SWEAH

SWEDISH NATIONAL GRADUATE SCHOOL ON AGEING AND HEALTH

LUNDS UNIVERSITET

Evaluation Report 2025 on the Swedish National Graduate School on Ageing and Health (SWEAH)

LUNDS UNIVERSITET | SWEAH

Evaluation Report 2025 on the Swedish National Graduate School on Aging and Health (SWEAH)

Evaluation Committee: Marja Jylhä, Clemens Tesch-Römer, and Kerstin Tham (June 2025)

1. Introduction 2
1.1 History and goals of SWEAH 2
1.2 Assignment of the SWEAH Evaluation 2025 2
1.3 Structure of the SWEAH 2025 Evaluation Report 3
2. Outcomes of SWEAH 4
2.1 Network building 4
2.2 Interdisciplinarity and multidisplinarity 5
2.3 Completed PhD theses and quality of research 5
2.4 Alumni perspective: Academic and professional careers 7
2.5 International, national, and local relationships 7
3. Organization and management of SWEAH 8
3.1 Guiding principles: Vision, missions, and goals 8
3.2 Curriculum and course work 9
3.3 Quality assurance processes 10
3.4 Organisation and management 11
3.5 Finances 12
4. Future scenarios for SWEAH 12
4.1 Future scenario A: Cessation of SWEAH 13
4.2 Future scenario B: Continuation of SWEAH as it is 13
4.3 Future scenario C: Expanding and optimizing SWEAH 14
5. Summary and recommendations 14
5.1 Summary 14
5.2 Recommendations 15

1. Introduction

In this introduction, history and goals of the "Swedish National Graduate School on Aging and Health" (SWEAH) are briefly sketched, the assignment for SWEAH's evaluation given to the review committee by the Vice-Chancellor and Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Lund University is described and the structure of the SWEAH Evaluation Report 2025 is outlined.

1.1 History and goals of SWEAH

The "Swedish National Graduate School on Aging and Health" (SWEAH) is an interdisciplinary research school on aging and health tackling scientific and societal challenges of aging and health. SWEAH's main goal is to educate future leaders in aging research and societal decision-making. The school's activities include interdisciplinary courses as well as networking and career development support for PhD candidates and postdoctoral researchers.

SWEAH was established in 2014 after the Swedish Research Council (VR) granted 25 million SEK for development and establishment of SWEAH for an eight-year funding period running from 2014 to 2021. Since 2022, SWEAH has been co-financed by 13 Swedish higher education institutions (HEIs). The current funding runs until the end of 2026. The following HEIs are partners in the SWEAH network: Blekinge Institute of Technology, Dalarna University, Jönköping University, Karolinska Institutet, Kristianstad University, Linköping University, Linnaeus University, Luleå University of Technology, Lund University, Mid Sweden University, Umeå University, University of Gothenburg, and Örebro University. SWEAH is coordinated by Lund University.

1.2 Assignment of the SWEAH Evaluation 2025

During the Swedish Research Council's funding period (2014-2021) the graduate school was evaluated at mid-term in 2016 and at the end of the funding period in 2021. The graduate school has been reviewed twice, in 2018 and 2019, by an external advisory committee engaged by the Board of SWEAH.

Lund University has decided in May 2024 that a new evaluation will take place. The document communicating the decision of the Vice-Chancellor of Lund University states[1]:

> *The University decides that an external evaluation of SWEAH will be carried out during the period 2024-2025. The evaluation will be based on the self-evaluation compiled by the Graduate School's management and board in 2024. This self-evaluation is in turn based on the structure and questions developed centrally by Lund University (LU). In addition, other relevant documents, interviews and site visits at LU and/or partner universities will be used to inform the evaluation. The review will be carried out during the period 1 January 2025 to 30 June 2025 and the evaluation report will be sent to the partner HEIs [higher education institutions] in autumn 2025*.

Background of this decision was the joint request of the management representatives of the partner universities to investigate the conditions for continued operations of SWEAH after the current funding will run out in 2026. The 2025 evaluation of SWEAH serves as a contribution to decisions on the conditions for continued collaboration and activities of SWEAH from 1 January 2027.

[1] Lund University, Reg. No. STYR 2024/1141 from 02 May 2025

In the "Terms of Reference for Reviewers in the External Evaluation of the National Graduate School on Aging and Health" the review committee has been asked to review SWEAH according to the following groups of questions (in the following these questions are referred to as "ToR Questions") [2]:

1. *(a) Is the graduate school organised and managed in the best possible way to achieve its missions and goals as specified in the Strategic Plan for the Swedish National Graduate School for Aging and Health (SWEAH) 2022-2025? (b) Are there any different and/or additional goals and activities for SWEAH to consider for the future? (c) In what ways has SWEAH balanced its international ambition with the national integrity and local accomplishments?*
2. *(a) Are the quality assurance processes of the course programme appropriate and systematic in order to ensure high quality of the graduate school's education? (b) Is the course curriculum and development reflecting the Strategic Plan and its goals? (c) Does the research production, in terms of PhD dissertations and publication rate, meet the goals?*
3. *(a) What is the added value of the graduate school? (b) Given that it is a collaboration between 13 partner HEIs, how are issues concerning interdisciplinarity, outreach, internationalisation and external collaboration with the surrounding society handled?*

As these group of ToR questions are composed of distinct and at times complex questions, the review committee has decided to parse them into eight single questions (numbered 1a to 3b). In addition, we parsed complex single questions into separate components (e. g. question 3b). Based on the answers to the questions, the review committee has been asked to provide recommendations for the future development of the graduate school. Specifically, the recommendations will be related to two questions which are posed in the "Terms of Reference" (p. 3)[2]:

- *What strong arguments are there for the continuation of SWEAH?*
- *What strategies would the reviewers suggest to sustain and develop the graduate school for the future?*

1.3 Structure of the SWEAH 2025 Evaluation Report

This report is based on SWEAH's Self-Evaluation Report, appendices to the Self-Evaluation Report, additional material, and five interviews which were conducted online in March 2025 and in person in April 2025. Due to the rich information available, the review committee has decided to structure the report into the following sections:

Outcomes of SWEAH (section 2)
Organization and management of SWEAH (section 3)
Future scenarios for SWEAH (section 4)
Outlook and Recommendations (section 5)

The questions posed in the "Terms of Reference" (ToR questions) will be addressed in relation to outcomes of SWEAH (section 2), processes of SWEAH (section 3, and future scenarios for SWEAH (section 4). In the recommendations (section 5) the review committee will address Lund University (coordinating university), the partner HEIs of SWEAH, the management team of SWEAH, and the supervisors involved in the network.

[2] Lund University, Reg. No. STYR 2024/1982 from 29 August 2024

2. Outcomes of SWEAH

Our analysis of success and impact of SWEAH is based on the Strategic Plan of SWEAH[3] which details missions on SWEAH visibility, on PhD candidates[4], on postdoctoral researchers, on supervisors and senior researchers and on national and international collaboration. In the SWEAH budget for the years 2022 to 2026[5], funding is available for activities regarding PhD candidates and postdoctoral researchers, only. Hence, we will put the main focus of this report on SWEAH's success and impact in respect to the missions on PhD candidates and postdoctoral researchers (missions 2 to 8).

We will report on the role of SWEAH for network building, for creating an interdisciplinary environment, for developing a curriculum and conducting course work, for completing PhD theses and improving quality of research, for supporting alumni's career pathways, for integrating local, national, and international perspectives, and for providing societal impact.

2.1 Network building

For SWEAH PhD candidates, there are three types of opportunities for network building: Student days and courses (SWEAH events in Sweden and travels for international research visits. There are at least two face-to-face SWEAH meetings per year and additional online or hybrid meetings. Participation in any of these meetings will be financed partly by SWEAH and partly by the home university of PhD candidates. As there are three parties involved – the PhD candidate, SWEAH, and home university – travels to both SWEAH events and travels outside SWEAH have to be applied for by the PhD candidate and approved by both SWEAH and the home institution. This procedure is due to the complex financing of the SWEAH network.

In the interviews conducted at a Lund site visit in April 2025, the current cohort of PhD candidates as well as SWEAH alumni from earlier cohorts agreed that SWEAH has helped them to establish a reliable network of peers and senior researchers not only from their home universities, but also from other universities in the SWEAH network. In particular, PhD candidates pointed out that meetings with their peers helped them to present their work in a safe environment, to realize the importance of their own work, and to become aware of interdisciplinary perspectives. In different meetings with both PhD candidates and alumni it was emphasized in addition that SWEAH has helped them to establish scientific and personal independence – "staying on one's own legs" as one of the interviewees phrased it.

This independence building capacity is a unique feature of the SWEAH network: PhD candidates are given the opportunity to establish "horizontal ties" to peers in addition to "vertical relationships" with senior researchers. Hence, this outcome of network building – independence – adds to SWEAH's missions as there are: training PhD candidates (mission 2 of SWEAH's Strategic Plan), increasing employability (mission 3), opening up for interdisciplinary perspectives (missions 4 and 5) and improving communication skills (mission 6). It has to be emphasized, that independence as an intended outcome of SWEAH is described in the Strategic Plan in relation to postdoctoral researchers (mission 7), but not for PhD candidates. To our knowledge, this positive effect on independence,

[3] Self-Assessment of SWEAH, Appendix 3 "Strategic Plan". The Strategic Plan of SWEAH contains 1 vision, 14 missions, and 22 goals. SWEAH's missions are divided into five sections: SWEAH visibility, PhD candidates, postdoctoral researchers, supervisors and senior researchers, as well as national and international collaboration.

[4] In the SWEAH terminology, the word "PhD student" is used. We have decided to use the word "PhD candidate" as the individuals pursuing their PhD degree in SWEAH already have an academic degree, and SWEAH encourages their autonomy and independence . We believe that the word "candidate" captures the encouraging atmosphere of SWEAH better than the word "student".

[5] Self-Assessment of SWEAH, Appendix 8 "Economic Report"

autonomy, and self-governance of emerging researchers is a unique feature of SWEAH as compared to other graduate schools in this area.

2.2 Interdisciplinarity and multidisplinarity

Interdisciplinarity is at the core of ToR question 3b[6] which aims explicitly at how SWEAH handles interdisciplinarity in the collaboration between the 13 partner HEIs. Interdisciplinarity is high on SWEAH's agenda. SWEAH's vision spelled out in its Strategic Plan states that SWEAH strives to be an "interdisciplinary and sustainable graduate school". Seven of the 14 SWEAH missions mention interdisciplinarity as goals, and four out of five missions referring to PhD candidates explicitly state that raising PhD candidates' awareness to interdisciplinarity and preparing them for an interdisciplinary academic career is central for SWEAH. Joint efforts of multiple disciplines are fundamental to successfully do research in the area "Aging and Health" and to solve research questions in this area. Consequently, both supervisors and PhD candidates represent a broad range of disciplines, e. g. geriatrics, gerontology, nursing, public health, neurosciences, occupational therapy, epidemiology, physiotherapy, social work, sociology, psychology, and economics. As the management of SWEAH noted, there are no limitations regarding what disciplines can be included in SWEAH – the overall criterion is that the PhD student project is relevant for ageing and health.

During the Lund site visit, the PhD candidates emphasized that SWEAH meetings allow them to discuss their own and others' PhD work in respect to underlying research questions, leading directly into an interdisciplinary discourse on topics of aging and health. Moreover, the PhD candidates mentioned that interacting with researchers from other disciplines is "eye-opening", as one participant put it. Throughout all interviews during the site visit, SWEAH fellows remarked that interdisciplinarity was extremely enriching for their own thinking. Some PhD candidates even reported on being able to implement interdisciplinary ideas into their originally monodisciplinary PhD project.

SWEAH has been able to create an environment of multidisciplinary cross-fertilization between research projects from different disciplines. It has also been able to implement an interdisciplinary approach to the thematic area "Aging and Health". Interdisciplinarity – strictly speaking the integration of knowledge and methods from different disciplines into a synthetic approach – may be beyond the capacities of a graduate school as topic and scope of the PhD projects are mainly determined by the home university. Yet networking and atmosphere in SWEAH are successfully promoting interdisciplinary orientations among the PhD candidates that can also be realized in their future projects. At present, a high diversity of disciplines is already represented in SWEAH, yet relevant disciplines may be missing or could be strengthened (e. g. architecture, urban planning, economics, psychology, political science, sociology). In sum, the review committee considers SWEAH to be highly successful to bring multi-disciplinary perspectives into the thinking of emerging researchers in the area of aging and health.

2.3 Completed PhD theses and quality of research

For any graduate school, it is decisive to support PhD candidates in pursuing excellent research and completing their theses in time. Consequently, the question is posed if the research production, in terms of PhD dissertations and publication rate, meet the goals SWEAH has set for itself (ToR

[6] ToR Question 3b is one of the more complex questions and relates not only to interdisciplinarity, but also to internationalization (see section 2.6) as well as outreach and external collaboration (see section 2.7).

Question 2c). SWEAH indeed mentions the goal to train PhD candidates to make cutting-edge contributions in research on ageing and health (mission 2 of SWEAH's Strategic Plan). It has to be emphasized, however, that it is mainly the responsibility of the partner universities to support their PhD candidates to publish cutting-edge research and to stay on track to successfully complete their theses. At the time being, there are no funds for PhD candidates' salaries in SWEAH's financial plan (see Appendix 8 of the Self-Evaluation Report). Hence, SWEAH's direct impact on the PhD theses will necessarily be limited – SWEAH's impact is more important in respect to network building, getting insight into interdisciplinary thinking, and being trained in gerontological theories (see sections 2.1 to 2.3 of this report), as well as supporting motivation and independence.

According to the Self-Evaluation Report (December 2024), there are 48 active PhD candidates and 78 alumni (p. 10, Table 2). Hence, over a period of ten years, 78 PhD theses have been successfully completed within the SWEAH network, 12 PhD candidates have terminated the participation in SWEAH before completing their PhD theses. There are large differences between partner universities. Most alumni come from Karolinska Institutet (28 alumni), Lund University (15 alumni) and University of Gothenburg (12 alumni). In all other partner universities, the number of alumni is not higher than four. Similarly, the numbers of currently active PhD candidates vary between 1 and 15 PhD candidates.

The topics of PhD theses comprise a large spectrum of research fields in the area of aging and health. Physical and mental health in old age have been addressed by 20 theses. Research on specific health conditions – dementia, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, oral health, and frailty – were examined in 19 theses. Support of older persons in terms of health care utilization, caregiving, or use of technology have been addressed in 11 theses. Social aspects of aging like health disparities or workforce participation have been the topic of 17 theses. Genetic and biological aspects of aging have been addressed in 7 theses. Methodological questions like participatory research have been addressed in four theses.

In an online meeting (4 March 2025), supervisors emphasized the role of SWEAH for their PhD candidates. SWEAH works towards the integration of ageing research in Sweden and allows their PhD candidates to get in contact with other PhD candidates with different backgrounds. In addition, SWEAH is important for each university to make the ageing research conducted by the PhD candidates visible within the university. Smaller universities have smaller research groups in aging. Hence, SWEAH PhD candidates profit from the large and multidisciplinary SWEAH network. SWEAH provides also networks for supervisors. It depends on the supervisors how much they want (and are able) to get involved, but the potential is there.

PhD theses in SWEAH are based on at least 4 publications in international peer reviewed journals. The reputation of journals is based on different criteria in different disciplines, and quantitative indicators such as impact factors differ considerably between disciplines for respected journals. In order to be able to assess the scientific excellence of dissertations, it would be necessary to have access to (quantitative) indicators that enable an evaluation of the scientific quality of the dissertations across disciplines. However, SWEAH did not provide any indicators of this kind, so it is not possible to systematically and thoroughly assess the scientific quality of the dissertations. When inspecting the list of SWEAH PhD publications (see Self-Evaluation Report, Appendix 6), the review committee was impressed by the quality of the journals listed.

2.4 Alumni perspective: Academic and professional careers

SWEAH from the beginning has focused not only on PhD candidates, but also on postdoctoral researchers. The transition from the status of a PhD candidate to the status of a full member of the research community can be straining and difficult. SWEAH's strategic plan contains two missions on postdoctoral researchers, both in terms of academic career support (mission 7) and progressive development of SWEAH (mission 8). Many graduate schools monitor the careers of their former PhD candidates but rarely support them in terms of career planning as well as of acquiring skills in publishing and acquiring third-party funding, which SWEAH does. It should be noted that SWEAH also offers a course for post-doctoral researchers. In 2023, this course had the topic "From Junior to Senior Researcher in Research on Ageing and Health", organized by Lund University. Although not in the focus of the evaluation assignment, we will briefly describe the role SWEAH plays for its alumni.

In the interviews with SWEAH alumni during the Lund site visit, the postdoctoral researchers stated that SWEAH had helped them to understand the aging field, gave them the opportunity for networking with other PhD candidates, and – through a friendly and welcoming atmosphere – helped to build up confidence which is needed to pursue a research career. SWEAH alumni have proactively and on their own initiative built up an alumni network "SAIN – SWEAH Alumni Interdisciplinary Network". SAIN gets funding from two foundations (Kamprad Family Foundation and Riksbankens Jubileumsfond) and from SWEAH. Alumni themselves applied for the money, with the help of faculty members who are actively involved in SWEAH. This network is aimed at all current and future alumni of SWEAH and describes it purpose as "basis for long-term and outstanding Swedish research on aging through interdisciplinary collaborations between Swedish universities".

Judged from the perspective of alumni, SWEAH has had a decisive impact on their scientific career. The networks built up during the time spent in the SWEAH network – normally not more than 2 to 3 years – seem to be rather stable even after having graduated and having made the transition into the postdoctoral status. Without SWEAH this important initiative would not exist – a clear indicator for the success of SWEAH in building network capacities in the participating PhD candidates. What is lacking in the information the reviewers were provided with, however, is a comprehensive list of the career paths of alumni (e. g. percentage of alumni inside/outside research). This information would be necessary for a sound evaluation of the success of SWEAH alumni. Remarkably, however, is SWEAH's thorough reflection of the career transitions of former PhD candidates into the role of postdocs which is based on empirical research[7]. This is highly unusual for a graduate school, and we commend SWEAH for this inventiveness.

2.5 International, national, and local relationships

SWEAH's ambitions regarding national and international relationships are high. To SWEAH's missions belong the provision of an infrastructure for national and international research exchange (mission 11), the establishment of possibilities for grant applications (mission 12), the expansion of the SWEAH network for other partners in Sweden and the Nordic countries (mission 13), and the development of international exchange and partnerships (mission 14). Consequently, the current evaluation addresses the question in what ways SWEAH has balanced its international ambition with national outreach and local accomplishments (ToR question 1c) and how issues concerning

[7] Melander, C., Löfqvist, C., Haak, M., Smedegaard Bengtsen, S. E., Edgren, G., & Iwarsson, S. (2025). Well prepared yet uncertain: Experiences of the early career transition after affiliation with an interdisciplinary graduate school. *PloS one*, *20*(4), e0321039.

internationalisation and external collaboration with the surrounding society are handled (ToR question 3b).

SWEAH is a national graduate school and, hence, the main focus is on collaboration between larger and smaller universities in Sweden. The PhD candidates learn about all other partner universities either through their peers, through site visits or in the context of SWEAH courses. However, not all Swedish universities engaged in aging research are part of the SWEAH network. Internationally, PhD candidates can be financially supported to visit universities abroad or serve as hosts for international scientists. Ph.D. candidates are free to choose any international host institution they deem relevant for their work. In 2023, Professor Judith Phillips, University of Stirling (Scotland, UK) collaborated in a SWEAH postdoc course. In addition to participants from Sweden, also UK participants took part in this course. In September 2024, SWEAH PhD candidates, postdoctoral researchers and the management of SWEAH visited the University of Stirling for a jointly arranged 3-day workshop.

Collaboration of SWEAH with the wider society is emerging. SWEAH's communication officer regularly posts news from research conducted by PhD candidates and postdoctoral researchers for the general public. An initiative aiming for municipal development towards increasing age-friendliness involving SWEAH and a local municipality has started recently, funded by a risk capital foundation (Utfallsfonden). In addition, Forte is financing an evaluation of this initiative, with the Coordinator of SWEAH as the Principal Investigator.

As a national network and graduate school, SWEAH is impressive and unique, not only in Sweden, but also in Europe. Lund University can be congratulated on having such a successful national graduate school. Nevertheless, it is certainly conceivable and desirable to expand the national network of SWEAH to include other important players in the field of research on ageing and health. International co-operation is of great importance to SWEAH, but so far it has only taken place to a limited extent. Involving universities from Nordic countries would strengthen internationalization. Greater efforts are needed here, but above all better funding to establish and maintain international relationships. The relationships between SWEAH and social actors are in clear need of improvement. There are initial promising efforts here, but these should be expanded in the future.

3. Organization and management of SWEAH

This section is devoted to organization and management, i. e. the processes of SWEAH: How are PhD candidates supervised? How do institutions collaborate in the network? What are the activities in the network? How is decision making organized? In this section, we will rely especially on SWEAH's Self-Evaluation Report and, in addition, to information gathered in the interviews conducted online and during the site visit in April 2025.

3.1 Guiding principles: Vision, missions, and goals

The review committee has been asked to review the strategic goals of SWEAH with regard to the questions if there are any different and/or additional goals and activities for SWEAH to consider for the future (ToR Question 1b). The Strategic Plan for SWEAH 2022-2025 gives an overview over the vision, missions, and goals of SWEAH. Additional information can be found in the Self-Evaluation Report (section 2 "Mission, goals, and Strategic Planning").

SWEAH's guiding principles are described in the Strategic Plan for the years 2022-2025. SWEAH's vision is an "interdisciplinary and sustainable graduate school for making Sweden and the world better for ageing", with four collaboration layers: academic communities within SWEAH, institutional partner universities in Sweden, national partners outside academia, and international partners. SWEAH spells out 14 missions in respect to SWEAH visibility (one mission), PhD candidates (five missions), postdoctoral researchers (two missions), supervisors and senior researchers (two missions), and national and international collaborations (four missions). Finally, there are 22 goals which are in a complex way related to the missions.

- Missions are related to multiple goals. Mission 2, for instance, refers to "supporting cutting-edge research" and is related to goals D "strengthening the communication of PhD candidates towards making societal impact", G "developing SWEAH core curriculum", and H "establishing collaborating with political and public authorities
- Similarly, goals are related to multiple missions. Goal D for instance refers to "strengthening the communication of PhD candidates towards making societal impact" and is related to mission 1 "SWEAH visibility", mission 2 "supporting cutting-edge research", mission 3 "improving employability of PhD candidates", and mission 4 "sustaining an interdisciplinary learning environment".

On the one hand, the strategic plan comprehensively outlines vision, missions, and goals and shows the strong ambitions of SWEAH. On the other hand, four critical observations have been made. First, the number of missions and goals is very high. It is unclear if there are hierarchies within the group of missions and within the group of goals. Second, most missions and goals are highly complex, composed of distinct sub-missions and sub-goals. Highlighting the central aspects of missions and goals might be helpful to clarify the central themes of SWEAH. Third, the net of vision, missions, and goals is highly complex. It is unclear, if all goals have to be fulfilled in order to declare that a mission has been completed. Fourth, and finally, while there are two layers of objectives (missions and goals), there is no description of means to reach these goals.

In sum, the review committee has the impression that SWEAH's Strategic Plan describes all relevant missions for a national graduate school expansively, but a hierarchy might be introduced and distinction be made between important central primary missions and less important secondary missions. This implies careful decision-making regarding the central primary missions of SWEAH. The review committee agrees that the missions regarding PhD candidates and postdoctoral researchers (missions 2 to 8) should be a of central importance to a graduate school like SWEAH. In addition, it would be helpful to describe means for reaching the goals. The review committee would not recommend to consider different and/or additional goals and activities for SWEAH.

3.2 Curriculum and course work

Training PhD candidates is high on the agenda of SWEAH (see mission 2 of the Strategic Plan). Consequently, it is relevant to ask if SWEAH's course programme is appropriate in order to ensure high quality of the graduate school's education (see ToR question 2b). In the self-revaluation report, curriculum and course work (section 5, pp. 14-15) and pedagogical principles (Appendix 7) are described in detail. SWEAH offers two doctoral courses per year and one postdoctoral course approximately every third year. The host institutions responsible for the courses rotate between the participating universities. Lund University offers a course on "Theories of aging", University of Gothenburg on "Gerontology: multidisciplinary and integrative perspectives on aging", Karolinska

Institutet on “Societal and life-course perspectives on inequalities in aging”, Linköping University on “Ageing and social change”, and Örebro University on “Societal communication and impact of research on ageing and health”. As mentioned already, the postdoctoral course “From junior to senior researcher in research on ageing and health” is arranged by Lund University.

During the site visit, the PhD candidates emphasized that the SWEAH courses are very helpful in gaining knowledge on theoretical conceptions and empirical approaches of a wide range of disciplines. In this context, it was mentioned repeatedly that contributions from social sciences were thought to be very helpful and enriching especially for those persons coming from disciplines in medicine and health sciences. Repeatedly, the PhD candidates highlighted the welcoming atmosphere, friendly tolerance, and the encouraging spirit of the courses. In addition, a writing retreat organized in April 2025 was judged as very constructive and helpful for writing manuscripts and the dissertation. A few of the PhD candidates expressed their wish that SWEAH should conduct all the four courses on an annual basis instead of every second year. This would make it easier for them to adjust the course-work to their individual processes. Both PhD candidates and alumni have described the SWEAH courses as a learning situation where they are widening their perspectives and theoretical frames of references.

SWEAH has a pivotal role in teaching PhD candidates multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary orientation in the area of aging and health. The course curriculum which has been developed and continuously adapted by SWEAH, is instrumental to this goal. A curriculum and a syllabus of courses is a necessary precondition for a successful graduate school. Clearly, SWEAH’s curriculum is highly successful and appreciated by the participating PhD candidates. The review committee thinks that the rotation of courses among the universities demonstrates the close collaboration between the 13 partner institutions.

3.3 Quality assurance processes

The quality of the curriculum and the course work is essential to SWEAH’s success. Hence, it is important to continuously monitor the quality of curriculum and courses, in order to intervene and adapt if necessary. The review committee has been asked to answer the question, if the quality assurance processes of the course programme are appropriate in order to ensure high quality of the graduate school’s education (ToR Question 2a).

SWEAH courses have been developed by participating partner institutions with different topics and disciplinary profiles (see section 3.2). From the beginning, PhD candidates have been involved in the prior planning and subsequent evaluation of the courses. Moreover, SWEAH alumni have contributed to the evaluation of courses. Finally, the Pedagogical Working group, based on the feedback from PhD candidates and alumni and by using the pedagogical principles, are discussing the success of the courses with those partner universities offering them. This results in concrete recommendations for developing and adapting future courses. Evaluation of the SWEAH curriculum and courses is based on eight pedagogical principles: multi-and cross-disciplinarity, constructive alignment, active learning, driven by PhD Candidates (and postdoctoral researchers), mixed learning environments, use of feed-forward strategies (in addition to feed-back), network orientations, as well as opportunities for post-doctoral learning.

During the site visit in Lund, both PhD candidates and alumni praised the quality of the courses. SWEAH’s curriculum confronts them with ideas and research outside their own project and allows them to learn about different approaches, for instance qualitative research. Also, the alumni

emphasized the excellent courses tailored to aging and health. In addition, the alumni pointed out the courses on career building and application writing which are highly relevant for postdoctoral researchers.

The review committee agrees that the quality assurance processes of the course programme are fully appropriate and lead to high quality of SWEAH's curriculum, courses and other education activities. Especially the establishment of the pedagogical principles and the Pedagogical Group are exemplary. The review committee commends SWEAH for having developed pedagogical principles which are highly relevant for quality monitoring and adaptation of curriculum and courses.

A comment on SWEAH's goal to support supervisors: The review committee acknowledges the fact that it is difficult to involve supervisors into the graduate school and, especially, in activities to support them. The review committee believes, however, that due to time constraints it will be difficult to engage supervisors beyond the level of engagement seen at the moment. In addition, we see the low-level involvement of supervisors not as a "weakness" of SWEAH (s. Self-Evaluation Report, Section 7, p. 15), but as chance for PhD candidates: SWEAH focuses on PhD candidates and creates an environment to support them in developing intellectual independence. Hence, the SWEAH management and board might reflect on the necessity of offering support to the group of supervisors.

3.4 Organisation and management

Organization and management strategies have to be appropriate for reaching the missions and goals of SWEAH. Hence, one important question posed to the review committee refers to organization and management of SWEAH: "Is the graduate school organised and managed in the best possible way to achieve its missions and goals as specified in the Strategic Plan for the Swedish National Graduate School for Aging and Health (SWEAH) 2022-2025?" (ToR Question 1a).

SWEAH has developed over the last 11 years, and over the years its management group was central to its functionality. The management group is composed of the coordinator (Susanne Iwarsson), the study coordinator (Steven Schmidt), the research administrator (Stina Elfverson) and the communication officer (Lill Eriksson). The management group works closely with the pedagogical group (see section 3.3) and an impact officer (new part-time assignment since 2024). The management group reports to the SWEAH Board which is responsible for making landmark decisions. The Board is composed of an external chair and deputy chair, two external members representing the non-academic society, representatives of the partner universities, as well as representatives of PhD candidates and alumni. The institutional backbone of SWEAH is the network of partner universities which cooperate with the management group both on the research and management level. This organizational "overhead" has one aim: to run the SWEAH network which consists of PhD candidates, alumni, and their supervisors. As there are 13 partner universities, it is highly complex to coordinate research representatives, management representatives, and supervisors to conclude contracts, plan courses and budget funds.

After having studied carefully the Self-Evaluation Report and having had online and personal interviews with the management team, with Lund University's Vice-Chancellor and the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, members of the Board, and representatives from partner universities on the management and research level, the review committee concludes that organization and management of SWEAH are excellent and fully appropriate to achieve SWEAH's missions and goals as

specified in the Strategic Plan. The review committee is impressed by the expertise and diplomatic skills of the coordinator which are indispensable for SWEAH's success.

Two aspects should be highlighted. First, Lund University has provided SWEAH over the years with a stable and reliable managerial environment. It seems advisable that also in the future, Lund University should serve as the organizational host to SWEAH. Second, the success of SWEAH is to a large part due to the outstanding expertise and management skills of the current coordinator, Susanne Iwarsson, who has been also the founder of SWEAH. There will be major transition in the next two years as the current coordinator will retire at the end of 2026. Lund University should consider how to fill the positions of the SWEAH coordinator and successor to the professorship (e. g. separation of tasks, job advertisement for the professorship with the SWEAH coordination as part of the job profile, or else). Time is running out, and decisions have to be made quickly.

3.5 Finances

The annual projected budget of SWEAH for the years 2022 to 2026 (see Appendix 8 of the Self-Evaluation Report) varies between 3.594 and 4.538 mio SEK. At the time being, the budget is composed of contributions from all 13 partner universities, with larger universities (Lund, Gothenburg, Karolinska) paying relatively higher contributions than the other partner universities. Based on each partner university's estimation, the contributions are based on the extent of graduate education on ageing and health at the respective HEI.

From the perspective of the review committee, this is money spent well with a high return on investment. Judging from the success of the PhD candidates and alumni, SWEAH contributes to multidisciplinarity, scientific excellence and independence as well as networking in the area of aging and health.

4. Future scenarios for SWEAH

Just one page has been devoted in the Self-Evaluation Report to the future development of SWEAH. This is amazingly little information, but understandable as the leader will hand over the task of coordinating SWEAH to other people. As the partner universities give their commitments only after the evaluation and a new coordinator will be only recruited if the activities continue, it is understandable that not much about the future can be said right now.

The evaluation committee´s assumptions about the future of SWEAH are, however, mainly in accordance with the self-evaluation report as well as the two reviews conducted by the external advisory board, 2018 and 2019 (Appendix 9). Therefore, the committee has tried to understand what the key persons of SWEAH think about the "added value" of SWEAH. In the interviews, the committee, for example, confronted interviewed people with three scenarios: cessation, continuation or expansion of SWEAH, which gave important input on the perceived added value for the PhD candidates, their home institutions, alumni, and to a less extent the supervisors. Hence, this section focusing on the future of SWEAH, takes the point of departure in the question: What is the added value of the graduate school (ToR Question 3a) in relation to three scenarios: cessation, continuation or expansion of SWEAH?

One important future question is how to solve the change in the management of SWEAH when the present coordinator, who also was the founder of SWEAH, Susanne Iwarsson, in two years will step down from her position as Professor in Gerontology at Lund university and the role as the

coordinator of SWEAH. Also, the question of how to take the opportunity of taking the next step in developing SWEAH for the future, would be of importance as well as the role in supporting and involving SWEAH Alumni in developing the new Strategic plan for SWEAH after 2026. These questions will be discussed further in the final section 5 “Summary and recommendations”.

The perceived added values of SWEAH are addressed in this section in relation to:

- Building a research network within Aging and Health
- Developing an interdisciplinary perspective
- Having access to high quality courses
- Having access to international exchange and conferences
- Belonging to a useful and supportive alumni network
- Strengthening the national and international knowledge building in Aging and Health
- Contributing to knowledge for better ageing

4.1 Future scenario A: Cessation of SWEAH

Based on how we have understood the key people´s perceptions of the added value of SWEAH, several key-quality aspects of the PhD-candidates training and the post-docs´ situation after finishing their PhD, would be lost if SWEAH ceased to exist after 2026. The PhD candidates would not have the same possibility to build up a strong national research network and widen their perspectives as well as developing their multi-disciplinary knowledge and understanding during training. They would probably not have the same access to high-quality PhD-courses (core curriculum) taught by the most prominent Swedish teachers and researchers in the field of Aging and Health and their possibilities to take part in international exchange and conferences. Also, the alumni would probably have lost their research network which seems to give them fantastic opportunities to continue research collaboration and attract grants. Finally, it would probably have been more difficult, for PhD candidates and alumni, to contribute to the development of the knowledge needed to address the future societal challenges of aging and health and to make accessible the knowledge in a global context. The committee does not think that SWEAH could be easily replaced with another less costly structure.

4.2 Future scenario B: Continuation of SWEAH as it is

The gains and benefits of the future scenario of continuing SWEAH as it is today are many, according to the key people. The PhD candidates affiliated to SWEAH will continue to build a solid research network and to develop an interdisciplinary perspective during their training. They will continue to have access to high-quality courses and international exchange. The alumni will continue to build their research network and careers in collaboration with other alumni and senior researchers. The purpose and meaning of belonging to a strong national/international network of researchers addressing complex questions within the area of aging and health, will continue to feel rewarding and will contribute to a positive future horizon as a researcher in the field. The only threat might be the fact that the SWEAH coordinator will retire in two years and therefore needs to be replaced by another strong and committed academic leader. It might be easy to destroy what has been built for ten years if SWEAH cannot recruit a new engaged and respected professor to take over as the new coordinator.

4.3 Future scenario C: Expanding and optimizing SWEAH

After ten years, the next step could be taken to expand and optimize SWEAH and when there is a shift in leadership. Facing such a transition, there is always an opportunity to further strengthen what has grown strong but also to discuss and create some new directions adding to the international forefront of knowledge in aging and health. Some ideas about how to expand and optimize SWEAH for the future are presented in the final section 5. However, the perceived added value expressed by the key people during our interviews should not be challenged since there is a need for stability and continuity to keep the high quality of SWEAH. One risk is that SWEAH is not visible enough among new academic leaders who are financially supporting SWEAH, which indicate the need for communicating and building relationships between SWEAH and leaders at the partner universities but also possible new partners in Sweden, the Nordic countries and globally. Finally, the future scenario of expanding and optimizing SWEAH needs to be based on the tremendous achievements obtained by SWEAH during the last ten years. Otherwise, there are risks of losing quality.

5. Summary and recommendations

In this section, we will provide a summary of our observations of SWEAH (section 5.1). This will address a central question posed to us in the evaluation assignment (ToR question 3a). Next, we will give recommendations in respect to the two questions posed to us in the assignment for the evaluation (section 5.2). (a) What strong arguments are there for the continuation of SWEAH? (b) What strategies would the reviewers suggest to sustain and develop the graduate school for the future?

5.1 Summary

SWEAH is a successful graduate school in an exceptionally topical field of research. The success is clear from any perspective from results, PhD candidates´ and alumni experiences and evaluations of supervisors to participant universities opinions. The added value to the participating PhD candidates is clear, particularly in multidisciplinarity and networking. The courses and interaction with other PhD candidates and seniors from different disciplines expand the scientific perspectives of the PhD candidates and inform them about other approaches than those of their own universities or research groups. This not only introduces the PhD candidates to interdisciplinary understanding but also helps them to define their own field and research questions and fosters their independence as your researchers. To the PhD candidates, possibilities and funding for international participation are important. The participating universities benefit from the courses on the themes that they alone might not be able to organize, and the number of PhD candidates in aging-related field may be small. A unique feature in SWEAH is the SAIN alumni network, largely initiated and organized by the alumni themselves. The post doc courses, peer networking and joint projects can be of crucial importance to the young PhDs future careers.

The future importance of SWEAH is evident from different perspectives. Summarizing these gives strong arguments for the continuation of SWEAH:

- First, Sweden, as many other countries, is experiencing rapid aging of population and increasing longevity. The society urgently needs scientific knowledge and academic expertise to meet the challenges of this population change, to encourage active aging, participation

and independence of older people, to organize appropriate health and social care, and to guarantee economically sustainable aging,

- Second, both individual and population aging are phenomena where biological, societal, and environmental factors interact. Therefore, aging is an archetype of research field where interdisciplinary approaches are needed. SWEAH has an exceptionally strong history and experience in multidisciplinary doctoral and postdoctoral training and has an excellent position to continue and strengthen it. By a strong interdisciplinary approach, SWEAH is able to provide knowledge and expertise that can directly help society at the national and municipal level to tackle these challenges and take the full advantage of longer lives.
- Third, SWEAH is well placed to further strengthen the already prominent position of Sweden in international research on aging. As a network of many universities, it will improve the visibility of Swedish research worldwide and promote collaboration between individual universities.

The present (and founding) coordinator Suzanne Iwarsson, together with the long-time research administrator Stina Elfverson, has a major, decisive role in the success of the SWEAH. The committed leadership is a great strength of SWEAH. However, this also creates a vulnerable situation during the transition period of the retirement of the present coordinator.

5.2 Recommendations

The review committee perceives SWEAH as an outstanding example for a national graduate school with excellent results and exceptional management which should be continued in the future (Recommendation 1). Nevertheless, there are decisions to made to sustain and develop the graduate school for the future (see Recommendations 2 to 9).

1. We strongly recommend continuation of SWEAH. Society urgently needs interdisciplinary scientific research on aging and health, and SWEAH is ideally placed to train the experts both to the academia and society at large. All information we as evaluation panel have received indicates that SWEAH's work has been successful and important for the PhD candidates, to alumni and to the participating universities. In fact, we were surprised and highly impressed by the unanimously strong positive evaluations and support for SWEAH from all the groups we interviewed. The PhD candidates particularly appreciated multidisciplinarity, networking and peer support, as well as the possibility of adopt increasing independence as researchers. In sum, there is strong evidence to support and develop the activities of SWEAH.
2. The new funding period and the apparent change of the director due to Susanne Iwarsson´s upcoming retirement provide challenges but also opportunities for SWEAH. It is important to the future of SWEAH that the new director is capable, tuned to interdisciplinarity, and fully committed to the development of SWEAH. We recommend that the new director visit the partner universities, perhaps together with the current director Susanne Iwarsson, in order to inform the university leadership about SWEAH potentials and to support the stability and continuity of SWEAH.
3. The new period in SWEAH gives opportunities to reconsider the focus and practices of SWEAH, e.g. by broadening the multidisciplinarity and adopting also new orientations. A bigger role of social sciences, technological sciences and economy would strengthen SWEAHs potential to respond to present challenges of research and the aging society. SWEAH might consider to

actively include PhD candidates from a broader range of disciplines. We also recommend introducing the AI and human-technology interface more strongly into the courses.

4. The internationalization of SWEAH could be deepened. One reasonably easy way to this would be to invite participants from other Nordic countries to a 3- to 5-day summer school. This would give opportunities to exchange good practices in PhD education, create new networks and deepen interdisciplinarity. However, in order to deepen and expand the internationalization of SWEAH more funds are needed for travel, short-term scientific missions, and hosting experts from abroad. We suggest, considering the idea of inviting universities from Nordic countries as partner universities in SWEAH, to strengthen international collaboration. SWEAH might also consider to apply for funding from other national and international funding sources to support mobility among PhD candidates.

5. The impact of SWEAH would be stronger by increasing the number of participating PhD candidates. The 10-year success, stable infrastructure and good practices give a good basis for this. There are several ways to do this. One, simply adopt more PhD candidates from the present and perhaps from other universities. Second, post doc grants for alumni would have a major impact on their career and strengthen the SWEAH network. We encourage SWEAH and the Lund university to consider funding sources to make this possible. The expansion should not, however, endanger the good practices of personal guidance that is one key to the success of SWEAH.

6. The strong position of Lund university as the “headquarter” of SWEAH has contributed to effective administration and management. With the new period of SWEAH, it is basically possible to consider decentralization of the management. Yet this would include risks on solid and strong administration, and we are cautious to recommend that.

7. While all the participating universities express a very positive attitude and report added value from SWEAH, the involvement and commitment of individual supervisors seem to vary. We recommend that the rights and obligations of PhD candidates, supervisors and the participating universities and the opportunities provided by SWAÈAH would be stated as clearly as possible in the contracts. The partner universities should be committed to support the PhD candidates´ participation in all available SWEAH activities. Showing the names of supervisors in the SWEAH web page would emphasize the joint collaboration in PhD training. One idea could also be to encourage the supervisors to involve other SWEAH supervisors in committees of half-time seminars or doctoral defenses, which could support the networking among supervisors.

8. All available evidence shows that the impact of SWEAH is strong. Yet more quantitative information of this would be useful. One potential indicator could be the career of the former SWEAH PhDs, such as their postdoctoral positions, postdoctoral grants, and grants to research groups consisting of SWEAH alumni. Developing indicators of both scientific impact and societal impact of SWEAH over time would contribute to a clearer picture of the quality and outcomes.

9. We recommend clarification of SWEAH missions (now 14) and goals (now 22). In our view, the number of missions and goals now is too high to really guide SWEAH’s activities. They also seem to be a mixture of real major goals and means and methods to reach these goals. From the perspective of the review panel, 4 to 5 missions (at maximum) would be sufficient, concentrating on PhD and post doc training. The procedures needed to follow this mission and the action plans could be listed separately.