

SUBJECT-LEVEL REVIEW EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2021



The University of Akureyri was granted the permission to award Doctoral Degrees in selected fields of study on October 20th, 2018. This was the end of a long application process and at the same time the beginning of a new era for UNAK.

In the final report from the Evaluation committee there were several issues raised both for the university as a whole as well as individual programs. In the end the government granted the university the permission to offer doctoral studies in the fields of social sciences, natural resource management, law and health sciences with specific subfields within each science field. In the buildup of the doctoral program the university has aimed to base our doctoral studies within the framework of the initial application, the conclusions of the evaluation committee and the formal permission from the ministry of education.

In the application process UNAK presented its idea of doctoral studies as an interdisciplinary approach with a center for doctoral studies. This is necessary both to accommodate research within the university, that tends to be interdisciplinary, the issues that are faced within Iceland and the fact that UNAK is a small university that needs to pull its resources together in order to have a critical mass of students and administration for doctoral studies. In the main findings of the evaluation committee there are several recommendations that agree to that approach and emphasize to have clear structure, admission criteria's (including requirements for funding) and coursework for students and staff, including training for continuous development plan for staff involved with the doctoral programs.

The evaluation committee also included recommendations for individual programs with most of those recommendations being applicable to the doctoral studies in general. An example of those recommendations is a clearer research strategy within faculties, clear and deep connections between MSc and PhD students and the research community. In several recommendations a research ethical committee is recommended for each program. However, in the light of the small size of UNAK, and the Icelandic academic community in general, there is an ongoing work within the rector's conference of Iceland to have research ethics community for the Icelandic Academic research as a whole – administer by the rector's conference.

The Self-Review Report is different from other UNAK reports because the doctoral education only started in late 2018 and the first PhD student has not yet graduated. Thus, UNAK has not yet been through the whole process from registration of a PhD candidate to graduation. The Self-Review Report concerns the experience and knowledge that has been gained through the two first years of a new doctoral programme as well as the plan for the coming years. This summary informs about concerns, the design, implementation, and early execution of PhD education at the University of Akureyri in relation to the initial proposal and the evaluation committee report.

After UNAK got formal accreditation for PhD education in October 2017 the first PhD candidates were enrolled in December 2018. At the end of 2020 seven PhD students had been accepted at UNAK and the first student is expected to graduate at the end of 2022.

The main findings of the doctoral education so far are that the UNAK PhD accreditation relied on three crucial conditions concerning the quality of the prospective PhD education: organisational/administrative competence, critical mass of the research community, and financial requirements – all of which were emphasized from the evaluation committee.

The guiding questions of the Self-Review report are:

- How does UNAK ensure the international standards of its PhD degrees?
- How does UNAK ensure that each PhD candidate has an adequate learning experience?

The entire exercise is about how to find ways to uphold and enhance the quality of UNAK's PhD education regarding international standards and the individual learning experience. The result of the analysis has given a list of the twenty most urgent actions in the interest of quality enhancement in PhD education at UNAK. The conclusion of the three dimensions is as follows.

1) Management structure and organization of the PhD education

Doctoral education at UNAK is academically under the auspices of the Doctoral Council and administratively led by the Centre for Doctoral Studies. This regulatory environment entails that UNAK issues PhD degrees in a certain field and discipline but not at a certain School or Faculty that hosts that discipline. The academic validation of the individual doctoral degree lies with the Doctoral Council. This is done in order to maintain a critical mass on both academic and administrative level.

The research project is normally under the auspices of one of the Schools or Faculties within UNAK. This means that a PhD candidate has a split relationship with the university. As students, they enroll at the Centre for Doctoral Studies under the jurisdiction of the Doctoral Council. As staff members, they belong to a School or Faculty within UNAK, normally the unit of their main supervisor.

By this division of responsibilities between the Centre for Doctoral Studies and the Doctoral Council on the one hand, and the Schools or Faculties on the other hand, the PhD candidates presumably obtain a better and more secure position during their stay at the university than if they are loosely attached only through one party, i.e., through the main supervisor.

As the PhD Candidates enroll with the university, they sign a contract in which the PhD Candidate, the main supervisor, the Dean of the School concerned, and the Director of Doctoral Studies declare their commitment towards this individual PhD project. The basis of that relationship is set forth in a comprehensive handbook on PhD education set forth and managed by the Centre for Doctoral Studies. Some chapters are already finished and in use and others are still under final tuning.

The Self-Review Report points out opportunities to further strengthen administrative clarity by a revision of the present Regulations concerning the entire University as well as the specific Regulations concerning PhD education. The division of responsibilities between the Doctoral Council and the Centre for Doctoral Studies on the one hand, and the Schools and Faculties on the other is probably the main issue, which can be resolved by the Rector and the University Council together as they revise the Regulations. A step towards that change was taken in spring 2021 when the regulations of the University were updated to separate the roles of the chairman of the Council and the director for the Centre of Doctoral Studies.

2) Professionalism and support of the scientific community

Professionalism is the keyword for all dimensions of administration, supervision, recruitment, design of research projects, curricular activities, etc. and is understood to be the best way to ensure international standards of UNAK's PhD degrees and an adequate learning experience for each PhD candidate. By "professionalism", the understanding is that all parties involved in the process honour and expect the following standards as guiding principles: specialized knowledge, competence, integrity, accountability, and self-regulation.

UNAK recognizes that PhD supervision is a form of professional competence that needs personal development as well as continuous institutional support.

UNAK has approached PhD education as a professional undertaking and the report concludes that this is the right way to go in the future, too. The main features of the UNAK PhD paradigm are the following:

1. A unified quality control of the PhD process, the curriculum and competence of supervision in the hands of the Doctoral Council ensures global standards in tailor-made PhD projects.
2. Explicit and detailed financial requirements will ensure sufficient financial resources to complete the doctoral thesis in due time.

The UNAK paradigm puts emphasis on the PhD journey as an education process, rather than a training (apprenticeship) or studies (coursework and large groups of peer PhD students). Since PhD education is supposed to be the candidate's ticket into academia rather than a life-long journey, every PhD process has a project-like structure. Externally funded, internationally well-networked research projects offer the paradigmatic environment for UNAK doctoral projects.

To underline the professional character of each PhD candidate's position in the research community, UNAK had decided that funding for full-time PhD positions is needed as a pre-requisite for admittance to the PhD programme. In practice, the Doctoral Council has decided that a reliable funding plan for three or four years and factual funding for one or two years will fulfil this requirement.

All present PhD candidates at UNAK work within research projects with external funding. Furthermore, each project has international connections and most of them are Icelandic contributions to Nordic, European or global research networks around a certain topic or thematic.

By engaging in PhD education, UNAK strives to lift its research activity, competence, and independent supply of knowledge to an internationally sufficient level. As a geographically peripheral higher education institution in the North, UNAK needs to uphold PhD education as a means of securing its internal competence supply according to internationally relevant standards.

Among other findings the SLR for doctoral studies then UNAK needs to take the following steps to ensure the professional nature of its PhD education on institutional level as well as on personal level:

1. Consolidate and explicate the functional and organizational position of PhD education. In the dialogue with the Ministry of Education and the Evaluation Committee of 2017, UNAK declares that PhD education will be a separate unit within the university. Such a unit would contain the present Doctoral Council and Centre for Doctoral Studies. Only such a unit can ensure the level of specialized knowledge, competence, integrity, accountability, and self-regulation that PhD education needs to be successful.

The PhD education at UNAK is not yet formally defined as an independent unit but will be part of the 2021 revision of the University Regulations. After UNAK has made a formal decision about the PhD education unit, a comprehensive dialogue will continue within the university community about the nature of UNAK's PhD education. The Doctoral Council as well as the Centre of Doctoral Studies can be instrumental in this development but the Rector and the University Council should preferably take the lead in the process.

2. Consolidate and enlarge the internationally qualified research community of UNAK and gear it towards compatibility with PhD education. This objective requires that UNAK increase its emphasis on recruitment policy concerning academic staff, towards focusing more on internationally recognized research quality. Professionalism among PhD educators also requires active training in PhD pedagogy and more advanced pedagogical requirements for supervisors. The Rector, Schools and Faculties should work on the changing of recruitment policies. The Doctoral Council and Centre for Doctoral Studies need to create norms for pedagogical competence and offer adequate supervisor training.

3. Develop internal financial instruments to create incentives beneficial to the UNAK PhD paradigm. Schools and Faculties should be financially encouraged to implement practices that are beneficial to PhD education, such as formation of centres of excellence with complex research portfolios, or a research environment in which one or more PhD candidates can pursue their doctoral education. The main objective of these actions is to create an environment with professional PhD educators. A professional approach to financial matters increases the professionalism of each PhD candidate. The Doctoral Council and the Centre of Doctoral Studies can provide expert advice on the topic but the Rector, the University Council as well as the Schools and Faculties should take part in this dialogue with the research community of UNAK.

4. Implement and develop practices and routines for continuous quality enhancement in the PhD process –from application to graduation. The Doctoral Council and the Centre for Doctoral Studies need to review the process constantly and revise processes and procedures accordingly. A more detailed exposition of aims and actions as well as key indicators for results can be found at the end of each main chapter of the Self-Review Report.

On a general level, the Self-Review Committee ascertain UNAK's ambition concerning the quality standards of its PhD degrees are on a realistic level. The brief experience and lack of final implementation of some processes and practices makes it challenging to evaluate the actual quality of the present setting. However, the fact that there have appeared no dropouts during the first two years is an encouraging indication. Furthermore, all PhD candidates seem to be within their individual timeframe, which gives an indication that the future success rate will be good. The first graduates from our PhD studies are expected in 2023.

Overall the main findings, recommendations and actions can be found in the summary table of actions in the appendix.

3) Conclusion

With the accreditation for doctoral studies of selected fields of study the University of Akureyri is now underway to strengthen its overall research output. The program is only a few years in but already there are 7 fully funded doctoral candidates. These candidates are conducting their education based on personalized learning outcomes and research proposals approved by a central doctoral committee which is administrated under the center of doctoral studies and research administration. The university is early on in its journey towards a fully-fledged PhD studies in all of its fields and disciplines, but the current plan is build the core competence of faculties and the administration in order to allow our current doctoral programs to grow and evolve over the next five years at which point the program overall will be reviewed and adjusted based on SLR findings and reviews. It was commentated in the Accreditation report that UNAK projected a clear vision for its future and the role of the doctoral studies in that future. This vision still holds and it is has become evident after the first few years of our doctoral program that doctoral studies are *the key* for future growth of the academic community at UNAK as well as a key component for research in cooperation with institutions and companies in the communities which UNAK serves.

Supplement

Table 14 Overview over 20 must urgently needed actions

Action	Objective	Agent	Chapter
1 Professionalism as key to success	Establish procedures founded upon specialized knowledge, competence, integrity, accountability, and self-regulation.	Doctoral Council	5
2 Professional PhD candidates	Position PhD candidates as academic professionals within the university.	Doctoral Council	5
3 Professional PhD educators	Create a community of experts in PhD education.	Doctoral Council	5
4 Institutional professionalism	Define procedures for interaction between Centre for Doctoral Studies and other constitutive units of UNAK (skipulagseiningar).	Rector and Univ. Council	5
5 Clarify institutional positioning and status of PhD education at UNAK	Establish common understanding and legal foundation for Centre for Doctoral Studies and the Doctoral Council as institutional unit (skipulagseining).	Rector and Univ. Council	2, 5
6 Clarify institutional positioning of PhD candidates	Common understanding and legal foundation for PhD candidates as employees and students.	Rector and Univ. Council	2, 4
7 Profile of UNAK PhD	Dialogue towards common understanding of the UNAK PhD paradigm.	Doctoral Council	2, 4, 5
8 Centres of excellence (=stable research teams)	Create powerful groups of researchers capable of attracting funding, PhD candidates, and intl. visiting researchers.	Senior IQA staff	3
9 Financial model for PhD education	Find financial incentives for all parties.	Rector and Univ. Council	4
10 Recruit IQA staff for academic credibility	International recruitment of IQA staff to all open positions, preferably full professors.	Schools	3

11	Systematic research funding practices	Facilitate continuous flow of external research funds.	Schools	3
12	Develop Centre for Doctoral Studies as expert body	Ensure competence in curriculum development, supervisor training and PhD pedagogy.	Rector and Univ. Council	2
13	Professional development of supervisors	Procedures for professional development of academics eligible as PhD supervisors.	Centre for Doctoral Studies	2
14	Cohesion of the PhD candidate body	Facilitate collaboration and common identity among PhD candidates	Centre for Doctoral Studies	2
15	Continuous dialogue between involved parties	Common understanding and ownership among all parties on the nature of the UNAK PhD paradigm.	Doctoral Council	4
16	PhD application counselling	Guarantee that applications are substantially and formally suited for assessment.	Centre for Doctoral Studies	4
17	Implement remaining parts of the PhD process	Define procedures and processes for a complete PhD process, incl. the doctoral defence.	Doctoral Council	2, 4
18	Criteria for eligible PhD projects	Common understanding about types of PhD projects fit for the UNAK PhD paradigm.	Doctoral Council	4
19	Create efficient feedback loops	Include all parties in continuous formal and informal update of information.	Centre for Doctoral Studies	4
20	Publish dynamic "Handbook" with comprehensive information about UNAK PhD education.	Electronic platform with all regulations, procedures, FAQ etc. (Doktorsnáman)	Centre for Doctoral Studies	2, 4