

## **Feedback report from SWEAH External Advisory Board**

February 2018

Søren S.E. Bengtsen, Dorly Deeg, Lars Geschwind

### ***Introduction***

This is the first feedback report from the SWEAH (National Graduate School on Ageing and Health) External Advisory Board. The aim is to provide SWEAH Board and Management with reflections and recommendations for ongoing and future work. The report is based on interviews during two days in Lund 28-29 November 2017 and documentary studies. The interviews in Lund were undertaken in separate category groups, i.e. supervisors, management, and doctoral students. The site-visit in Lund concluded with a feedback session together with the SWEAH Board where the preliminary findings and observations were reported. Complementing the broader aim of the advisory board, the following five specific areas were sent to us beforehand, as a point of departure for the discussion.

1. Overall impression of SWEAH? SWOT analysis of this kind of graduate school structure.
2. Impression of the interdisciplinary mix of disciplines – is it productive for knowledge generation within research of ageing and health?
3. What are the potential outcomes – “effect measures” – relevant to evaluate SWEAH?
4. What is most efficient for the future – activities supporting PhD students, and/or postdocs?
5. What kind of experiences do you have from other contexts, and/or support from relevant literature, that could be useful for SWEAH?

We have addressed all of these issues in the report, some more than others. We have also felt free to discuss a few other issues that came up during the interviews. The feedback report is structured as follows. First, a description of the field ageing and health is outlined. This is followed by our understanding of SWEAH as a graduate school. Thereafter, reflections upon the various activities and initiatives are provided. We end the report with a concluding discussion including a few suggestions and recommendations for the future to be considered.

### **The science of ageing and health**

Gerontology – the science of old age – is an interdisciplinary field of science. Its recognition as a field of science in its own right was exemplified by the foundation of national and

international societies of gerontology and of journals of gerontology a few years after WWII. Since WWII, universities have expanded immensely, accompanied by more and more differentiation into subdisciplines. This makes it more and more difficult to address ageing holistically. Meanwhile, gerontology as an academic discipline has not gained much footing, as there are hardly any departments of gerontology in universities worldwide. Indeed, quite a few collaborative entities with names such as ‘centre on ageing’ exist worldwide, constituted of scholars who belong to various disciplinary departments. Arguably, this lasting situation is due to the broad interdisciplinarity of the field of ageing and health.

Regarding education, worldwide there are relatively few bachelor or master programmes exclusively focused on gerontology. This means that students interested in pursuing a PhD in ageing tend to have had a relatively monodisciplinary education. However, to really be able to address urgent issues concerning ageing, insight in all aspects involved in ageing is indispensable. This implies that young scholars of ageing should be confronted with and learn from scholars in disciplines other than their own. It should also be noted that the development of health, either at the population level or in older people’s lives, is central to ageing issues. Therefore, the foundation of the Swedish National Graduate School for Competitive Science on Ageing and Health fulfils a societal need. It will breed a much needed next generation of interdisciplinary ageing researchers. Internationally, Sweden is a frontrunner in having facilitated such a graduate school.

### **SWEAH as graduate school**

Graduate schools can take many forms in terms of geography, scientific content, and mission. Some graduate schools are national, even international, within the same scientific area, whereas others are more local, typically with a thematic and disciplinary boundary crossing range and scope. The mission of graduate schools shows as much variety. Some graduate schools have had transformational and policy driven agendas, while others have structure and process as their main rationales. In the latter, professionalized admission systems in cohorts, and, by that, the creation of “classes” has been one of the overarching goals together with more structured supervision, a formalized course curriculum, and a continuous quality control.

In a Swedish context, graduate schools have often been initiated by funding bodies outside the university, both public and private. The initiatives have had specific aims, in designated areas in need for more highly educated employees having completed the highest degrees (licentiate and doctor). Examples of such areas include teaching/education, social work, nursing and engineering.

Where does SWEAH fit the description of a graduate school? SWEAH is externally funded, based on an application to Vetenskapsrådet, responding to a competitive call. The call stems from the recognition of the importance to increase capacity in ageing research and practice. It is explicitly aimed at strengthening scientific work across disciplines. Based on the successful application, a nation-wide consortium was created, with University of Lund as coordinating partner.

## *Evaluation of aspects*

### **Admission and recruitment to SWEAH**

The recruitment process is a crucial yet complex part of doctoral education. In interdisciplinary, network organised graduate schools perhaps even more so than within well-established disciplines, since a number of factors influence the decision-making. In the case of SWEAH, students are already admitted to a programme at one of the partner institutions when they apply for a SWEAH position. They apply to SWEAH based on their merits and, in addition by writing a motivation letter. Alongside scientific excellence, an important criterion for admission is what was described in interviews as “an interdisciplinary attitude”. Applicants are asked to motivate why they should be admitted and this should be apparent from the research question, the supervisor constellation, the research environment, the methodology applied, and the literature list. Supervisors are also asked to enclose a recommendation letter. This admission process seems to work well and there were no critical remarks raised.

Already in the grant application to Vetenskapsrådet, there was an intention to also recruit postdocs to SWEAH offering them skills-oriented coursework and a mentoring scheme. This idea was frequently discussed during the site-visit. This seems like an excellent idea and a valuable complement to the initial focus on the PhD level. Moreover, this might also be a valuable link between doctoral students and supervisors, an idea that is more developed below. Postdocs are valuable assets in research environments and also have reached a level at which mobility across universities could and should be promoted.

### **Courses**

One of SWEAH’s main contributions has been to develop new courses, made available not only to SWEAH students but also to others if there are places available. The content of the courses is described as participant-driven. It has been established in a “bottom up” procedure, building on the interest of the doctoral students. The only criterion was that the relation with ageing should be apparent. It is true that the student-driven curriculum best accommodated to the first students admitted, but needed some adaptation as new students came in later on.

The general impression of the courses is that they provide broader perspectives and build a shared identity, and also that they are appreciated by the students. There is always a challenge in interdisciplinary settings that the scientific exchange becomes either irrelevant or trivial in terms of content. From that perspective, the student driven idea seems feasible as a starting point.

We think there is still a potential to develop new courses. A vital possible step for SWEAH, it seems to us, is to establish more courses with a more “fixed” curriculum based on existing literature. We discussed the possibilities of introducing a “canon” for SWEAH students to be taken. This would probably lead the graduate school in a slightly different direction, away from the flexible, student driven approach.

The format of courses could also be further discussed. The potential of developing more courses based on a flexible format, using technology (online, e-learning) could be further explored. Geography is an important issue for SWEAH students, and many of them cannot easily travel to other parts of the country for course work. Also, students from the smaller universities mentioned in the interview that courses were often hosted by the larger universities, which demanded some students to travel more than others to pursue the relevant courses. Meanwhile, these students were more in need of the credits than students from larger universities.

We advise that SWEAH considers the use of blended learning courses that would make the physical accessibility of the courses more equal. Also, blended formats would themselves provide forums for knowledge sharing, sharing of information, a shared 'memory' and archive with key texts and theories, and forums for dialogue and discussion for SWEAH students (and supervisors alike). In many ways we can see that SWEAH online forums and platforms could strengthen both the formal and informal communication, knowledge sharing, and peer feedback systems.

Accommodation to specific periods of the PhD trajectory should also be taken into account, thus aligning the courses with the progression in the research process. Here, more workshop-based formats could be applied, as they are limited in time and commitment. They would help to further strengthen the feedback-culture and to enhance awareness of the process-dimension of graduate studies in addition to the product-dimension (the thesis).

Gathering and spreading information about courses existing in different institutions, not only SWEAH courses, is an important task for the network. This information is useful for all students with an interest in this particular knowledge area. The role as national network is important and has the potential to be long-term sustainable.

### **Funding opportunities for doctoral students**

Another important part of SWEAHs work has been to provide finances for doctoral students to take part in national and international scientific meetings and conferences through so-called 'backpacks' (ryggsäck). This seems to have worked really well and has been highly appreciated by students. During the interviews students repeatedly mentioned that they felt well-funded and had very good opportunities for travelling and going to conferences. These conferences were primarily international conferences.

In addition, SWEAH organised a national conference in Stockholm. SWEAH doctoral students had the opportunity to discuss their research by presenting it to peers. This conference was well-appreciated, because it provided a good picture of research on ageing in Sweden, and was small enough for participants to be able to get to know one another, which is good for exploration of possibilities for future jobs as a post-doc. Such a national conference has the effect of strengthening the cohesion between the universities and research environments within Sweden, and in this way not only increase mobility for doctoral students on an international level, but on a national level as well.

## **Peer support**

Since Sweden has many small universities/colleges, SWEAH is especially useful for doctoral students working in isolation in one of these institutes. SWEAH provides a wider horizon and a critical mass in ageing research, so that students can obtain deeper knowledge and also form a professional network. Doctoral students initially viewed interdisciplinarity as a challenge, but in the longer run as an advantage. Some students experienced a conflict between their own institution's graduate school and SWEAH. Regardless, there was a growing identification with the global field of ageing and health. A 'SWEAH attitude' was described as characterised by curiosity and openness.

The network facilitates practical and emotional support, based on the realisation that all doctoral students have similar questions regarding their research trajectory. It helps to see what other students are doing (or: are allowed to do) in different environments.

It would be good to maintain the networks that have been formed in SWEAH. Developing a SWEAH Alumni Network would enable involvement of former doctoral students as resources in courses and in mentoring. This would strengthen the initiatives and efforts started in SWEAH. Moreover, it would help bridging the gap between junior and more senior researchers and between universities and organisations and companies in wider societal context.

This links to a farther-ranging point about increasing and engaging the number of stakeholders within, and connected to, SWEAH. This would cater to the need to further professionalise the field of ageing and health.

## **Relations to supervisors**

One of the topics discussed during the site-visit was the relation between the graduate school and the doctoral students' supervisors. Our experience from other graduate schools, in particular with an interdisciplinary aim, is that there are potential tensions between supervisors representing and promoting their discipline and the graduate school management, which in the case of SWEAH stands for ageing and health as an interdisciplinary field of science. We have seen no such tensions in this case but the relation between local supervisors and SWEAH management is crucial, not least for doctoral students who may become stuck in between.

The issue how to get supervisors more involved was addressed by various groups interviewed. There seems to be a direct relation between the school and the students with less contact with supervisors. Some supervisors have been involved in the development of courses and have joined workshops and conferences, but overall there seemed to be more to be done regarding the involvement and engagement of supervisors. It is also fair to say that there were both supervisors and doctoral students who thought having SWEAH as an additional sphere, separate from supervisors, might be a good thing. We discussed a number of possible initiatives. First, more incentives for supervisors was a suggestion at a more general level. This usually means time and money and, not least in academia, academic merits. It is not

possible, due to Vetenskapsrådet's current funding rules to allocate money for salaries. However, it is possible to fund course development and partaking in specific events. Second, there is the tension between addressing broad, basic issues and specialised ones. Third, the current requirements for teachers who want to develop courses with SWEAH support are rather tough. On the one hand, there should be a consortium of at least two higher education institutions and the courses should also be interdisciplinary (as assessed by SWEAH Board). On the other hand, the course needs to be accepted by the supervisor's institution as well.

We discussed combining funding streams, both from external sources and from direct state funding. Perhaps an even closer link between SWEAH and other existing research projects could be possible. Again emphasizing the networking aspects of SWEAH, a peer to peer network also for senior academic staff would be interesting. As a suggestion, such a network could focus on new and assistant supervisors rather than the most senior professors.

There seems to be still unexploited possibilities for SWEAH to communicate even more clearly to the doctoral supervisors 'what's in it for them': To argue convincingly that doctoral supervisors could benefit greatly from being more engaged in SWEAH activities and to nudge their students in a positive and constructive way. Many supervisors benefit indirectly from the strong peer-feedback and peer-mentoring within SWEAH. Such support systems are an indirect help to the general learning process that supervisors also support and engage with.

SWEAH could also be used for hosting seminars for the supervisors, which could create an open and inclusive multidisciplinary space for knowledge exchange and even 'inspiration days', where newer and more experienced supervisors could meet and discuss central challenges and examples of best practice in relation to doctoral supervision.

### **Organisation and management**

The management of SWEAH is based at Lund University and comprises highly experienced scholars and professional administrative staff. There are currently 15 partners in the consortium of which some were already in the initial application whereas others have joined along the way. The consortium seems fairly loosely coupled, appearing mainly as an emerging national network. Beyond the obvious coordination role of Lund, the status of partnership is a bit less clear. What does it mean to be a partner? And does Lund assume a more powerful role, due to the coordinating role, than the other universities? Also, is the relationship equal between the larger and the smaller universities, and are the number and range of SWEAH activities equally distributed across the various partners? Could the aim be to build a stronger 'ecology' around the SWEAH initiative in order to connect to domains and professional contexts beyond the purely scientific and academic arenas? Ecology, here, means the internal cohesion within the individual institution, across divisions, departments and sections. Also, and at the same time it includes the cohesion between different institutions, professional arenas, and other societal contexts.

The management and administration of SWEAH seems to work smoothly and we only heard appreciative comments during the interviews. One of the challenges discussed was how to communicate SWEAH initiatives internally at partner institutions. If the aim is to broaden the

scope even more, there are many potential scientific environments that might be interested. There seems to be a need for a more strategic approach to communication and dissemination.

### **The interdisciplinary contribution**

The scientific field of ageing and health encompasses a broad area, reaching across faculties and cultures including medicine, health, behavioural and social sciences, economics and law. The future approach to breadth is an important strategic issue. With the current multi-disciplinary approach participation could be even broader including also relevant parts of the humanities.

One of the explicit aims of SWEAH is to enable doctoral students to engage in, and learn from, other disciplines than their own. Thus, it crosses disciplinary boundaries. This fits in with the field of ageing and is important for the future working life of SWEAH students, regardless whether within or outside academia. The approach taken seems to be multidisciplinary, based on interaction between existing disciplines, rather than an interdisciplinary approach in which several disciplines are integrated. This is a common strategy for interdisciplinary scientific fields, which recognises the fact that disciplines are the main building blocks in higher education institutions. However, the lack of a more integrative approach may give rise to constructive and interesting discussions within SWEAH about if there really is a joint SWEAH doctoral identity, and what defining features can be detected and described. It would be interesting to see if SWEAH can at the same time maintain the strong disciplinary anchoring within core research and methodology and at the same time build an inclusive community of scholars with a shared graduate school identity.

SWEAHs contribution, as we see it, is mainly complementary to disciplines and synthesizing rather than revolutionary. By making doctoral students and senior scholars from various disciplines meet, the scientific awareness and breadth is increased. By courses, scientific meetings and other activities, SWEAH is a strong supporting factor in the area of ageing and health. This was also described in interviews in many positive words, summarizing the 'SWEAH attitude': openness, curiosity, flexibility, engaged, active and attentive. SWEAH provides a broader perspective on ageing for doctoral students. The exposure to other disciplines helps students forming their own researcher identity while still maintaining their overall SWEAH identity and sense of belonging.

To obtain a more aligned and shared understanding of SWEAH's interdisciplinary aims and projects, we suggest that SWEAH considers having a course or module in the first semester for every new doctoral student in SWEAH. This module would address the nature, challenges, and possibilities for working within an interdisciplinary research environment. Also, it would help doctoral students develop their meta-cognition and assume perspectives on the meaning and nature of interdisciplinarity early on in their research process. Thus, it would not merely be an interdisciplinary course (module), but would actually be a course on interdisciplinarity in the PhD research process.

We see SWEAH as a unique opportunity to create and build further discussions around the individual and local research projects on the one hand and work within SWEAH on the other

hand. Exactly because of the interdisciplinary context, doctoral students within SWEAH obtain insight in how disciplines other than their own work. This would include but not be limited to awareness of relevant journals and conferences beyond their own discipline and an expanded research profile. This helps students in developing skills to communicate across disciplinary boundaries. Moreover, it helps them to see how other institutes than their own are organised. This makes them better equipped for future experience as post-docs or professionals in the field of ageing and health.

### **Concluding remarks**

In this concluding discussion we will revisit the issues raised in the introduction. The overall impression of SWEAH is very good. This is a well-managed research school with many laudable initiatives, for other to be inspired by. The main contribution is the creation of a national network for multidisciplinary studies of ageing and health. This will benefit the doctoral students in terms of scientific breadth and widened perspectives. It will also provide networking opportunities across Swedish higher education institutions. We think this multidisciplinary approach is a feasible and sustainable way of organising a graduate school, i.e. complementing the disciplinary perspectives with cross-disciplinary encounters. The courses provided are developed with that in mind, a ‘bottom-up’ approach, embracing the various backgrounds and research interests among students. Since doctoral students are admitted to and will graduate in their respective discipline, this seems like the only possible way to start.

The current interdisciplinary mix of disciplines seems already broad, crossing traditional faculty boundaries, from medicine to law. This is enabled by the interactive, multidisciplinary approach outlined above. An even broader composition of disciplines is of course possible, if the long-term aim is to remain a meeting place, an agora for various perspectives on ageing and health. If the aim is create a new field of research, in the intersection of existing disciplines, the number of disciplines might already be high.

The most important impact of SWEAH is, we suggest, first of all the networking initiatives, including mobility funds, scientific meetings and courses. Other indicators could be number of publications, course evaluations, number of mobile students and number of participating supervisors. The number of graduated PhDs (as reported in the annual reports) seems perhaps less relevant, given that the main responsibility for students’ progression and completion remains with the supervisors. The already published PhD theses seem in varying degrees to have been affected by the SWEAH experience. Having said that, it seems the PhD students themselves have very positive experiences from being part of SWEAH. It has indeed widened their scientific horizons.

We also recognize the future strategy to focus more on postdocs. This also seems like a good idea for fostering the next generation of ageing and health scholars. If this is a matter of priority in terms of resources we think the number of doctoral students admitted could be reduced. Postdocs are crucial components of a vital research environment.

The report is based on our earlier experiences from research, policy and practice. One of the crucial things for multidisciplinary graduate schools is the relation to supervisors, who may represent one or more disciplines. We did not notice any tensions or conflicts in this regard but there might also be a future potential to involve more supervisors in the development of SWEAH, in particular those who are junior or even new to the supervisor role.

Lastly, the management and organization of SWEAH seems well-functioning. The School is coordinated by Lund University and there are currently 15 partner institutions. However, there seems to be a challenge to 'spread the word' about SWEAH internally, within the institutions. It seems very much up to each of the contact persons how this is undertaken. We therefore recommend some kind of communication strategy for SWEAH partners.