

# **Response to the Evaluation Report of the PhD Programme in Economics Lund University**

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Table of contents

- 1. Introductory Comments ..... 2
- 2. Area, Environment, and Resources ..... 2
- 3. Design, Implementation, and Outcomes..... 4
- 4. Achieving Objectives – Judgment and Approach: ..... 6
- 5. Working Life Perspective:..... 6
- 6. Doctoral Student Perspective:..... 6
- 7. Gender Equality ..... 6
- 8. Sustainability Perspective..... 7

**1. Introductory Comments**

We thank the external evaluators for their comprehensive review and insightful feedback on our PhD programme in Economics at Lund University. We appreciate the time and effort they have invested in identifying areas for improvement. In this response, we would like to address each of the concerns and recommendations, as well as provide our perspective on how we plan to implement improvements based on these suggestions. The structure of the response follows that of the report.

**2. Area, Environment, and Resources**

**Staff: Quantity, Competence, and Management**

*Matching Process Between Students and Supervisors:*

To improve the matching between students and supervisors, each of the seminar groups held specific meetings during the spring of 2023, in which both faculty members and PhD students briefly presented their research interests and current projects. This approach allowed our PhD students to familiarize themselves with the research strengths of our faculty members, making it easier for them to find suitable supervisors. We will continue refining this process and consider the implementation of additional measures if needed.

*Change of Supervisors:*

We understand the importance of ensuring that our PhD students are aware of the procedures for changing supervisors due to conflicts. To improve information about the procedures and support mechanisms in place, we have now inserted links to the relevant document on the Intranet site of the PhD programme, making it easily accessible for all students. Additionally, we will announce this information more clearly to incoming PhD students during their first orientation day to ensure they are aware of the procedures and their rights from the beginning of their studies.

*Availability of Supervisors in Different Areas of Economics:*

We acknowledge the concern regarding the availability of supervisors in macroeconomics. We are actively considering this matter in our strategic planning and recruitment processes. Additionally, we are currently assessing the structure of our courses, and as part of this

process, we are investigating how to improve the course package in macroeconomics. This will hopefully strengthen our PhD programme and ensure that our students receive a well-rounded education in all major fields of economics.

## **Research Studies Environment**

### *Physical Environment*

Regarding the physical separation of PhD students from faculty members, we acknowledge the impact this has on networking, and the overall experience of our PhD students. While the prospects for a major relocation on school level to enable a common localization of all colleagues at the departmental level seem limited at the moment, we will continue to actively explore ways to enhance interactions between faculty and PhD students, and work towards a more favorable office arrangement in the long term.

### *Psychosocial Working Environment*

We understand the importance of addressing the mental health and well-being of our PhD students, and we want to underline that the department takes these matters very seriously. Over the years, we have developed an early response strategy to help us understand individual PhD students' health and well-being by interacting with both students and their supervisors (as well as their teachers during the first year). The importance of early intervention is underscored by a 2021 report from the union ST<sup>1</sup>, which revealed that around 20% of doctoral candidates experienced issues such as difficulty taking vacations, slow progress in thesis work, insecurity due to conflicts, and sleep problems. To assess the situation at the department it is essential to present an accurate overview of the department's situation and our efforts to improve the psychological environment for PhD students.

First, it should be noted that sick leave figures for our PhD candidates are quite similar to those for other positions at the department (admin, tenure track and postdoc, and tenured), which implies that the average number of sick days per PhD candidate per year is around 1 day, slightly higher than for tenured staff but lower than admin. When it comes to the average number of sick days per PhD student for those who are sick, then it is around 5 days, with 1-2 sick periods per year, which is comparable to those on tenure track and admin positions.

Second, considering those PhD students who received various types of external assistance (e.g., CBT) to address psychological issues, approximately six out of our 35 PhD students have sought professional help for stress, uncertainty, grief, and other psychological concerns. These students not only received professional support but also had fewer sick days. In other words, professional assistance is introduced at an early stage before psychological problems become severe enough to cause long-term effects.

We believe the department's strategy of promptly addressing stress and psychological issues positively impacts the well-being of our candidates, as evidenced by their situation being fairly similar to that of other colleagues. However, we are always striving for improvement and are currently exploring new ideas, some of which have been inspired by the committee's report:

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<sup>1</sup> [https://sfs.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/how\\_healthy\\_are\\_our\\_doctoral\\_students\\_summary\\_of\\_the\\_principal\\_results.pdf](https://sfs.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/how_healthy_are_our_doctoral_students_summary_of_the_principal_results.pdf)

- One new idea is to increase the possibility for PhD students (and all other faculty members as well) to bring up issues is to initiate digital one-to-one meetings with the head of the department. These meetings were introduced during the pandemic, but they will be reintroduced in a new format during 2023. The idea is to set up around 10 slots every month that will be open for anyone to book in order to discuss a topic of their own choice. Hence, PhD students will not only be reminded about the possibility to bring up any issue they think is important, but they will also have more opportunities for this.
- Another idea under consideration is the initiation of a seminar course described more in Section 3 below. We believe such a course will help bridging the gap between the course work of the first year and the thesis work. Thus, the course will offer support and guidance during a phase of the programme that some students find extra stressful.
- In order to better monitor the working environment and continuously improve the PhD program, we are also considering conducting yearly online surveys among our PhD students. These surveys would cover various aspects of the program, including general programme evaluations, research environment, and issues related to stress and mental health. At a recent meeting with the research education committee (forskarutbildningskollegiet) at LUSEM, this idea was brought up and was well received. Hopefully, such surveys can be implemented at the faculty level to lower administrative costs and provide a more comparative perspective on our PhD students' experiences.
- Following suggestions in the review, we have recently initiated a mentoring programme for incoming PhD students, pairing them with more experienced students from senior cohorts. The PhD students have also started a PhD lunch seminar to be held once a month. This will provide another forum for interactions among PhD students that will hopefully also provide guidance and support for new students.

### **3. Design, Implementation, and Outcomes**

#### **Achieving Objectives – Knowledge and Understanding**

We have taken note of the concerns regarding the structure and content of our course package, particularly the recommendation to increase the required coursework. While we understand the rationale behind increasing the required coursework, we are not yet fully convinced that this would improve our programme. That said, we do not rule out that the course component can be extended somewhat, and we will give it serious consideration during the thorough review of the course structure that we are currently conducting. It is important to acknowledge that other universities in Sweden are currently considering shortening their course package to 90 credits. Consequently, we may not stand out as an exception in the national academic landscape.

To improve our course offerings for our PhD students, we have formed a working group consisting of the director of studies, the past and present director of the PhD program, and the director of the Master programme. The working group is currently reviewing the entire course structure of both the PhD and Master programs, with a particular focus on the areas below that was brought up in the review.

### *Restructuring the First-Year Course Package*

We will consider reallocating some resources from the Master level to allow for more exclusive PhD courses. The introduction of the DABE programme has increased the set of elective courses for the Master programme, which could justify reallocating some resources to the PhD level without severely affecting the size of the course package offered to the master students. We will also work on optimizing the sequence of courses, such as addressing the problem of the Econometrics courses being offered only every second year.

In general, we do not view it as a major problem that Master students are allowed to take the PhD level courses. According to the lectures of the PhD level courses in Microeconomics and Mathematics, the master students are very motivated and perform at the same or higher level than the PhD students. However, the issue is more critical for the courses that are compulsory also in the Master programme (e.g., Advanced Macro), and we are here going to consider introducing alternative PhD level courses to assure progression from the master programme.

### *Explore Collaborations and Mini-Courses*

We are exploring collaboration opportunities with other universities, for example with Gothenburg. While full collaboration may not be possible at the moment, our students have, for example, already been welcomed to participate in their first-year PhD Macro course if they prefer. We are also planning to host PhD level mini courses with external lectures in the coming years.

### *Introduce a Seminar Course for Second-Year PhD Students in Economics*

We are considering introducing a new mandatory seminar course (4.5 credits) leveraging the department's active seminar series that involve a large set of highly qualified external speakers each semester. The course would run during the second year and encourage students to actively participate and reflect on the topics covered in the seminars. As examination students may be asked to write a report or prepare questions for a selection of the seminars, and then work out an idea related to the topics raised in the series. The course could provide a natural way to introduce students to the research process and the academic environment more broadly. Group tasks will be incorporated to promote collaboration and discussion among students, and the course examinations will be designed to encourage students to reflect on different perspectives, such as research ethics, equal treatment, and sustainability.

### *Improve Course Evaluations and Gather More Feedback on the Program*

In response to the comments in the review, we have already changed the nature of the course evaluations. They now include extra questions for PhD students (including those shared with Master students) this will allow separation of the answers between master students and PhD students. As mentioned above, we have also raised the issue of implementing a yearly, more general evaluation of the PhD programme to identify areas for improvement, ideally coordinated at the faculty level.

### *Teaching*

Regarding the issue of PhD students not being course examiners, we would like to clarify that they are not assigned as formal examiners. However, we will strive to make sure that PhD students are not responsible for the main teaching of other PhD students.

#### **4. Achieving Objectives – Judgment and Approach:**

##### *Individual Study Plans (ISPs)*

We acknowledge that there is room for improvement in how the ISP is used and perceived by our students and supervisors. We understand that the current system may not always serve its intended purpose as a useful planning tool for students and supervisors, and that there is inconsistency in its implementation across the department. Before the next round of revisions of the ISP, the programme management will provide more detailed guidelines about how to fill in the ISP, ensuring clarity and consistency. Hopefully, this will imply that the ISPs will be viewed as a more helpful tool in the learning process for both students and supervisors.

#### **5. Working Life Perspective**

##### *Job market*

We recognize that the growing orientation towards international academic job markets has led to an increased workload for supervisors. To alleviate this and provide more support to the students going on the job market, we have appointed two job market placement officers (one professor and one associate senior lecturer). They are responsible for preparing PhD candidates for the job market, helping them develop their job search materials, and training them for interviews and job market seminars.

##### *Work-life balance*

We are pleased to hear that our department generally accommodates new parents and promotes a work-life balance for PhD students. However, we are concerned about the increased stress reported by students who become parents during their studies. In response to this feedback, we will encourage an open dialogue between students and supervisors to address concerns related to parenthood and work-life balance, ensuring that any necessary adjustments are made to accommodate the special needs that arise due to parenthood.

#### **6. Doctoral Student Perspective:**

We are pleased that the review points out that our students are overall satisfied with the department and the quality of the program, and especially with the support from their supervisors. In terms of student representation on department boards and committees, we will enhance our efforts to inform and encourage PhD students to participate in these roles. Providing more detailed information about the prolongation associated with different positions, as suggested in the student report, will be implemented to increase interest and involvement. Several comments under the Doctoral Student Perspective heading related to the physical and psychosocial working environment. Those issues have been extensively discussed in Section 1 above.

#### **7. Gender Equality**

We are committed to stepping up our efforts to increase gender equality among faculty and preserve the gender balance among PhD students, and the gender equality has been improved over the last couple of years. Especially for professors and for the group of tenure tracks, which we expect will have a positive impact on our gender equality in general. We will continuously review the measures already in place and identify areas where improvements can be made.

## **8. Sustainability Perspective**

We appreciate the suggestions for increasing the interest in discussing and implementing sustainability perspectives among our PhD students. One way that we plan to do this is to integrate examination tasks targeting these areas in the new seminar course described above. Many of the external speakers in the seminar series touch upon issues relating to sustainability in a broad sense that also includes ethical questions. The seminar course will thus naturally incorporate elements relating to these perspectives.