

# Action plan for the development of the doctoral program in Library and Information Science (LIS) at the University of Borås

December 2021

## Introduction

During spring term 2021 we received feedback regarding the doctoral program in Library and Information Science (LIS) at HB from two different sources. First, the biannual “Barometer” is an extensive survey provided for all doctoral students at the University. Second, the doctoral program was evaluated by a panel of external reviewers. This also supplied feedback on various aspects of the program.

Although the current document is formally restricted to the external evaluation we want to note that in the various follow-up meetings we discussed both sources. Some activities described below are the result of discussions regarding the Barometer. We consider it a fortunate situation that we were able to work with both sources of feedback during the same time period.

We want to emphasize that some of the feedback coming out of the external evaluation concerns overall issues of our research. This is as it should be as questions of research and the doctoral program are so intimately intertwined. However, within the HB evaluation system our research and our doctoral program are evaluated separately with several years in between. In the current review process, we did not supply much information about our research, thus hampering the reviewers ability to supply us with constructive comments on such issues. Despite that, comments in that area were presented to us and duly appreciated.

As a note to future evaluation processes we would want to emphasize that it is difficult for us to commit to some action points regarding overall research issues as that is not what is evaluated and a proper research evaluation is upcoming. *It would be much better if we could collapse these evaluation tracks into one, with a single review for both research and the doctoral program.*

The two sources of feedback were initially presented and discussed at the LIS FUU meetings May 10 and June 14. Further discussions were held during the supervisor meeting May 25. The director of the research education program together with the chair of the LIS FUU started working on the action plan in August 2021. A first draft summarizing identified problems and possible action points was presented at a seminar open only for doctoral students September 6. This led to additional feedback which was integrated into the action plan. The revised plan was thereafter presented and discussed at the supervisor meeting of September 14. The action plan was further discussed at the FUU-meeting September 27. The draft of the final document was presented and discussed at the FUU-meeting November 22. A summary of activities was also discussed at the supervisor meeting November 23. In addition to these meetings there have been several informal discussions with section head/prefect during the process.

In the following, we will review the various issues identified by the external reviewers, commenting upon them one by one, commenting on specific activities to address problems.

## Main points of the evaluation

The doctoral program received, by and large, high marks from the reviewers. In sum:

- 1) The program upholds high quality within LIS.
- 2) The design of the program, its content and procedure, raised several issues (see below).
- 3) The processes and routines for follow-up of individual study plans are adequate.

- 4) The review of the education and educational environments led to identification of several problems (see below).
- 5) The continuous follow-up work and development work, involving active participation from the doctoral students themselves, works well to the furthering of quality of the program.

The reviewer's aggregated opinion was that the doctoral program is ambitious, handled well and easily lives up to the demands of HF national goals for doctoral programs. That said, they identified 15 points where additional improvements can be made and/or serve as grounds for reflection. These were mostly connected to points two and four, above. Some comments are simply notations of mechanisms that works well within the program. Other points describe problems that are difficult to deal with. Then there are those points that we find necessary to follow up with this action plan. In the following, the 15 points will be briefly discussed in turn.

A summary of the 15 points and suggested activities are found in table 1.

1) LIS is a broad interdisciplinary research area. This has consequences for doctoral students. What can be done to allow students to see this as one subject area?

LIS is indeed broad in character, allowing studies with a high degree of diversity. Nonetheless, the situation is actually similar to many other disciplines within the social sciences such as sociology, psychology and ethnology. It is also similar to technological neighbors such as informatics and computer science. At HB there is a long tradition of dealing with this through the key institution of the Monday research seminar which since the 1990s have been a space where diverse perspectives mingle. Doctoral students are required to read papers from their peers and comment upon them. In this way, students are fostered to not only specialize but also uphold a broad competence within LIS. It also helps that LIS is a relatively small subject area. There's a closeness to scholars at other Swedish and Nordic departments. Most doctoral students attend a course in LIS theory at Oslo Metropolitan. Here, students from all Nordic countries meet, discussing their diverse projects.

*Activities:* Can we do more? We are developing our collaboration with the programs at Lund and Uppsala which provides another space where Swedish students in LIS can come together. A larger initiative is also being developed, a national research school in LIS. This would allow LIS students to further root themselves within a disciplinary identity at the national level. We will also investigate the possibility of resurrecting the so-called "classics course" which introduces the students to several historical benchmark texts in LIS. The course has been dormant for two years as it is no longer part of the obligatory course package.

2) There should be synergy between broadness and depth, how can that balance be further developed and how can progression between courses be clarified?

This is a difficult problem to deal with and there are two different problems involved. First, yearly courses have been difficult due to a lack of critical mass of new students coming into the program on a yearly basis. Ideally, a handful of doctoral students would start at the same time and be fed a well structured package of progressive courses in a timely fashion. However, as is currently the case, 1-3 new students start each year. The alternatives are either to provide reading courses or to wait until there is enough students to hold regular courses with a group of students. The latter is preferable as the content of the course can come alive through lectures, seminars and discussions between students. Based on our discussions, we find it preferable to provide a package of qualitative and quantitative methods early on for all students, where much will be customized according to the needs of the individual doctoral project. The second problem is that different students require separate forms of progression. It is therefore important that the student arrives as a customized strategy in close dialogue with supervisors.

*Activities:* We aim to develop a substantially improved structure for coursework, allowing for some normative ideas of progression. The placement of the LIS theories course (Oslo Metropolitan) is already provided on a yearly basis. Most students can therefore take the course early, creating clear progression. The theory of science course is also available yearly. Ideally, students can take this course after the LIS theories course. Once the methods package has been developed and established as an early resource, these courses should serve as a splendid fundament for early progression. With these developments at hand, the obligatory courses should all be available to students within the first two years. Students are free to choose among the remainder of the optional courses. These should be used to develop knowledge and skills within the special area the student is working within. To sum up, the obligatory courses should be available during the first two years of student work, providing a progression for the student to establish basic research skills, particularly within LIS. These courses should be taken within the first two years and in the order described above. The optional courses should be used for progression within the latter part of the program to develop a progression within method, theory and previous research related to the thesis topic. As a National Research School is being developed in LIS during 2022 (coordinated by us), we expect to increase quality and quantity of available courses by pooling national resources.

3) Is it easier for students to complete their thesis in time by pursuing a monograph or through a thesis by publication?

Our current statistics and experiences do not provide a clear answer to this query. So far, we have allowed the students themselves to make the decision regarding the format of the thesis. During the 2010s monographs have remained more popular. The tradition of writing a thesis by publication is still quite short as the first one with this formatting was successfully defended in 2010. 27 PhD thesis have been successfully defended since 2010. 19 of these have been monographs and the remaining 8 thesis by publication. Overall, many thesis projects have gone over time. About 10 of the monographs have been completed within the time scope or within reasonable delays. In the case of thesis by publication 5 out of 8 were completed in time or within reasonable delays. We have no action points in this area.

4) What can the department do to further strengthen the research environment and the social context for doctoral students, particularly international students?

Over the course of the program numerous international students have been enrolled. Since 2005 students have successfully completed the program coming from Iceland, Italy, Nigeria, Rwanda, Uganda (2) and UK. At the time of the evaluation, students native to Croatia, Pakistan, Rwanda Thailand, and USA were enrolled. In addition, we are currently in an ongoing SIDA-funded collaboration with Makerere University (Uganda) where several supervisors support 10 doctoral projects (**need precise number**). We have, therefore, a substantial history and experience of supporting international students through the program. However, there is no doubt that it is more challenging for international students to pursue their degree given that there is an added threshold of overcoming cultural differences. An additional challenge is that students come from a variety of cultures and with separate forms of funding. Currently, one student is enrolled through stipend and such funding is no longer allowed in Sweden. In recent years, international students have mainly come to the program through SIDA-funding and the stipends utilizing the sandwich model. Such funding is still allowed in the Swedish system. This involves two students from Rwanda whereof one has completed her thesis. An additional student from Rwanda is expected to enter the program later this year or early next year. Furthermore, a student from Mozambique has entered the program this year. SIDA-students have an advantage as international students by virtue of the design of their support structure. They receive added help in developing their thesis plan before being accepted to

the program. In addition, they receive considerably more supervisor hours than what is usually allotted to students in the program.

*Activities:* HB doctoral students now have biweekly meetings and sometimes meeting the YC. This strengthens the collective of doctoral students at the University. A most valuable resource has been published by SFS in the form of a handbook for doctoral studies (<https://phdhandbook.se/>). We believe this will be useful for all students but particularly international students. National legislation has changed somewhat for international students recently and it is important that we support visa issues. The admittance process involving international students has sometimes been time-consuming and more attention should have been given to information flows. The process will be improved upon. We have acquired specific competences in supporting SIDA-students and the earmarked resources that are allowed for such projects. We aim to utilize these resources more strategically and with more deliberation than earlier. Particularly, SIDA-students have an added third supervisor from their home country. Previously, there have been varying strategies about how this resource should be used. This can certainly be improved. Another possible action is to make the examiner more active in the case of international students, for instance in the form of regular follow-up consultations with the supervisors. A mentor system, where a senior doctoral student has an added responsibility for the newcomer has been successfully tried previously and this will become more institutionalized and strategic. We also need to assure that all relevant documentation, particularly concerning the introduction stage, are translated to English. International students will also be helped by the doctoral program handbook that will be written, see further under point 8. As previously noted, we are developing a National Research School which will be valuable for improving the research environment.

#### 5) How can the system for quality assurance be simplified and improved for students?

*Activities:* The quality system connected to the seminar course is currently being substantially simplified. We are also planning to simplify and develop the ISP-meetings (see further below, points 13 and 14). So far, the role of examiner has been centralized to the chairman and deputy chair of FUU. We have started to broaden the distribution of examiners. This is done both to lessen the burden of the FUU chair and deputy chair, but, more importantly, to enhance participation of other professors. We are in the process of creating routines for what tasks the examiner should be part of so that uniform standards will apply.

6) Is the doctoral program primarily open for previous students and current staff? If so, does this lead to a lack of influx of new ideas and if so, what can be done to remedy the situation? This appears to be a misunderstanding. Reviewing the 19 doctoral students registered 2020 only six had had some previous experience as staff before becoming doctoral students. This modest figure could be seen as quite normal for a Swedish doctoral program. As already noted, there is also a strong tradition of accepting international students into the program. Additionally, for someone with a master degree in LIS a possible career choice is to apply for a senior lectureship at HB and this, in turn, requires a PhD. Naturally, those who successfully apply to a staff position are also likely to be both very interested and highly qualified when a doctoral student position is announced. The comment would have been more pertinent as a criticism of the situation before 2010. When the doctoral program was initiated. At that time, recruitment relied heavily on existing staff. There was a fundamental lack of PhD's within LIS. HB made available earmarked funds for junior lecturers to apply for a doctoral position. Therefore, staff has historically been overrepresented among doctoral students. 14 of the 22 who defended their thesis between 2000 and 2010 worked as staff for some time before becoming doctoral students. *No activities.*

7) How can LIS extend external networking and external funds outside the discipline to be more efficiently used and which strategies can be connected to the doctoral education?

The comment is partly addressed at the disciplinary domain of LIS, signalling a general problem for most schools. Nonetheless, LIS, as developed at HB, is broad. There are networks with disciplines within the humanities. These are diverse in character: reading studies, literature studies, cultural policy studies, digital humanities, theory of science and cultural heritage. There are other networks with disciplines within the social sciences: pedagogy, sociology as well as mass media and communication studies. Finally, there are networks within technological research: computer linguistics, information systems, informatics and computer science. During the 2010s these networks led to doctoral student positions through three separate projects. First, in collaboration with pedagogy a 10 year Center of Excellence funded by VR. This led to 70% funding of five doctoral projects. This has been very important for the department but it's difficult to replicate. Second, in collaboration with international researchers within the digital humanities, funded by the EU ITN program. This led to one doctoral student position. We regularly apply for further ITN funding but so far have not been successful again. Third, in collaboration with mass media and communication, funded by VR. This also led to one doctoral student position. We regularly apply for additional funding from VR and other Swedish funders in the context of different networks. In sum, we have the necessary networks and utilize them in various applications. We believe we are doing what we can with some success, but of course hope for improved outcomes.

*Activities:* We have initiated regular research application seminars, supporting ongoing application work. These are planned to take place once or twice each term.

8) How do the doctoral students learn about planning, managing and processing research projects as well as the writing process with the aim of publication in scholarly journals?

As with most doctoral programs the prime resource for developing such skills is the supervisors. There is also a course on academic writing available which most students take. Possibly, a course in project management could be added. However, this is not something that is contemplated at the time being.

*Activities:* Considerably more attention will be given to project management issues in the context of research group meetings. Furthermore, as previous mentioned, a local research program handbook specifically aimed at students and supervisors within LIS at HB will be written. The aim is to create an accessible guide to what can be expected and what is required of the student. The handbook will include a check list/template for the first year of doctoral studies, describing what is needed for establishment of a successful start of the program. In some cases, this involves codifying tacit knowledge. A special section will be devoted to the specific problems of international students. An additional activity, already mentioned, is the introduction of research application seminars.

9) What is the strategy to deal with the situation of decreasing amounts of doctoral students?

*Activities:* This is a problem for most doctoral programs in Sweden. The existing strategy consists of three parts. First, stabilizing the recruitment of doctoral students through faculty means. Ideally, two new recruitments each year. Second, stabilizing the recruitment of doctoral students through external means. Ideally, two new students each year. Third, reframing elements of the program to adapt to a program that does not have 20-22 students at the same time (which has been the norm). Instead, we should strive to have a working program with 12-15 students enrolled. In addition to this strategy we are hopeful that the development of the National Research School will supply a boost for student numbers.

10) Is there a risk that the doctoral program becomes a support system for the bachelor programs?

*Activities:* There is such a risk. There have been complaints from doctoral students that the convention of 20% teaching (allowing the program to span over five years) leads to teaching obligations that overshadow the research project. However, this has been discussed and in April we put forward a new policy document concerning teaching engagements of doctoral students. It supplies clear directives to the managers of doctoral students to strictly limit teaching engagements. Of most importance, course leadership will no longer be offered to doctoral students. It is our hope that this will solve the problem. Furthermore, in upcoming recruitments we will clearly emphasize the student option of not selecting 80/20 over 5 years but that it is possible to have a doctoral position with 100% research and that other options are also possible.

11) The seminar series is an identified strength and it has been well developed both within the department and within the research groups.

This is more of a comment. We agree, and will continue to highlight the seminar as an important resource for doctoral students. *No activities.*

12) The faculty level courses are acknowledged as positive for creating a community among doctoral students and collaboration of the larger collective.

Again, this is a comment which we agree upon and we will continue to build upon that strength. *No activities.*

13) How can ISP and the matrix-document of goals be used as constructive tools to help doctoral students meet the examination goals?

Both the ISP and the matrix-document, as well as the ISP meetings, have dual functions. First, facilitating planning of the project. Second, serving as a control instrument. It is precarious to balance these two goals as they to some extent are contradictory. However, a point of improvement would be to make the ISP meetings to a large extent driven by the doctoral student. This leads to the next comment.

14) How can the ISP meeting become more driven by doctoral students so that the ISP and the matrix to a larger extent is perceived as useful tools for the planning of the student?

*Activities:* For the ISP meetings 2022, which are planned to take place in January/February, we will launch a new procedure, inspired by the established mode of work at A1, of putting the doctoral student in the driver's seat.

15) The course plans made available for review exhibited a literature there was extremely traditional and, in addition, lacking perspectives concerning equality and internationalization.

*Activities:* We have reviewed the literature of the above-mentioned courses and it is obvious which literature is referred to within two courses. One of these will no longer be provided. The second course will be reviewed for 2022.

A summary of the 15 points and our suggested activities are provided in table 1, below.

Comment	Activities
1) How can students better be helped understanding the broad research area?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Developing collaboration Lund/Uppsala</li> <li>-National Research School</li> <li>-Investigate possibility of resurrecting “classics course”</li> </ul>
2) How improve progression between courses?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Improved structure of coursework</li> <li>-Yearly availability of obligatory courses</li> <li>-Digital ISP</li> <li>-National Research School</li> <li>-Added emphasis on dialogue with supervisors on progression</li> </ul>
3) Is there better prognosis with monograph or thesis by publication?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-No activities</li> </ul>
4) How to further strengthen research environment for international students?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Improved process of admitting international students</li> <li>-SFS guidelines for international students</li> <li>-Improved strategic usage of earmarked SIDA-funds</li> <li>-Mentorship</li> <li>-More active examiner role</li> <li>-Improved routines of translation to English</li> <li>-Doctoral program handbook</li> <li>-National Research School</li> <li>-Biweekly meetings, sometimes with VC</li> <li>-Vigilance on visa issues</li> </ul>
5) How to improve and simplify quality assurance system?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Quality system of seminar course simplified</li> <li>-Distribution of examiner role</li> <li>-Standardizing examiner role</li> </ul>
6) How to increase external recruitment rather than students with background as staff?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-No activities</li> </ul>
7) improve external networking for externally funded doctoral positions?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Research application seminars</li> </ul>
8) How to improve students planning, managing and processing of research projects?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Doctoral program handbook</li> <li>-Increased focus on such issues within research groups</li> <li>-Research application seminars</li> </ul>
9) How to deal with a program with less students?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Stabilizing recruitment with both internal and external resources</li> <li>-Reframing to a somewhat smaller program</li> <li>-National Research School</li> </ul>
10)) Can the program risk becoming support system for bachelor programs?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Improved guidelines for teaching engagements</li> <li>-No course leadership</li> <li>-Emphasize option of 100%</li> </ul>
11) The seminar is an identified strength	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-No activities</li> </ul>
12) Faculty level courses are positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-No activities</li> </ul>
13) How can ISP and matrix document be used as constructive planning tools?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Make ISP meetings driven by students</li> </ul>
14) How can ISP meetings became more student driven?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Modeling established procedures at A1</li> </ul>
15) Are course literature lacking perspectives concerning equality and internationalization?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Course plans will be reviewed</li> </ul>

Table 1: summary of comments and activities.