



AALBORG UNIVERSITY  
DENMARK

# RESEARCH EVALUATION AT THE DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE AND LEARNING 2020-21

## FOLLOW-UP PROCESS AND TAKE AWAYS

### INTRODUCTION – PROCESS AND STRUCTURE

The Department of Culture and Learning has carried out a formative research evaluation over a two-year period. The objective of the research evaluation has been to support and qualify the development of the department's research activities within the context of the individual research group. Focusing on the research group as the primary evaluation objective has allowed for local and context-specific dialogues and processes during all phases of the evaluation process, which has ensured a greater sense of relevance and embedment of the research evaluation.

The evaluation process was defined and organised by a steering committee chaired by the head of department, and included representatives from the research groups, the study boards and the faculty management. Furthermore, relevant department bodies and councils have been consulted about the evaluation scope and process. The evaluation process comprised six phases:

1. Evaluation design
2. Data collection
3. Self-evaluation in the research groups
4. Overall evaluation report and perspective
5. Panel visit and panel report
6. Follow-up process

The external evaluation panel visited the department in the autumn of 2021. During the site visit, the panel met with research group leaders in sections/clusters. Together with self-evaluation reports for each research group and a report at the department level, the site visit formed the basis for the panel's final evaluation report. The panel's report consists of two parts: *The panel's concluding remarks and recommendations*<sup>1</sup> and *short sub-reports*<sup>2</sup> for either the individual section/cluster or the individual research group.

As part of the follow-up process (phase 6), the department has identified the central learning points and takeaways from the research evaluation, including learning points related to design and process. In general, there has been emphasis on dialogue and involving processes, both internally in the research groups, and across clusters of research group leaders, the steering committee and department bodies. In follow-up meetings, the dialogues and knowledge-sharing across research groups have been mentioned as particularly meaningful experiences for the research group leaders. Learning points from these internal processes are seen as essential parts of the self-evaluation process.

In the following, the learning points and takeaways will be presented together with the department's strategies for either sustaining successful practices or addressing the challenges identified. The document should not be considered an all-encompassing summary, as it accounts only for general learning points and takeaways pertaining to several research groups at the department. Research group-specific learning points will be discussed and handled in a local track of the follow-up process, at research group level.

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<sup>1</sup> Appendix 1

<sup>2</sup> The sub-reports are not enclosed in appendices, as they contain anonymous quotes

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The evaluation panel identifies a number of key strengths which should be maintained and further developed, and acknowledges that the department's research activities make important contributions to academia as well as society. The report also highlights important dilemmas and challenges that the department should be aware of and address in the future. However, some of the themes mentioned in the report fall outside the scope of the evaluation; these typically relate to university framework conditions that are already addressed at other levels of the organisation, e.g. by the work environment- and cooperation committees. In general, the panel's comments resonate with the department's, the faculty's and the university's strategic focus areas for the coming period.

In the following, the central learning points and takeaways under each of the four evaluation parameters will be presented. The evaluation parameters are:

1. Publication patterns;
2. Knowledge collaboration;
3. Interplay between research and education;
4. External research funding.

This document will be used internally within the department as a basis for forming future department strategies, and at faculty level in order to pass on key learning points and experiences from the evaluation process.

## **PUBLICATION PATTERNS**

### **From the self-evaluation report:**

- The department produces a large number of publications in all categories, though with a downward trend, primarily due to the 10% layoff in 2019. This downward trend has been observed throughout the university
- There is a high degree of research collaboration internally at AAU, nationally and internationally, which is reflected e.g. in the number of co-authorships
- The department has a large base of publication outlets (journals, conference proceedings and anthologies) on a great variety of subjects
- Publications for practitioners are a vital instrument for several research groups.

### **From the panel report:**

#### **Strengths:**

- Research groups have developed novel and innovative ways of disseminating research
- Many of the research groups have high publication rates

#### **Challenges/dilemmas:**

- There is a perceived conflict between the need to publish in highly ranked international journals and the need to fulfil the task of disseminating research to a broader audience within society
- Dissemination of knowledge to a broader audience is not sufficiently recognised and rewarded

#### **Panel recommendations, if applicable:**

- Knowledge sharing/exchange of experience between research groups should be encouraged and facilitated on a departmental level
- Employ holistic view of research ideas (the text spiral model); from first draft, via conference paper, submitted article, to smaller, popular articles, podcasts etc.
- Emphasise a more explicit and transparent recognition and appreciation of the entire research process.

### **Department strategies:**

The self-evaluation as well as the panel's feedback substantiate that collectivity in research is fundamental to publication quality as well as output. It supports the department's strategic focus on stimulating collectivity in research activities, as elaborated in the conclusion.

With respect to publications, the department will strengthen research publication capacity, quality and collective approaches in activities by:

- Establishing support systems and nurture collaborative approaches to
  - o finish drawer publications
  - o turn work-in-progress papers, conference abstracts/papers into journal papers,
  - o transform (elements of) project reports into peer reviewed publications.
- Stimulating international collaboration and co-publishing with international researchers
- Encourage translation of Danish-language research into English
- Increasing the availability of publications to new and existing audiences, by repurposing, reformulating and redesigning publications in various relevant formats.

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- Explicating the department's strategic focus on research dissemination to provide transparency and qualify the dialogue about expectations
- Developing support structures for research dissemination

## KNOWLEDGE COLLABORATION

### From the self-evaluation report:

- Knowledge collaboration is central to the department's activities as a strategic benchmark and an integral part of practice within both research and education
- Can take the form of externally funded projects or co-authored publications, but also includes other formats such as network conferences for practitioners and fellow researchers, meetings, workshops etc.
- The self-evaluation process has shown that it is difficult to measure this complex parameter. The internal survey and analysis via network views was chosen as a way to provide . . . new insights about their collaboration patterns.

### From the panel report:

#### Strengths:

- Research groups have a high degree of geographical groundedness ("somewhereness") with strong engagement in the city and the region (both Copenhagen and Aalborg)
- All research groups have structures for formal and informal meetings, seminars etc. to discuss work in progress to support collaborative processes

#### Challenges/dilemmas:

- In some research groups, the generational balance challenges knowledge transfer and future growth. There are few opportunities to recruit/fund PhD students, and the lack of senior members in some groups is challenging as well

#### Panel recommendations, if applicable:

- Long-term strategies for knowledge collaboration and external funding deserve to be put forth as examples of good practice for other groups to imitate and emulate
- Collaborative processes for review, critical discussion etc. on section or department level should be facilitated to reduce the risk of group myopia
- Engage senior scholars as mentors in research groups where there is a lack of seniority.

### Department strategies:

One of the fundamental pillars at the department is the strong engagement and interplay with external collaboration partners and society at large. It allows for new research agendas to emerge, stimulates development of theory and practice and gives rise to external research funding. It should of course be noted that some subject areas have closer ties with practice and other external partners than others. Generally, knowledge sharing across research groups becomes vital for strengthening our practice in this area. The department will:

- Facilitate knowledge sharing about strategic approaches to network-building
- Facilitate knowledge sharing about approaches to PhD recruitment and funding within the given framework conditions of the department
- Support mission-driven research in collaborations with other research environments at the university and continue working on and facilitating core humanistic research areas
- Create a closer bond between education and alumni, which creates more opportunities for external knowledge collaborations and research ventures
- Stimulate the international network of the research groups by attracting international guests from partner institutions, e.g. "writer- in-residence", international PhD students as guests or double/joint degrees.
- Support and facilitate engagement in interdisciplinary research centres and projects on department-, faculty-, and university-level
- Revisit and further develop research support processes, e.g. review processes.

## INTERPLAY BETWEEN RESEARCH AND EDUCATION

### From the self-evaluation report:

- Researchers at the department focus on topics that are relevant to the department's educational activities, and the research environments develop in interplay with the study programmes.

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- Several of the study programmes offered by the department involve a degree of specialisation that facilitates interplay between researchers' current research projects and the study programme. Such activities support the development of new research talent and potential PhD students
- The AAU PBL model facilitates active interplay between the department's research and education activities. The department constantly seeks to strengthen this connection
- The department conducts research in teaching, learning, PBL and university education

**From the panel report:**

From concluding remarks:

- There is also a strong, and often very creative, engagement in creating an interplay between research and teaching

The panel report does not go into much detail with this evaluation parameter, but it highlights many general strengths and examples from the meetings in the sections that can be used as inspiration going forward:

- It is considered a strength that students are introduced to the research environment through . . . lectures, joint Blogs, internal guest lectures and participation in international programs
- There seems to be a good interplay between research and education among group members, who integrate their research activities and outputs with teaching in a variety of ways, including the use of case studies, multimedia and mobile technology. The aim is to enhance students' understanding . . . develop their skills in concrete collaborations and expand their professional networks
- A notable aspect of this is that group members have on several occasions helped students publish revised versions of their papers as scholarly articles
- Research and teaching are firmly integrated within the research group. The research group consciously seeks to contribute to teaching not just within their own department, but in the university at large, as well as offering weekend and night classes.

**Department strategies:**

At AAU, there is a general strategic decision that departments in 2022 shall focus even more on building stronger career-paths and a talent-track for potential researchers. Moreover, the university strategy emphasises integration of SSH and STEM in the study programmes and mission-oriented research. In that sense, the department considers interplay between research and education a pivotal aspect of realising the university's strategic ambitions. At the department, we will:

- Continue to explore and share experiences from the activities highlighted as strengths by the panel and self-evaluation report (see above)
- Strengthen the PBL research, for example through the newly established IAS PBL centre (Institute of Advanced Studies in Problem Based Learning)
- Create a closer bond between education and alumni, which supports not only the research agenda, but also graduating students' transition to the labour market, and provides insights into the competencies needed in the education programmes
- Connect educational activities to the department research fields on e.g. sustainable development goals, youth and learning, and digitalisation, humans and IT, investigating students' motivations and the competences needed from the perspective of the employing organisations.

## **EXTERNAL RESEARCH FUNDING**

**From the self-evaluation report:**

- The department researchers are involved in many different types of projects, funding and networks. External funding enables them to redeem research time and fund other researchers (assistants, postdocs etc.)
- External funding may not represent a large part of the department's economy, but it is vital to cementing and quality-assuring established research. External funding allows for new research agendas and theory development, contributing to empirical work and ensuring talent development
- The total amount has been relatively stable, though showing a slightly increased level of external funding over the past five years. The total is approx. DKK 30 million with 150 ongoing projects in 2020
- The department will work on increasing the volume of external funding. This entails support for both traditional funding strategies (processes based on national and

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international calls for applications at governmental funding bodies, the EU etc.) and negotiated projects conducted together with public and private partners.

**From the panel report:**

**Strengths:**

- Many research groups are highly successful in attracting external grants
- External funding allows for new research agendas and theory development, contributing to empirical work and ensuring talent development.

**Challenges/dilemmas:**

- There is a perceived conflict between the task of writing successful applications for new research projects and the demand to publish research already carried out
- There is a perceived pointlessness of application writing, given the poor success rate
- In some research groups, there seem to be an uneven balance between applications for smaller grants and long-term projects.

**Panel recommendations, if applicable:**

- A holistic approach to scholarly research should be nurtured where publications, application writing etc. are seen as integrated parts of one process and not merely as a preamble to research
- The work on applications should be recognised and rewarded also in those cases where it doesn't result in funding. Scholars assuming tasks not normally recognised in the systems of measurement and audit must not suffer detrimental effects to their respective careers. To ensure this, solidarity between group members is required so that no one is stuck managing the research group's twitter account while others publish and flourish
- Collaborative processes and close coordination of research activities between research group members are crucial. No single scholar could feasibly perform all tasks required (teaching, research, publishing, application writing, collaborations, administration, dissemination, societal outreach etc.)
- Focus on the balance between small and large grants in the research group's strategic plan for funding
- As for the lack of possibilities to recruit new PhD students, a signal should be sent upwards within the university system to indicate that this should be regarded as an absolute priority, should the means so allow. The possibility for the research groups to develop in a sustainable way requires the possibility for rejuvenation, and to a large extent this possibility must be secured on a more central level
- Knowledge sharing across research groups about approaches to PhD funding as part of collaborations with the local community.

**Department strategies:**

Many research groups have an extensive external network which gives them a solid basis for collaborative projects and external funding, and for engaging in mission-oriented research. As previously mentioned, some subject areas have closer ties with practice and external partners than others, yet knowledge sharing about strategies and approaches across research groups is still important. The department will:

- Stimulate a culture that recognises the entire research cycle
- Working strategically at the research group level with external funding processes, incl. setting priorities about what and what not to apply for (yet)
- Match expectations in the research group, and between researchers and management.
- Revisit and further develop the research support processes for applications and operations of negotiated and funded projects, e.g. external review processes, consortia handling processes, legal aspects and data management.

**ORGANISATION OF RESEARCH**

In addition to the learning points from the four evaluation criteria, two over-arching factors have emerged in the evaluation and the follow-up process: The collective processes of the research group and the size of groups. Both the self-evaluation and the panel's feedback substantiate that collectivity in research is fundamental to ensuring quality and output in publications, balancing the portfolio of research activities, and working strategically with external funding.

Collectivity is understood as working in teams with an emphasis on knowledge sharing, dialogue and mutual responsibility. It may occur in sub-teams in a research group or across groups, but still within the scope of the research group's objectives and strategy. It does not entail that all applications and publications are written by several researchers, or that all

projects are carried out by multiple researchers in the same group. However, it does presuppose that several persons from the same group or across groups collectively take responsibility for the research at hand (whether an application, a research publication, or an ongoing project). The idea is to support both individual researchers and teams, and to provide feedback/feedforward, dedicating time and effort to improving the quality of the group's activities. It is one of the research group leader's focal points to strive towards and create a pleasant atmosphere for such collective processes.

The self-evaluation process, the dialogues across research groups, and the panel report show that many groups successfully apply some of these principles to research activities. There is, however, also unrealised potential. To stimulate collective processes, the department will facilitate dialogues about the role of the research group leader, work with the research groups to establish a culture and atmosphere of collectivity, and establish organisational learning across research groups.

The panel also noted that the research groups "vary considerably in size, something which in itself is not a problem. Some rather small RGs appear to be perfectly happy with their size, whereas other groups express concerns that the size of the group hinders them from realising their full potential and doing what they wish to do." The panel do *not* push for restructuring, however, since many reorganisations have taken place recently. These perspectives are of course noted and an increased focus on cross-sectional activities may provide the needed volume for smaller groups. Similarly, the new SSH Faculty and work on signature projects, inno-missions etc. may provide smaller groups with the needed structural support systems for collaboration across research groups. Furthermore, the panel's suggestions for mentoring or processes across research groups are useful when it comes to maturing publications and project applications.

## CONCLUSION AND EVALUATION OF THE PROCESS

Overall, the evaluation process has been very fruitful, and the department has been assessed well. However, the process has also been very time-consuming, especially the process of generating large amounts of written material and data as part of the self evaluation. This was primarily done to introduce the external panel to the department's research, yet it seems to be the self-evaluation process that the research groups and the department management consider valuable. Although sometimes, it is in the knowledge of an "external audience" that learning processes are carried out most effectively.

The department management found that the dialogues with the panel during the site-visit also allowed for interchange of experiences from their organisational settings. For example, knowledge about how other organisations have internal boards for applications, sometimes choosing how many applications to send to specific calls, and therefore turning some researchers down or asking them to mature the project proposal, is an aspect that may serve as inspiration for this department. Such dialogues were valuable.

On the other hand, it was often difficult for the panel to really grasp the situation and context of the research groups in an AAU setting - even with the self-evaluation reports at hand. The response of the panel does not seem to bring a lot forward on a concrete level for the individual research group. The fact that the panel had only superficial knowledge of the specific field of research of some of the research groups was in some cases considered an obstacle for substantial dialogue.

In future evaluations, it may indeed be meaningful to build on a more dialogical method based on selected key figures – a lighter version of the evaluation with less textual documentation from research groups and the department level.

The department is in the process of implementing the department strategies listed above. Some of the takeaways were addressed at the department seminar in November 2021 and the local follow-up process in the research groups has also been discussed at a meeting for all research group leaders. These internal processes will continue in 2022. Finally, the research evaluation has been used in connection with the drafting of the department's strategic goals and will continue to serve as a base-line for the dialogue with the SSH faculty. That is; the strategic and concrete dialogue and implementation process lies at both the management and research group level.