

Second report from SWEAH External Advisory Board

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Introduction

This is the second and final report from the SWEAH External Advisory Board (EAB). It is based on our understanding of the structures, processes and outcomes of SWEAH during the period of study (2017-2019) as shown in documents and interviews. To us in the EAB, it has been a pleasure to be a “critical friend” in this process. Our task has certainly not been to control or to find errors and faults but rather be enhancement focused and suggest ways to further develop, strengthen, and consolidate SWEAH.

The following main issues, decided by the SWEAH board, were sent to us before the second site visit in Lund, March 2019.

1. What are the potential outcomes – “effect measures” – relevant for the evaluation of SWEAH?
2. Are there any different and/or additional goals and activities for SWEAH to consider for the future?
3. How should SWEAH’s postdoc program be designed to efficiently attain the goals of the graduate school, in particular in terms of fostering future leadership capacity and internationalisation?
4. Considering the responses to the attached enquiry to the Vice-chancellors of the partner universities (2018), and available information about the funding of SWEAH beyond the current funding period: What strategies do you suggest to sustain and develop the graduate school for the future? What strong arguments are there for the continuation of SWEAH?

In addition to these, the EAB was invited to pose questions we would like to see addressed themselves. The following six questions were formulated:

1. Have the SWEAH Board worked systematically (on a structural and educational level) with the recommendations proposed by the EAB since last year?
2. What specific initiatives have been set up or considered?
3. In what ways has SWEAH balanced its international ambition with the national integrity and local accomplishments?
4. Do we see an improved experience of SWEAH as contributing to doctoral students and their supervisors’ expectations?

5. The future scientific scope of SWEAH and the approach to breadth versus a more focused integration of perspectives

6. How does the SWEAH view its contribution to gerontology (research on ageing) in Sweden and internationally. What elements of SWEAH contributed to advance gerontology particularly?

The responses to our own questions will be used in our evaluation as we see fit, while this report is organised around the four main issues as formulated by the SWEAH board. We first present a few general observations, by which we briefly revisit the recommendations and reflections from the first site-visit in Lund in November 2017. Secondly, we address the issues and themes discussed during the second visit in Lund.

General impressions

Overall, we see a positive development of SWEAH. It is now a well-established organisation that has matured and now provides an even stronger infrastructure than at the time of the first site-visit. We recognise that several of the EAB recommendations have been considered. A concrete example of this is the now developed support of postdocs and the general transition from a sole focus on PhD to an additional focus on postdocs. More generally, we saw predominantly positive developments in the curriculum, the role of supervisors, the emphasis on interdisciplinarity, and the environments in which SWEAH plays a role. We provide some background to these observations and also discuss the “SWEAH spirit”.

Curriculum

SWEAH offers a series of free courses that are an addition to courses in the own department of PhD students, and provides them with a broader view. It is continuously looking for ways to promote and to optimise the courses. On the initiative of supervisors, next year a course “Ageing and social change” will be offered in Linköping. On the initiative of students, an online course was developed, which so far had few participants, but can be used in the future.

SWEAH has developed a course for postdocs, which strengthens the focus on retention and the further development of researcher and peer communities, including mentoring. This course is open to postdocs from external institutions for a fee.

In a similar way, retention and community building has been prioritised between PhD students by the arrangement of half-yearly PhD-days, where SWEAH PhD students have the opportunity to provide feedback on each other’s projects, and to work with knowledge sharing activities and sharing of wider experiences around being a PhD student within SWEAH and more generally. For recently graduated PhD students, an evaluation form has been developed to find out what they want in their post-doc phase.

Supervisors

The experience of a matured and strengthened national Graduate School was also present in the supervisor group that we interviewed during our second site visit. The supervisors

experienced SWEAH as a professional, well organised, and smoothly running organisation. Relatively new supervisors stated that it takes time to know how to profit most from SWEAH, but all saw benefits to their PhD students. The mentioned benefits included: confrontation with different disciplinary views on ageing, confrontation with theories and a variety of methodological approaches, and network building. The supervisors described SWEAH as a “gateway to the broad field of ageing”. For themselves, they saw benefits in collaboration on existing courses or developing new courses.

According to the PhD students with whom we had a meeting, supervisors are generally supportive of SWEAH and encourage their students to apply. They appreciate the “ryggsäck”. However, from the side of the PhD students we heard that some students found that they lived in two separate worlds: their local environment and SWEAH. They felt that their supervisors wanted them to make up for the time they had spent on SWEAH. We have not been able to check if this was a feeling only, or a really existing supervisor attitude.

We noted that among the supervisors we met, none were working in the medical field. This is in stark contrast with the observation that a majority of the PhD students enrolled in SWEAH are working in the medical field. Although the absence of medical supervisors may be due to accidental circumstances, we find it important enough to report.

SWEAH has undertaken efforts to increase the engagement of supervisors, for example, by inviting them to participate in the SWEAH conference. Also, a one-day pedagogic course was offered for supervisors on mentoring, linking with the students following the post-doc course. As supervisors have different profiles, and some are not familiar with ageing research, “best practices” are made available online.

Interdisciplinarity

A conclusion from the first EAB site visit was that interdisciplinarity was one of the main contributions, or “added values”, of SWEAH. The PhD students underlined this conclusion in various ways. They have become aware that ageing is a vast research area, with a variety of both quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches. They have gained insight into the context of their own research. Also, the confrontation with other disciplines forces a student to make their own views more explicit. Potentially, they will be better able to translate the knowledge resulting from their research to other stakeholders.

To illustrate this point, we found the following quote from a former SWEAH PhD student particularly illuminating:

Moreover, being a part of SWEAH has also been influential. Over the years, I have attended interdisciplinary courses and activities with colleagues from vastly different disciplines and research environments. I have been challenged with unfamiliar theories, methods and philosophical underpinnings, all relevant for the broad and interdisciplinary field of ageing and health. The knowledge derived from these activities has contributed to the theoretical, and to some extent, the methodological choices made.

Kylén 2018, p 13

Whether this will help build a career remains a question. Most likely, it depends on the discipline one specialises in. To illustrate, the contrast was mentioned between a student specialising in sociology versus in heart surgery.

Furthermore, the supervisors underlined the importance of the interdisciplinary aspect of SWEAH, and that the interdisciplinary aspect contributed in important ways to creation of new and original knowledge within the core disciplines as well. In a more practical sense, SWEAH offers the opportunity to find a second supervisor for a PhD thesis that crosses disciplines.

In all, we feel that SWEAH promotes interdisciplinarity in a sensitive and thoughtful way, by building on existing disciplinary traditions but also exposing individual junior researchers to other scientific ways of thinking.

“The SWEAH spirit”

In the interviews from the first site visit, the so-called “SWEAH spirit” was discussed. This term was introduced to us as a description of the special atmosphere of the School. Some of the keywords were openness, curiosity, flexibility, engagement, activity and attentiveness. These features were highly appreciated by the students and staff alike and were considered valuable both in relation to the PhD education, but also in relation to the unique approach to research and knowledge creation processes. In the case of the latter, this was connected to a particular creativity and motivation in the research projects.

During the second site visit, we came across a few concerns regarding the sustainability of this spirit. The further institutionalisation and the more “mature” organisation must not negatively affect the positive aspects mentioned above. It is always a balance to strike between a strong community and sense of belonging, and openness and flexibility for those who are outside the core group but still interested in participation. Our impression is that SWEAH is aware of the need to maintain this balance and manages it well.

Environments

It is clear that SWEAH plays different roles for different environments. Its main contribution seems to be for the small environments where few researchers within the field are active, even if the role played at larger environments seems to be significant as well.

On the *local level*, each partner institution and local research environment benefits from the interdisciplinarity in research focus and scope encouraged by SWEAH. Also, the financial and practical support from SWEAH feeds into the home environments in a positive way.

On the *national level*, SWEAH manages to build cohesion, focus, and a heightened research momentum within the research into aging and health. Through its national initiatives, SWEAH brings researchers, research communities, and research approaches and methodologies together that would not be likely to come together otherwise. This enhances research outcomes, researcher development and formation, and the creation of research and

professional networks that would otherwise be difficult to create and maintain for the individual researcher, research team, and research institution.

On the *international level*, SWEAH has started to profile itself in the wider European research communities on ageing and health. The potential transformative aspects of SWEAH, as a national platform with international reputation, could be further followed up in the future.

Surely, to strengthen and further develop contributions on each level (local, national, and international) and at the same time to ensure synergy between these levels, is a very challenging task, but also one with great potential. With the professionalism, competence, vision, and tenacity of the SWEAH management and leadership we have ourselves witnessed and experienced over the two site visits, we are strongly convinced that SWEAH may succeed in this further development and progress on local, national, and international levels in the years to come.

EAB addresses the issues raised by the Board

1. What are the potential outcomes – “effect measures” – relevant for the evaluation of SWEAH?

There are already a number of quantitative indicators in use, and reported to the financier, including the number of participants, number of mobile students, number of institutions involved, and number of graduates. These are all relevant and useful instruments to monitor progress.

We have also discussed more long-term effects of SWEAH and in so doing we have focused on what we find to be the most valuable contribution: interdisciplinarity. The exposure to interdisciplinarity does not necessarily show in a PhD thesis, although there are examples like the thesis quoted above. A possible suggested effect measure could be how interdisciplinarity shows in the future careers of SWEAH scholars. This could include but not be limited to the following: (a) publications beyond the obvious disciplinary outlets, (b) collaborations with researchers from other fields as shown in publications and grant applications, and (c) academic and professional career paths of SWEAH graduates.

Another theme is the establishment of new research areas and research agendas within the field of ageing and health. One example arose from our discussion with supervisors: with knowledge about and support from SWEAH, a professor in engineering used the opportunity to write a grant proposal to start a research line on ageing. Had SWEAH not been in the background, he would have chosen another topic. Thus, a further effect measure could be the number of new interdisciplinary projects engaged in with the support of SWEAH.

In respect of these suggested effect measures, it would be beneficial if SWEAH could integrate some of these suggestions into the SWEAH curriculum: (a) Guide new SWEAH PhD students towards interdisciplinary journals (or journal open to interdisciplinary submissions). (b) Guide and support SWEAH PhD students and early career researchers (e.g. postdocs) in how to identify funding bodies, how to write applications, and how to build application consortia with external partners, that are positioned in interdisciplinary domains.

(c) Map and identify career paths of previous SWEAH graduates and sustain the alumni-network build around SWEAH in order to gather knowledge about SWEAH careers, as a reservoir of ageing-and-health researchers, but also to be able to guide and support new PhD students in how to pursue a variety of possible academic and professional careers.

2. Are there any different and/or additional goals and activities for SWEAH to consider for the future?

PhDs and postdocs

This second question is related to the organisation and management of SWEAH. A first reflection from the EAB is around postdocs. As mentioned, we recognise and highly appreciate the new focus on postdocs alongside PhD students. However, during the interviews, a need was also expressed to further explore opportunities in terms of mentorship. Firstly, postdocs could be engaged as mentors for PhD students and secondly, postdocs could also be mentored by more senior academic staff. In the interviews, the postdocs themselves mentioned that it was enjoyable to participate and engage in the mentoring scheme with PhD students, and the postdocs experienced the mentor-role as a way of developing as a researcher (besides the research activities). Even though the mentoring scheme was appreciated by PhD students as well as postdocs, the postdocs also mentioned that it took up much time, energy, and focus away from their research activities. We suggest that the mentoring scheme with postdocs are developed in a way that allows postdocs time and energy to fully engage, and that a course or modules on mentoring pedagogies and techniques are offered to postdocs as a form of semi-formal career training.

Secondly, the same could be the case for the mentoring *of* postdocs (and not only *by* postdocs). We encourage a systematically developed scheme around the mentoring of postdocs and that responsible senior researchers are identified and contacted to take on the role. Here, as well, time should be recognised for the mentoring tasks and senior staff could be offered seminars or informal modules on mentoring pedagogy and approaches.

Third, more hands-on workshops could be organised that are fully dedicated to writing a joint article or a joint grant application. Such workshop could be supportive for recently graduated postdocs who are looking to develop an own research line.

Network of institutions

During both site-visits, the issue of broad involvement from partner institutions in SWEAH activities has been raised. It has been challenging to make supervisors and other senior academics interested.

Our first suggestion is to introduce a “reversed engagement” model, meaning that SWEAH could be embedded in the partner institutions rather than the other way around. Key SWEAH staff could tour the partner institutions and arrange activities there rather than the other way around. The idea behind this suggestion is that the partner institutions will develop a stronger sense of ownership and responsibility when receiving more influence and a stronger local SWEAH voice. The “reversed engagement” approach will, hopefully, allow a co-organiser

and co-ownership approach to SWEAH. As such, a partner representative could spread the word to other disciplines in their institution.

A second possible initiative could be to strengthen the external stakeholder network and launch more joint activities. SWEAH has a unique position to act as translator and broker of knowledge in the area ageing and health. We wonder if SWEAH activities (seminars, mini-conferences) could also take place within external organisations, institutions, companies, and NGOs in order to consolidate SWEAH not only within an academic community but within wider societal, socio-economic and socio-cultural domains as well. The composition of a list of potential stakeholders outside academia would be a first step, based on consideration of who needs to receive the knowledge generated in SWEAH. Postdocs who have started working in non-academic institutions could be helpful links. Links with stakeholders could be strengthened by jointly planning a conference, and by use of social media.

3. How should SWEAH's postdoc program be designed to efficiently attain the goals of the graduate school, in particular in terms of fostering future leadership capacity and internationalisation?

The activities already in place – grant proposal writing training, management training, ethics workshops – are all well intended and worthwhile. In addition to them, we suggest SWEAH to promote the following.

Collaboration with external stakeholders. This is important both for those who are interested in careers outside the university and those who aim at career paths within academia.

To pursue this, we think shared *supervision and mentoring of PhDs* could be valuable both for PhDs and for postdocs. Shared supervision and mentoring could be agreed between researchers in external contexts and in international contexts. The aspect of academic leadership and research leadership could be enhanced by such collaboration with external partners or with international research groups.

Mobility and international experience are important ways to foster future leadership capacity and (possibly) internationalisation. However, it has been evident that longer stays abroad have been less attractive for SWEAH PhDs. Little use was made of the possibility to apply for extra money on top of the “ryggsäck”. We suggest a programme for *shorter international stays, a kind of “mini sabbaticals”* during a couple of weeks to get the flavour of other academic environments abroad but still within a feasible format more suitable for potential candidates. Such stays could be international (in research contexts) but could perhaps also be national, or even local, but in *professional contexts*. Being in different academic *and* professional environments could, in different ways, promote leadership competences in postdocs. Perhaps this could even be integrated into the PhD as a form of “doctoral internship model” as we know it from other national contexts. This intersection between academic and professional domains seems to be especially relevant for SWEAH due to its interdisciplinary nature and outreach.

4. Considering the responses to the attached enquiry to the Vice-chancellors of the partner universities (2018), and available information about the funding of SWEAH beyond the current funding period: What strategies do you suggest to sustain and develop the graduate school for the future? What strong arguments are there for the continuation of SWEAH?

Breaking this long theme down into two, we start with a discussion around the arguments for continuation of SWEAH and then move on to the future sustainability issues.

Arguments for continuation

We recognise that SWEAH is a unique national platform for ageing and health research, presenting different angles on ageing in a connecting way. Its contributions have been substantial for the many institutions involved, not least for the smaller research environments. It has also worked as a platform from which researchers with more peripheral yet serious research interests in these themes could meet, learn and be inspired by. At the second site-visit in Lund, we heard a compelling example by a researcher from the engineering faculty (see above).

So far, recruitment of PhDs in different disciplines has followed the “snowball” strategy. Although the current disciplinary composition is fairly broad, there are disciplines, in particular within the social sciences and the humanities, not involved today. We are thinking for example of economics, history, philosophy, and anthropology. This way seen, there are still unexplored dimensions to the notion, scope and reach of “interdisciplinarity” which is so central to the SWEAH identity and outcomes.

All this cannot be done by one single institution. SWEAH provides a necessary, dynamic, national forum to discuss the provision of courses, content, potential overlaps and complementarities across its partner institutes. It also provides a basis for an alumni network, to be further developed the next couple of years as more PhD students graduate. As mentioned above, the organisation and leadership of SWEAH works very well. It has a well-functioning administration in a matured organisation with highly satisfied stakeholders, which has put much effort into continuous learning and improvement. In itself, the existence of this organisation is an argument to keep it in place. Moreover, its existence enables further development as discussed under issue 2.

Sustainability and development

The second, and vital, issue to address from this long theme is how to sustain and develop SWEAH in the future. Our overall and very positive impressions of SWEAH should be obvious to the reader. However, as far as we are concerned, the long-term strategy has not been one of the stronger sides of SWEAH. SWEAH is currently funded by Vetenskapsrådet, but this funding will end soon, which confronts the board and the management with the following questions: What is the long-term funding strategy for SWEAH? What kind of funding models do you explore?

The current main strategy seems to be to apply for more external funding. Whereas external funding bodies could and should play an important role as initiators and drivers in the build-

up of new research schools, this should in the longer run be the responsibility of the universities. Relying on external funding to such a large degree seems unsustainable, even if the host environment has put a huge effort into applications for further funding.

Given the long and successful track record of SWEAH, a stronger future commitment from Lund University as coordinating institution should be possible. However, given the wide geographical scope of this partner network, the other institutions involved should be more financially engaged. A future funding model could for instance be based on (a) membership fees, (b) co-funding models and/or (c) fees for course participation. Yet another possibility would be to involve external stakeholders as financiers of SWEAH activities and make the partnership with these stakeholders stronger. As mentioned, our impression is that stakeholder involvement has not been prioritized and currently is rather limited. In this regard, stakeholders could be motivated by the observation that “it is very expensive to do the wrong thing” – borrowing a statement that we heard in our meeting with the SWEAH board.

Taking all points of in our report into account, we conclude that SWEAH could well be on the way to develop into more than a graduate school, i.e., a network that stimulates generation of knowledge on ageing and health as well as application of such knowledge – without losing sight of its core goal of guiding graduate students.