

Evaluation

Doctoral program in economic history

University of Lund

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Lund University has one of the largest, if not the largest programmes in Economic History in the world. It has grown very rapidly in recent years and now produces a large number of PhD students in diverse areas of economic history, several of whom have distinguished themselves internationally through their work as PhD candidates or recent graduates. One significant source of growth has been the Faculty's success in winning research grants through which they support the doctoral students alongside a number of Postdoctoral researchers.

The Evaluation Committee (EC) consisted of Professors Birgit Karlsson, Jan Kok, and Jane Humphries. The EC was provided with a number of background papers including Professor Astrid Kander's Self Evaluation document. On this basis members of the EV prepared lists of their individual questions and concerns. These were shared within the EC. Additional documentation was provided as requested. Professors Karlsson and Kok visited Lund on the 25th January where they conducted a series of interviews with graduate students, and teachers and administrators of the Programme, where they were able to follow up the issues that their background work had identified as relevant to an assessment of the programme. These interviews were taped and shared with Professor Humphries who was unable to travel to Lund on this date. She had however visited the Department earlier in December when she acted as an 'Opponent' at a PhD viva and met with a number of DPhil students. Members of the EC then wrote up their individual assessments of the programme which have been consolidated as the joint report below.

The actual outcomes meet the objectives set for them, including the intended learning outcomes

The programme aims to give its students both broad knowledge and understanding of economic history and familiarity with the research methodologies used by economic historians. The EC's view is that these goals are to a large extent fulfilled. The compulsory courses expose the students to a range of literature and introduce several methodologies. They provide a good foundation for more specialised learning and for the individual

research demanded by a doctoral thesis. However, The EC had a number of questions about the courses and wanted to use the opportunity created by the evaluation initiative to suggest ways in which the achievements of the last few years could be consolidated and progressed. The course on “Foundations in economic history” constitutes a major claim on students’ time and provides a significant share of course credits. The EC understands that since the intake of students is heterogenous, providing a foundations course is essential. Indeed since students on the course come from very different backgrounds, spanning social sciences and humanities, and often with little prior specialist work in economic history, it could be argued that even more background work would be beneficial, especially as the student interviewees suggested that the course was appreciated especially after some time when the ideas and literature had been digested and fed through into individual research. Members of the EC did however think that the structure and content of the course left the introduction to economic history prematurely. The value of the course might be enhanced and made more immediately apparent to students if the general bibliography could be supplemented by work that addressed a student’s chosen subject. Of course this would require some customised teaching but the EC thinks this would be worth the extra effort. Another possibility would be to use the classic texts to lead into current debates within economic history, closing the course with some recent material. After all, when students attend international conferences and workshops they will be exposed to ongoing modern research not discussion of the classics. The course organisers need to emphasize how the study of foundational texts illuminates current debates.

The EC felt that the strategy with respect to the teaching of research methodologies, while understandable, was perhaps unbalanced. There are courses in quantitative methods, but not in qualitative methods, which suggests a hierarchy within methodologies and indeed that it is not necessary to study qualitative methods which can somehow be ‘picked up’ from general reading. The problem of how to provide space to teach both methodologies effectively within a PhD programme is not unique to Lund. There is huge pressure to provide formal training in quantitative methods. The demands on economic historians to be competent (indeed assured) econometricians are heavy and for students with little statistical education the learning curve is steep. However, the EC argues that some space should be found for a formal introduction to qualitative research methods not least because mixed research strategies can produce research of higher quality. The neglect of qualitative approaches can be legitimized by the claim that students who are interested in qualitative

methods can take elective courses, but this runs the risk that in the long run graduates of the programme are methodologically limited and fail to appreciate qualitative research.

The EC thought the programme was generally successful in terms of enabling students to achieve the competence and skills identified as learning outcomes. The structure of the program forces the students to deliver and discuss course material and we were particularly enthusiastic about the way in which group activities were encouraged making it possible for students to learn from their peers. This is done mainly through the “Research seminars” where attendance is compulsory. However if the only requirement is attendance this runs the risk that individual students free-riding on their peers or only engaging actively when discussion turns to their areas of interest. This, in turn, might lead to a narrower view of economic history than is desirable. The Department might consider ways to promote a more active participation in the seminars by, e.g. formally prioritising student questions at the beginning of the discussion time, or by scheduling particular students to contribute in specific seminars.

A really positive thing is that the students are, not only encouraged, but also get the financial possibility to participate in conferences, Swedish as well as international. This provides the students with training and experience in how to present as well as how to respond to comments and criticism. Lund’s success in preparing students for such exposure is manifest in the number of their students who have won prizes in ‘New Researcher’ competitions or been congratulated on presentations at seminars and workshops.

The program puts the learning of the doctoral students in focus

The programme is successful in putting the learning of the doctoral students in focus. The necessary compulsory courses are adequately supplemented by electives. The EC is enthusiastic about the doctoral students’ recently established opportunity to participate in the courses arranged nationally.

When it comes to the pedagogical challenges, many steps have been taken to break down the loneliness that has been considered a natural part in doctoral studies. Since the intake is sufficiently large they get to know each other in the mandatory courses, and compulsory attendance at the departmental seminars consolidates group identity and creates opportunities to socialise. The brown-bag seminars where students are encouraged to present to each other, provides another important possibility to network with peers and build intellectual confidence. It is a common pedagogical wisdom that small group discussions not only enhance personal learning, but also consolidate knowledge and build confidence.

The EC's hope is that the brown-bag seminars provide the kind of informal settings and unthreatening audiences that make this kind of leaning possible. The EC thinks there would be some benefits in promoting greater student engagements within existing structures and more pressure on students to show initiatives. One suggestion for achieving this goal could be to require students to demonstrate their preparation when coming to the seminars by for example handing in questions on the material in advance. Another suggestion is that students organize 'master classes' by invited or visiting scholars to gain yet another perspective on the best approach to tackle their questions. Finally, there is a yearly opportunity to discuss the individual research design in an international setting (ESTER seminar); it is not clear to what extent Lund students participate. It is a shame if this opportunity is forgone.

The education is based on scientific ground

Doctoral studies must balance between giving the students ability to work on their own and ability to communicate their problems, absorb critique and communicate their results. Giving support to the solitary work seems to function well through supervision, but it is not really clear whether or not the other aspects are enough developed, even if it is obvious that these aspects have been much more addressed during the last years.

Overall, the training program is quite 'task-oriented', which clearly contributes to the high completion rate, but does less well in preparing students for post-doctoral ventures. Students aiming to remain in academia might benefit from training in e.g. grant-writing, whereas other students might benefit from meetings with alumni who have found a job in policy-making, statistical agencies and so on.

All supervisors and course instructors have sufficient and appropriate disciplinary and pedagogical training (quality of staff)

Supervisors and course instructors have access to formal training. However, it is not entirely clear whether the department management has made sure that this education meets the current needs of students or is appropriate for a doctoral programme. Some staff members appeared unenthusiastic and we would like to see some of the relevant course content more clearly identified. The development of the supervisors' pedagogical qualities could be an area in which improvement could take place. In case of mismatch between a student and the assigned supervisor, appropriate procedures to change

supervisors are in place. Such procedures are especially important as doctoral studies take place within projects.

The program has a sufficient quantity of staff

Here Lund does really well. Since supervisors generally have only 25% teaching duties, they have enough time to be active and engaged researchers, role models for their students. They also have enough time to be involved and caring supervisors. However issues arise because of the way in which the programme has grown and the nature of its funding sources. On the positive side, all the doctoral students are involved in projects, led by their supervisor. This has the advantage that it ensures a peer group of researchers with similar aims and interests. Doctoral students do not drift searching for viable topics and supervisors are simultaneously engaged in related research. The supervisors have a strong interest that the doctoral students will finish their work and that it will be of good quality, not only as supervisors but also as project leaders. However, it is also often the case that the limits between supervision and project discussions become blurred. Students might find their intellectual autonomy cramped if not overruled. Or supervisors might find their students moving away from the initial proposal and drifting beyond the funded research project. To date the department has managed the balancing act involved in mobilising research funding for doctoral students but it should keep the potential strains of this funding model in mind when considering further expansion.

The program is relevant for the doctoral candidates and answers to societal needs

The courses are, by and large, helpful and relevant for the students, especially as they are often geared to their specific research questions and are given in small groups ensuring strong personal commitment. The seminars are also considered useful, though some students felt that sometimes they were too frequent. The students also feel that more attention should be given to teaching opportunities (see General Comments below). This is an important point in terms of preparing students to compete on the international academic job market.

The actual research goals (four publishable texts, with a minimum of two single-authored, and a Kappa of about 40-50 pages) are feasible and the procedures are clear. Students indicate they miss the opportunity to replace two papers with a 'job market paper' that would enhance opportunities in the American job market.

The societal goal is definitely fulfilled if societal needs are seen on a world scale. The projects deal with currently important questions like environmental deterioration, third world problems, welfare provision, and demographic issues. If, on the other hand, the focus is on Swedish society, the connection is not so clear. Of course many international problems are also Swedish problems but the research is rarely specific to Sweden. This is a consequence of international recruitment of students. At the current time there are hardly any Swedish students in the program and learning Swedish seems to be a low priority especially given the course work load. The connections to Swedish society in the projects must therefore be made by the Swedish supervisors. It is possible to analyse Swedish source material without knowing Swedish, but language limitations can be problematic.

The doctoral students have influence over planning, implementation and evaluation of the program and of their studies

This question raises again the general issue of student autonomy over their research topic when recruited to work under a project umbrella, (as discussed above), but once accepted into the programme, and according to the information from the students, this seems very much to be the case. The doctoral students can discuss their studies both with their supervisors and in formalized discussions with the Director of studies. There seems to be a good combination of the Individual Study Plan (brief but dynamic) and the recently introduced Research Design prepared by the students in their first year.

The combination of receiving education in the first year and gathering data (e.g. in Africa) can cause problems with the planning, and some students still have to earn ECTS while completing their research.

As to the present evaluation, students indicate that they would have appreciated being involved in the self-evaluation. We recommend this for the next round.

The learning environment is appropriate and accessible for all doctoral candidates

The learning environment seems on the whole to function very well. The students come from different countries and are in most cases not strongly connected to Swedish society. It is therefore of great importance that the environment in Lund functions as “a second home”, a requisite that the department has taken seriously and by and large achieved. It is helpful that the group of students is sufficiently large to accommodate diverse friendships and social clusters. To avoid conflicts and antagonisms from developing, the department encourages

cooperation between research groups and individuals when it comes to research applications.

There is of course a danger for isolation from Swedish society, if the incentives for learning Swedish are few. On the other hand, many of the students aspire to an international career, rather than aim to remain in Sweden. Lund's doctoral program in economic history primarily serves the international research community of the historical social sciences, yet we would advise reinforcing the ties to Swedish history, society and scholarly community.

There is a well-functioning support for doctoral students in need of such support

Apparently, the need to formalise support for students has grown in recent years. A survey concerning the work situation and levels of stress is conducted annually. As a result of evidence on growing pressures, the department has intensified its work on the physical and psychosocial environment. Students who feel anxiety and stress to an extent that it affects their work are encouraged to seek professional help. Arrangements are made for them to intermit their studies so that their stress levels are not elevated by concern that sick leave would compress their timetable to completion.

The program is continuously evaluated and its quality is appraised

The program as a whole has not previously been evaluated. The current appraisal has been prompted by the educational authorities' plan to undertake routine evaluations of the third-cycle programs nationally. The department volunteered to trial the procedures for evaluation, in order to obtain external assessment of the structure, content and performance of the programme, advice on the programmes' strengths and weaknesses, and identification of where improvements are possible. The EC hopes to have responded to this aim.

At the micro level, individual course evaluations are made continuously.

Internationalization and international perspectives are promoted in the program

Here also Lund scores highly. The department has the responsibility for one of the Masters program at Ekonomihögskolan with international recruitment, and this has provided a stream of ambitious and able graduate students with diverse backgrounds and experiences. The global make-up of the student body is complemented by the fact that so many of the supervisors' projects are dealing with international questions, using international material and cooperating with international scholars.

Gender equality and equal treatment perspectives are integrated into the program curriculum

There is no obligation for students to participate in courses which deal with gender questions or for the department to provide such courses. On the other hand, gender issues are incidentally discussed in many of the compulsory courses. The gender discussion in the self-evaluation report is mainly related to the balance between men and women in staff, in the group of doctoral students and in the applicant situation. On this score Lund is performing well.

Relevant (for the discipline) sustainability perspectives are promoted in the program

The same can be said about sustainability. This aspect is integrated in some of the compulsory courses. It is also one of the themes that is part of the department's research profile.

General comments

The Department of Economic history in Lund has had great success in making the students able to finish their doctoral studies in time. It is also clear that the program in general provides the students with important competences, not only specialist knowledge on the topic of their theses but also in terms of communicative skills and general investigative abilities. One factor underpinning this success is the Department's responsibility for a master studies program that has enabled it to recruit internationally. Another factor contributing to the success is the way in which the doctoral students are integrated into the research projects underway within the Department and led by the supervisors. Research and doctoral supervision are formally integrated within the structures of the Programme. This means that the supervisors have a double motivation to help their students, both as supervisors and project leaders. They also have sufficient time for this task.

Another strong point in the program is the increased emphasis on the psychosocial aspects. There are not only informal but also formal routines for discovering and helping students who need extra support. A significant source of stress for students is the uncertain future they face on graduation. Moreover, competition is ever present within the student body. However, it seems that the department has managed to create a situation, characterized by

helpfulness and openness, while at the same time recognising that intellectual competition exists and must be handled effectively. The weak points are in many ways mirror images of the Department's strengths. The research based funding model and the assignment of students to ongoing projects has a downside, mentioned in the self-evaluation report, and explored further in the EC text above. It increases the risks of a narrow perspective on economic history and can possibly limit intellectual autonomy; a prospect against which the Department should guard. The temptation to narrow the content of economic history is further threatened by the weight given in the compulsory courses to quantitative research and methods. While this is understandable given the general direction in which economic history has moved and the international orientation of the students and staff, there is a real danger that students will fail to engage with archival research and with qualitative methods. The Director of studies is aware of the problems of narrowness.

The other strength that can also be considered as a problem is the internationalization of the programme and the students. The international perspective and orientation ensure that the programme is recognised and respected internationally, and that the students are well integrated in the international economic history community. At the same time the programme risks separation from the Swedish economic history community. Not many students know Swedish and some of them are obviously not interested in devoting time to learn the language. This is perfectly all right if they do not plan to participate in locally-oriented research but if they do, they certainly have a handicap. To make the most of the opportunity of studying at Lund, the EC would hope that students could engage with local sources and Swedish issues. Finding space for an introduction to Swedish sources and issues in the already crowded program would be difficult but perhaps this could be resolved by taking advantage of Lund's participation in the national program in economic history which does provide sessions of this kind, indeed on two tracks, one tailored to international students.

The third problem is the fragility of the project structure. The Swedish authorities are hostile to the use of scholarships for financing doctoral studies and other universities have already adapted to this policy. If this hostility is formalised into a ban on such funding, Lund would find it difficult if not impossible to operate on the same scale. On the other hand, many of the doctoral students take part in projects, financed in a way analogous to employment. The director of studies, during the interview, recognised the fragility of the funding model but argued that it has been behind Lund's expansion. To date the Department has learned to

manage the risks but it would be sensible to develop a strategy to cope if new regulations threatened existing practices.

The fourth problem relates to the fact that the department tends to be more of a research institute than a department with balance between research and teaching. As a result, the opportunities for doctoral students to get teaching experience is limited, a problem exacerbated by Department's disconnection from undergraduate programmes for which it might provide service courses. The students maintain the lack of teaching opportunities to be their main problem when it comes to their evaluation of the ways in which the programme has enhanced their career opportunities. They rightly consider that they will be disadvantaged in competition with graduates from other institutions if they have no or little teaching experience. The fact that the students are rarely Swedish-speaking further limits their possibilities to get this experience.

Summing up

On the whole, the Department's doctoral education is very effective. The department has chosen to focus on research with a quantitative orientation. It has also chosen to assign all students to current research projects. It has also chosen to become internationalized. In many ways, the strategy has been successful, but the department will obviously have to take further decisions in relation to the Swedish economic history community as well as towards Swedish society. It will also have to discuss the risks, and the pros and cons of its underlying model of funding and associated pedagogic design. One issue for future discussion will also have to be the extent to which further growth is desirable. Much has been achieved; the next step will be to think how to consolidate. But all departments have to meet these challenges and no department is able to fulfil all goals judged desirable.

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