

*8. Det är en tydlig rekryteringsprocess för att attrahera högkvalitativa kandidater.*

*9. Det finns processer och kriterier för antagningen av doktorander med bäst förutsättningar att genomföra utbildningen.*

Yes, the recruitment processes seemed to render a sufficient mix of internal and external candidates with a mixed set of backgrounds. The relatively high level of success rate in terms of candidates actually finishing their PhDs, as well as getting relevant jobs afterwards, is also an indication that the recruitment process works. Here we are unable to allude to reasons why some candidates were unable to finish the PhD programme, as they did not form part of the site-visits.

*10. Kontinuerlig uppföljning och utveckling av utbildningen genomförs*

During the PhD period, the work of the candidates is continuously tracked through the ISP (mandatorily reviewed at least once per year) and the three obligatory seminars where the candidates get feedback on their work. Some of the PhD candidates were more exposed to feedback than others as they also present paper drafts to their respective research groups and attend the same conferences as their supervisors and/or research groups.

The amount and quality of the feedback varies depending on the PhD student's relationship with the supervisor, the supervisor's relationship to a relevant network of external scholars both

within and outside of Sweden that are willing to take on the task of being an external reader, and finally on the culture of the individual research group.

While the three obligatory seminars and the ISP thus sets a basic level of continuous feedback for all the PhD students, the quality of the feedback seems to span a fairly wide range.

#### *11. Utbildningen säkerställer doktorandens karriärmöjligheter*

Our assessment indicates that there is a lack of systematic process to facilitate the students' career opportunities after finishing the programme. It appears that the focus is very much on the programme as such, but not really on what comes after. This is true both for those aiming for an academic career and those aiming for a career outside of the university.

What was particularly pointed to was a lack of a systematic process to prepare students for international research careers, especially at more competitive schools. The PhD candidates were not provided preparation for "job talks" and such and although the candidates get acquainted with the networks of their supervisor and research groups, they are not necessarily aware of the career opportunities that follow.

One issue that was singled out in terms of the students' career possibilities was opportunities to gain teaching experience. The PhD students stressed that they wanted this as an integral part of the programme. Currently it was more on an ad hoc basis and largely dependent on the (sometimes urgent) needs of the department as well as the individual supervisors. Some of the supervisors, on the other hand, were very negative towards giving the PhD students abilities to gain teaching experiences and did not see this as an integral part of the programme. Some of the candidates expressed concern that their lack of teaching experience would be a liability for their chances of getting a job at other universities.

#### *12. Doktoranderna har tillgång till en aktiv forskningsmiljö med tillräcklig metod- och teorilära, ämnesdjup, ämnesbredd, och omfattning*

Given the broad array of different topics and perspectives that both the faculty and the PhD students represent, it is not strange that all the areas are not covered to the same extent in-house. It appears that the basics are covered rather well in the mandatory courses that are part of the course package in företagsekonomi, and offered in other ways to the Economic Geography students. When it comes to more specific courses there seems to be more ad hoc solutions where they are sometimes offered in-house and sometimes sought for in other places. Some of the sub-disciplines – such as finance – had a more structured way of getting access to courses offered elsewhere, whereas other sub-disciplines – such as marketing – was more dependent on the PhD students themselves being proactive.

While the principle of taking specific courses outside of the department was not critiqued per se but rather seen as something positive, there seems to be a need for better and more updated information about the available courses in Sweden as well as abroad.

#### *13. Doktorandernas möjlighet till samverkan både med forskare nationellt och internationellt samt med det omgivande samhället*

The extensive networking possibilities with local businesses was pointed out as something positive. Regarding the networking possibilities with national and international research

communities this was also an area where the PhD students were largely in the hands of their supervisors. If the supervisors were part of an extensive network and willing to share this was very positive for the students, but this was not something that was guaranteed by the programme as such.

The relatively large number of incoming visiting scholars was singled out as very positive in terms of networking possibilities.

#### *14. Alumnerna och arbetslivets skattning av utbildningens relevans*

The alumni had a very positive outlook on the relevance of their PhD education and the way it prepared them for their current positions. They did stress, however, that they were all relatively “successful cases” and that we probably could have gotten a rather different picture had we been given access to those that did not succeed in finding a suitable job after graduating. However, the statistics show that all PhD candidates get employed.

We did not get access to representatives from business who could testament to the merits of the programme.

#### *15. Eventuella upplevda svagheter som inte tydligt kan hänvisas till något av kriterierna.*

Although the programme overall seems to mostly lead to positive experiences for those involved, success is highly dependent on the relationship between the PhD student and the supervisor. In the cases when this works out, and the supervisor is in good standing with the overall department, everything seems to fall into place. In the cases when the relationship fails and/or the supervisor has a more peripheral role at the department it is more troublesome.

### **Impact of the coronavirus pandemic**

Whilst not a focused part of this evaluation, many participants also spoke of the impact that the coronavirus pandemic was having upon their PhD studies, both in very tangible terms, in relation to course provision and distance learning, and less quantifiable impacts the situation was having on their own mental wellbeing.

Several students commented that distance learning during 2020/21 has meant that they have not only the ability to participate more easily (and at a reduced cost and environmental impact) in courses that are run at numerous overseas universities. Whilst this can be interpreted as a positive, given the idea that many conferences will also now follow this model of delivery we would stress the need for the PhD programme to compensate for the missed physical meetings and network building that will be lost to PhD students through this manner of engagement.

Moreover, students saw both the positives and negatives in increased working from home. Again, aligned with our recommendations (to follow) to build on an integrated working environment, where PhDs are equally engaged within the workings of the department, as both a staff member and student, a balance should be maintained between home and office working that suits the individual students and the departments. Also, physical environments, such as the organisation of office space, should reflect an integrated environment for PhD students, and not spatially create separation between the PhD students and their departments.

## **Recommendations – action points**

It would be advisable for the department to set in motion processes that would enable all PhD students to feel equally involved in the academic environment, both in how their offices are located, how they are integrated in their research group and the set-up of the PhD community as an entity. The wellbeing and integration of the PhD candidates is very dependent on their relationship with their supervisor. We recommend that the department prioritizes that Stefan and Kajsa continue to follow this on an individual basis.

As mentioned above, Stefan and Kajsa are currently working as a “dynamic duo” that guides PhD students through the program. From the interviews we conducted, this seems to be working out nicely at the moment. There is, however, a potential risk with having so much power over individual PhD students’ situation resting on individuals rather than the system. In the event that either Stefan or Kajsa would take on different responsibilities it is not certain that a potential replacement would work equally well. To prepare for that, it is important to work on the formal processes so that an individual PhD candidate’s access to support and information is *not* dependent on the relationship with those in charge.

Compulsory course structure generates a sense of belonging but could be more flexible – especially for the candidates in företagsekonomi, as the combination of courses is too broad.

We found some ambiguity in balancing the PhD cohorts and individual autonomy when choosing courses / place within academic environment. Our recommendation is more customization in the företagsekonomi programme and maybe combine the two into one programme more flexibility.

Teaching duties and equal distribution, we recommend a more systematic integration of the PhD candidates into teaching to the extent to which each individual candidate would like to teach.

If the department aims at more internationalization as well as more integration and a flat structure for the PhD candidates, we suggest that the working language of the PhD related activities shifts to English.