

Research Assessment Report

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We would like to begin by saying that we, as a panel, felt very welcomed by the School of Communication and Culture (SCC) that hosted us, and were impressed by the open and honest way in which the School's management and researchers discussed their ideas, experiences, and concerns with us. We commend the School for having taken the step of organizing its first research evaluation and want to note that the whole program for our visit was well thought through and carefully organized. We also appreciate the awareness and consideration expressed in the self-assessment report regarding the diversity of the types and traditions of research conducted in the School, and regarding the specificity of humanities scholarship. The value of academic citizenship is clearly recognised by the School management and the researchers, and our impression is that the general atmosphere of the School's environment nurtures academic freedom and creativity, and helps researchers flourish.

While we were very impressed by the general dynamism of the School's research environment, we want to provide some reflections and suggestions on steps that the School might consider taking in order to develop its research environments even further and into the future. These steps concern the need to clarify the structure of the School and to accentuate its strengths. We will briefly discuss these points before moving on to the five foci that Aarhus University has selected for this round of research assessments.

Currently, SCC organizes its research through a matrix structure into interdisciplinary research programs, which vary considerably: some are thematically focused whereas others are broad umbrella programs that are oriented more towards researcher training and support. The programs have significant autonomy but share a general commitment to interdisciplinarity. This set-up seems to be appreciated by most of the researchers, but the variety of the ways in which the programs are organized does seem to pose certain challenges and can mean that not all researchers get the same support or benefit from the programs in the same way. There seems to be a degree of vagueness linked to organizing SCC research into programs in which membership/participation is not mandatory, but part of resolving this may just be a matter of clarification. There are different options as to how research can be organized, all of which have advantages and disadvantages. Further reflection on the different options might be helpful. We will discuss this point further in the section on interdisciplinarity.

We were slightly puzzled by the fact that the basis for the evaluation were reports composed by the departments, which, according to the matrix structure of programs, is not where most of the research is going on. There is a risk that some of the issues related to the research conducted in the programs did not get the visibility they deserve in this evaluation exercise because of the assessment's documentation from the perspective of the departments. In part, this risk was mitigated by the opportunity we had to meet with directors of research programs and centers during our visit.

While some strategic management might be helpful in bringing the aims and priorities of the research programs into clearer focus, there is also room to increase the visibility of the School's particular strengths. SCC clearly excels in many different areas, but for outsiders it is not immediately obvious what the School is really good at or what it stands for. A cohesive communication strategy could be useful outwardly; some of the School's strengths could be "packaged" in a way that is prominently featured on the website, for example. It was indicated that there is a new communication officer but that this role is not yet being optimally used. It may be a good idea to task the person in this role with improving the outward (and perhaps also

inward) communication about the programs' foci and their relationship to one another and to the departments.

Research publications

We commend the School's recognition of a diverse range of publication strategies and disciplinary priorities. The self-assessment report includes valuable reflection, for example, on the need to publish in English and Danish. The shift to English makes sense in the increasingly international academic landscape, but it is clear that publications in Danish remain important, especially in certain disciplines with close ties to Danish institutions. Publications in languages other than Danish and English should also continue to be recognized and supported.

We wish to draw attention to the need to reflect more actively on the ethical issues that may arise when co-authoring and co-publishing across disciplines. Just discussing it on a case-by-case basis, as seems to be standing practice, may not be enough. Given that there are vastly different conventions with respect to what is required for supervisors to be co-authors of their PhD students' and postdocs' publications, there seems to be a need for increased awareness and clear guidelines about how and when to discuss these issues and where to turn when disagreements or other problems arise. Overall, it would be good to encourage more reflection on what co-authorship means across the School. In addition, there are now complicated intellectual property and data management and ownership rules and conventions that researchers should be aware of and regularly reflect on.

In the wake of the abolishment of the nationwide ranking system of publication forums, a need for more mentoring on publication strategies was expressed. Such mentoring is likely to be beneficial not just for junior scholars but also for senior scholars in a constantly changing academic publishing landscape.

Finally, we would recommend considering the possibility of introducing some more flexibility in the bi-annual research assessments of individual researchers by recognising different types of publications, such as commissioned reports and new academic publication forms such as video essays. Credit should also be given in the bi-annual assessment of individual researchers' output for substantive grant proposals, although these – and non-academic publications – should not be seen to legitimate a complete absence of academic publications.

Research ideas and funding patterns

In the self-assessment report, the process of developing research ideas is discussed mainly in relation to getting funding. We want to advocate for a broader perspective that recognises research ideas as not just instrumental to funding – their development can also be related, for example, to the advancement of basic research, to societal relevance and to how various academic as well as other outputs have impact (see also the observation on impact indicators under societal and political/policy impact).

Mentoring and sharing best practices is necessary for fostering the development of research ideas at all career levels. In several discussions, the emphasis was laid on applying for ERCs, but it seems important to ensure that mid-career and senior researchers have the time, psychological and intellectual energy and resources to develop new ideas for research in a less targeted, instrumentalized way.

There is a clear need for more robust post-award support, especially in certain research areas (e.g. work with big data sets). Research administration is growing in many parts of the humanities today as external demands and expectations are increasing and support structures need to reflect this. Better support structures will cost more money but this should be seen as a necessary investment. Several researchers observed that certain aspects of support were being dealt with too high up in the organization, so it takes a lot of time and energy for PIs to sort these issues out. It seems it would be helpful to decentralize these aspects of support so that they are more directly accessible and can happen in ways that are better catered to the actual needs of the researchers. It is important to build competence in post-award support, which speaks in favor of employing permanent staff for these tasks, as low as possible in the organization, and with a clearly specified role. However, it is also important to set clear expectations to PIs in terms of the workload involved in research applications and grant management.

We understood that some research program and center leaders have a wish for less centralized research budgets. Decentralizing research budgets – placing the budget as low in the organization as possible – would prevent PI's from using unnecessary psychological energy on solving small issues, which they have to ask for authorization from someone up the chain. We appreciated it that the School indicated it is working towards this.

The Danish funding landscape is excellent in comparison to that of many other countries, and SCC researchers have been very successful at winning grants from various national and international funding bodies. There is a range of public and private funding instruments available to support projects of various sizes. Our impression is that the School as a whole is making very good use of the available funding. The provided statistics concerning submitted applications and received funding impressively testify to this.

Where there may still be some room for further development is with regard to internal seed funding. This seems to be much desired and works well in the places where it is available. We were given several examples of this (for example in the SHAPE initiative). Perhaps such seed funding could be made available more consistently across the research programs.

Societal and political impact of research

We can see that SCC is involved in much interesting and relevant research that, in varied ways, has substantial societal and political impact. We appreciate the School's efforts to start developing a multidimensional understanding of what types of impact there can be, reflection on the importance of impact pathways, and a realization that impact encompasses more than just dissemination. It might be helpful if this entailed further reflection on how to take into account the different ways in which various types of research have impact, for example by developing impact indicators. This can be a way to argue for the relevance of various kinds of research and the value of the outcomes.

It might also be worth developing ways of sharing experiences and best practices across departments and research programs. This could be done, for example, by organizing a School-wide annual research day. On such a day, those with expertise in co-creation and co-production processes, participatory design and the ethical dimensions of such research could share this expertise with others.

There may also be room for further collaborations with various societal stakeholders across research themes, projects, and centers. A key to success seems to be solid knowledge of the institutions that act as partners of collaboration.

We recommend developing ways of internally and externally recognizing impactful outputs such as commissioned reports, guides/briefs, policy documents, media engagement,

etc. It should be clear how researchers can highlight such outputs for their bi-annual evaluations. A narrative format could be explored as a way of supplementing traditional data on publications and other outputs provided through databases like PURE. The websites of the research programs and centers can be used to highlight impactful outputs externally.

We see a need for a more developed media training offering, attentive to the specific issues that may arise, for example, for researchers working on controversial topics or for women or minority researchers. Moreover, there is a need for clearer ethical research guidelines and processes for research involving external stakeholders and partners (companies, public bodies, cultural institutions, etc.) or research participants, to ensure safeguards for all involved are put in place. Not only junior but also more advanced scholars need to keep up with new developments, especially as they move into interdisciplinary fields where different norms may apply.

Talent development and merit

As a broad framework for talent development in the School, the management might consider developing a unified vision with a defined set of ambitions. This may be a challenge as SCC is large and very diverse, but could create more coherence between the different programs and centers, and lead to a clearer division of responsibilities between the programs, centers and departments.

It is important to further develop support structures for early career scholars and to discuss how to support those who are working individually, outside centers or programs. We sensed a need to signpost to junior scholars academic and non-academic career pathways and to provide a clearer sense of the requirements for career progression. Furthermore, it would be good to develop a model for postdoc supervision and support, with an assigned mentor, in particular for postdocs who work on individual funded projects. There is a PhD policy at School level but no postdoc policy – it would be beneficial to develop one.

At mid-career and senior level, the internal professorial promotion system seemed to be appreciated and worked well, however it was discontinued ahead of its planned 3-year cycle. It might be worth considering the possibility of continuing it or developing a long-term schedule for when to re-open it and for how long – and then to adhere to this. It is important to envision ways to support existing established staff to progress in their career and to find a good balance between this and attracting top international talent through open competitions.

At the same time, it is vital to engage in expectation management across all career levels. Even with a lot of scaffolding and support systems, an academic career is never completely predictable, also because requirements shift (nationally and internationally), sometimes within quite a short time. It will likely never be possible for everyone to proceed through all career levels from PhD to full professor. More openness about this could prevent or assuage disappointment.

Finally, we recommend boosting mentoring activities for researchers at all career stages (either through establishing a mentoring program, or as part of the work of research programs or departments). Mentoring should be something that more people do, and it should be an accountable and valued activity.

Interdisciplinarity in research

We appreciate the strong interdisciplinary tradition that Aarhus University has in humanities and social sciences, which is something that distinguishes it from other Danish universities. Without

the strong appreciation for interdisciplinarity, many of the School's research initiatives would not have been possible (e.g. the Recreational Fear Lab would not have come about had there been a narrow understanding of the discipline of English Studies). SCC supports this tradition through the matrix organization of its research programs, which in many instances cut across departments. The tradition has clearly also affected the self-understanding of the departments, all of which characterize themselves as interdisciplinary. In general, researchers seem to be relatively satisfied with the research programs. For example, many seemed to feel that the size of the programs is ideal for creating a "meaningful community". In some of the small departments, the programs were appreciated for offering broader and more dynamic research communities, and in some big departments researchers considered the programs to offer an ideal context of trust in which people feel safe and comfortable in sharing research ideas, draft articles and proposals etc. The programs can also offer interaction with people other than supervisors or Heads of Department, with whom there is more of a power and dependency relation.

Having said this, we do feel that more clarity is needed on what a research program is and what its functions and roles are. As noted before, at the moment, some programs have a clearly defined thematic focus, while others are broad umbrellas that concentrate on providing research support and researcher training. Variety in how the programs operate can be positive, in enabling each group to do what is useful for them at a given point in time. However, if the intention is that the research programs provide essential research development support, it is important to clarify what this should minimally entail, also in relation to the departments and centers and their functions, so as not to end up duplicating support structures and workflows. We sensed a need to clarify to the School's researchers, especially new ones, what different research programs offer, to help them decide which one(s) to join.

Some directors and researchers we met felt that membership in a program should be mandatory, but there are also valid reasons not to do this given that the programs do not cover all of the School's research. The non-mandatoriness, however, does create a sense that there should also be research support offered in the departments, which risks doubling such support functions and thus introducing a certain inefficiency. If the School sees the programs as the place to offer research development support, then perhaps opting out of joining a program should mean opting out of this support. At the same time, if the departments are where the School wants to offer general research support, the programs could be reoriented away from such support towards collaborative work on specific interdisciplinary research themes. The latter choice would make it easier to develop long-term research support and mentoring, as one of the downsides of the research programs is that they may only run for three years, which is quite short, especially for those on short-term contracts (postdocs).

Overall, it would be helpful to define the aims of the research programs, with some core functions that are fulfilled by all of them clearly identified, and to initiate a discussion within the School about the implications of making membership either mandatory or optional. It is also worth reflecting on how to tighten the link between research and education. Teaching should be based on research but the matrix organization does not necessarily facilitate this optimally. One challenge for researchers doing interdisciplinary work that cuts across departments or even faculties seems to be the quite rigid teaching programming and the difficulty of organizing teaching across faculties.

With regard to the research centers, we would like to suggest cutting the number. Centers are important structures that give visibility to research strands and expertise on specific subjects, but there is a risk of the notion of what a center is becoming diluted if there are too many. It would be worthwhile to consider establishing some criteria for deciding what a center should minimally be (for example in terms of the number of researchers involved) and do. For

example, centers should regularly organize events and other activities. Reflection is needed on how to close down centers that are no longer active, and on how to acknowledge past centers (maybe in the form of an online archive).

We do see a clear need for more discussion within the School on research ethics and data management. This is particularly important in the context of interdisciplinary research that brings together disciplines with different norms, practices, and traditions, as well as in light of the increasingly strict regulation of the ethical aspects of research projects and their data management by funders (for example the ERC) and regulatory bodies at national and international levels. Here, the focus should be on various aspects of research from navigating the ethics of co-authorship across disciplines to outlining a clearer, more formalized way of ethically engaging with research participants. Impactful research involving external stakeholders in particular might entail ethical risks, and it is vital to ensure the safety of researchers and participants alike.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, we believe that there is great value in keeping the SCC research structure flexible and dynamic, as this allows it to move along with new societal and academic developments. The general sentiment among the School's researchers was strongly in favor of retaining the ample room provided to develop bottom-up initiatives and we would not want the School to limit this room.

Even so, with the SCC excelling in so many areas, there is a need to communicate more clearly what its particular strengths are. It is worth considering how the School's varied research could be better showcased to various audiences. In order for the researchers to feel that the full range of their research activities and the different forms of impact these activities have are recognized, moreover, we endorse the efforts of the SCC to seek ways of including them in the bi-annual assessment. Our sense was that the SCC already values these activities but that this appreciation could be made more explicit. Finally, we would like to reiterate our impression that all the School's researchers would benefit from more structural mentoring schemes, more comprehensive discussions about ethical and data management issues, expanded media training, and more post-award support low in the organization. Specifically for mid-career researchers, we recommend considering the reinstatement of the professorial promotion scheme.

The SCC is working towards increasing the number of international staff, improving the gender balance (which is still skewed on the professorial level), and strengthening the diversity of the research community. It is important to continue these efforts. The overall orientation of the SCC is highly international, in terms of research publications, networks, and collaboration. It is valuable that the self-assessment process made visible a desire and need for even more collectivity. Given the School's inclusive atmosphere, it provides an excellent environment for further strengthening a sense of community, for example through developing mentoring schemes, Research Days, and other events that focus on sharing best practices.