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| ***“From the inside of a PhD Program in International Management”***  Published in: Holbæk, Kristiansen and Randøy (Ed), Management for progress: The manifold academician – Essays in honor of Harald Knudsen. Novus Forlag, Oslo, Norway. |
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# Introduction

The demand for high-quality PhD graduates is growing; people capable of conducting research and engaging in consultancy are in higher demand from leading universities, public institutions and a growing number of corporations. As a concequence, the world is experiencing a massive growth in PhD education (Cyranoski et al., 2011). In this chapter, we provide an insight into the International Management PhD Program offered by the University of Agder. This case is interesting as it illustrates some of the motivations behind the creation of a PhD program. At the same time, the case demonstrates the importance of committed and innovating professors, in this chapter refered to as entrepreneurs, when establishing a new study program at the PhD level. Moreover, we have found that information from within PhD programs is scarce, and hope that work such as this may stimulate debate on the organization of PhD programs. Finally, we believe that the chapter should fit nicely within the scope of this book, since Harald Knudsen, whom it commemorates, was instrumental in establishing the PhD program.

According to the program description presented in its webpages, [www.uia.no/intphd](http://www.uia.no/intphd), the International Management PhD Program offers equal opportunities to individuals from all nationalities to engage in academic research, teaching or consultancy in the area of international business. Its objective is to be an international, high-quality PhD program through which candidates receive a doctoral education that will allow them to act as consultants, obtain positions in multinational companies or top universities, and publish in well-reputed international academic journals. The overall purpose of the program is to provide the PhD student with a thorough theoretical and methodological background in the field, along with experience of completing a substantial piece of original scientific work (the thesis). The program focuses on international business issues that draw primarily on the academic discipline of management, strategy, and marketing. An evaluation conducted in 2011, of external and internal members, showed that University of Agder (UiA) has managed to establish a high-quality PhD program in international management. Today, it is considered one of the major Scandinavian PhD programs in this area of study.

In what follows, we will present the program in more detail and review the process through which it was instigated, including referring to the importance of key professors in guiding the program during its first years of operation. We will also review the students’ origins, before presenting some results from a recent survey in which students were asked to evaluate the program. The implication of this chapter is that PhD programs interested in constantly improving their quality should recognize the importance of strongly involved entreprenuerial professors as well as the close monitoring of student satisfaction.

# The PhD program: Conception and importance

As a member state of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), Norway’s higher education system has been modeled in accordance with the Bologna process. In 2003, a new degree structure was implemented during a quality reform that introduced a 3+2+3 model: a three-year bachelor’s degree, two-year master’s degree and three-year doctoral degree. The implementation of this common structure for doctoral education in Europe was aimed at increasing cooperation and mobility across countries and ensuring a common approach to quality in PhD education. Within the new regulatory framework, educational institutions in Norway can decide on the detailed regulations for their PhD degrees themselves, although – as is the case with the Program in International Management at UiA – institutions can also follow the recommended guidelines for PhD regulations adopted by the Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions (UHR). In principle, all kinds of higher educational institutions can get PhD programs accredited in Norway. In 2009, 22 institutions had PhD programs: 7 universities, 9 specialized universities, and 6 out of 35 university colleges, with 8,377 students enrolled and 1,148 PhD degrees conferred (Mørland, 2010)

According to the regulations of the UHR (2004), the objective of a doctoral program is to educate and develop the skills of competent individuals by engaging them in research, publication, consulting and other professional services within their field of expertise. The goal is that these highly trained individuals will go on to serve society in academia, business or other work. The institution offering the PhD program must provide all doctoral candidates with courses and instruction at a high academic level. The research project, often refered to as the thesis, is the core of PhD education, consisting of an independent piece of academic research that meets international standards in the discipline within which it is written. The thesis should make an original contribution to knowledge and achieve a level meriting publication in the literature within its academic field.

Work on a doctoral thesis includes individual supervision from an academic supervisor; the candidate should have regular contact with his/her supervisor and participate actively in the research community. Once the thesis has been completed, the institution appoints an evaluation committee with at least three members[[2]](#footnote-2). The evaluation committee determines whether or not the thesis is worthy of public defence. In addition, the doctoral candidate should hold a trial lecture on a topic determined by the evaluation committee. Having fullfilled the necessary coursework, and with their trial lecture and public defense having been approved, the candidate is conferred the degree of Philosophiae Doctor (PhD) – the highest educational level.

# The process of becoming a university

The establishment of the PhD Program in International Management in 2006 was a major step in the process of UiA qualifying to become a full university. Traditionally, there were only four universities in Norway, located in Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim, and Tromsø. Later it was determined that university colleges offering five master’s programs and four doctoral programs could be given the formal status of a university; as a result, the Norwegian College of Agriculture, Stavanger University College, Bodø University College, and Agder University College all became universities.

Back in 2003, the then-named Agder University College (AUC), adhering to its long-standing strategy of growth and development aimed at the attainment of university status, applied to the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) for accreditation for its PhD Program in International Management. At that time, the Faculty of Economics and Social Sciencies was the largest of the seven AUC faculties, with 2,000 students and 137 members of staff, including 15 doctoral students / research fellows. However, these doctoral students were working at the school while enrolled in PhD programs at other universities. The AUC prioritized the Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences and committed itself to providing the resources that faculty needed to take on the responsibilities of education at the doctoral level.

According to the PhD program proposal sent to NOKUT (Høgskolen i Agder (HiA), 2004), despite the fact that several leading universities in Europe and the United States were offering PhD programs in international management, a doctoral program focused specifically in this area was lacking in Norway. Given Norway’s long tradition of trade and international cooperation, expertise in the area of international management is a constant requirement in many sectors. Additionally, the program was expected to provide a local knowledge base for the public and private sectors in Southern Norway. Historically, this has been among the most open and internationally oriented regions in Norway, with high levels of exports and trade, and commercial shipping, maritime and oil industries. Therefore, the Agder region stood out as a natural location for a PhD program in international management.

The first proposal for the PhD program was turned down by NOKUT for being too broad. The idea had been to group together all of the reasearch on international issues/topics being carried out at the faculty into one joint PhD program. NOKUT, however, found it theoretically difficult to group academic disciplines such as political science, development, IT and international business into a joint faculty program. A second, more narrow proposal, focused on business management, was accredited in January of 2006, with the first group of students starting in the fall of that year. Profesor Trond Randøy was appointed as the academic director of the PhD program. Two years later, Professor Andreas Falkenberg took over, and since March of 2011 Associate Professor Roy Mersland has been the director. Since the implementation of the program, it has been organized in cohorts, with student admissions happening every second year. During the first few years of the program, a combination of internal UiA professors and external, internationally reputable researchers linked to UiA as part time adjunt professors made up the academic faculty. Gradually, internal UiA faculty members have taken over most of the teaching and supervision in the PhD program.

# The entrepreneurs who built the PhD program

Four people stand out as the entreprenuers behind the PhD program – Professor Joyce Falkenberg, Professor Trond Randøy, Professor Andreas Falkenberg and Professor Harald Knudsen. Without the efforts of these professors, what is today UiA’s largest PhD program would never have come to life. After the first application to NOKUT was turned down, Professors Trond Randøy and Joyce Falkenberg joined forces to design a narrower program and, together with key internal and external professors, convinced NOKUT of the program’s quality. Professor Andreas Falkenberg was a major supporter of the idea of creating a program, and actively worked to get the program up and running. Of the 23 students[[3]](#footnote-3) enrolled in the 2006, 2008 and 2010 cohorts, Professor Andreas Falkenberg supervised five, and Professors Joyce Falkenberg and Trond Randøy four each. Moreover, from the beginning, Professors Andreas Falkenberg and Joyce Falkenberg have taught the core theory courses in International Marketing and International Strategy, respectively, while Professor Trond Randøy has taugth the elective course in International Corporate Governance.

All four entrepreneurs had a major role in the creation of the program. However, the role of Professor Harald Knudsen was fundamental in getting it underway. During his time as dean, he was a relentless leader who fought for the establishment of a PhD program within the faculty. He headed the first committee in charge of designing the PhD program and, after the initial plan of grouping all PhD education at the faculty into one program was refused, he rapidly changed the plans and supported the idea of a more focused program. Moreover, no one has supervised as many students as Professor Knudsen. Of the 23 students from the 2006, 2008 and 2010 cohorts, Professor Harald Knudsen supervised six and, from the outset, has been in charge of the core theory course in International Management.

# International management – An important academic field

International management is a discipline that brings together two major areas of study: general management and international business / international affairs. Consequently, it covers a wide range of general management topics within an international context. Core academic disciplines for the study of management normally include organization theory, human resource management, marketing and strategy. These disciplines focus on both business firms and non-profit organizations, such as public agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), among others. International management also borrows from a number of other disciplines, including economics, political science, information science, geography, history, law, and anthropology, in order to provide insights into international management issues.

International management has been maturing as an academic discipline over the last three decades. It has developed its own theoretical frames of reference, research traditions and terminology. The current level of maturity is reflected in a growing number of academic associations and institutions focusing specifically on international issues, such as the Academy of International Business, the European International Business Association, and the International Society of Marketing and Development. Moreover, there are several recognized journals that specialize in the field of international management, such as the *Journal of International Business Studies* and *International Business Review*.

# The candidates

In the four admission years between 2006 and 2012, 36 students have been accepted into the program. For different reasons, seven students have voluntary decided to leave the program, five have successfully defended their theses, four have recently handed in their theses to the respective evaluation committees, and another six are expected to hand in their theses by the end of 2013. The duration of studies from admission to completion is estimated at between 5 and 6 years, which is the average for PhD programs at Norwegian business schools (Evaluation-Report, 2011). Nevertheless, in line with Norwegian policy developed based on the Bologna guidelines, there has been an emphasis recently on reducing this study duration. In the current policy regime, the average duration can be considered a weakness of the program and needs to be shortened. Nevertheless, a reduced duration of studies should not compromise quality. To balance the need for a shorter duration and continued high quality, the program is currently putting emphasis on closer collaboration between supervisors and students, and more focus on the output – the production of a thesis – from the start of the PhD process. A reduced course load and courses that are more aligned with the students’ research are other measures being tried out.

In the last two years of student admissions (2010 and 2012), around 90 individuals from around the world applied to the program. Only between 5 and 10 per cent of applicants are accepted. Table 1 presents the students’ countries of origin (those who have left the program without completing it are not included).

Table 1. Countries of Origin of Students Admitted to the PhD Program

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| **Country** | **Number of students** |
| Norway | 4 |
| Denmark | 2 |
| Sweden | 1 |
| Lithuania | 1 |
| UK | 1 |
| Germany | 1 |
| Turkey | 1 |
| Israel | 1 |
| Jordan | 1 |
| Sri Lanka | 3 |
| China | 1 |
| Pakistan | 1 |
| Tanzania | 8 |
| Uganda | 1 |
| Nigeria | 1 |
| Grenada | 1 |

Source: Candidates’ records

The distribution of students according to their countries of origin demonstrates that candidates are indeed coming from around the globe; the number of students from Tanzania, and to some extent Sri Lanka, stand out. The reason for these numbers is the long-term partnerships between UiA and Ruhuna University and Mzumbe University in Sri Lanka and Tanzania respectively. All the students from Sri Lanka and four of the eight from Tanzania completed their master’s studies in international management at UiA as a result of these partnerships, with outstanding results. This gave them an excellent academic foundation and faciliated their entry into the PhD program. Relatively few candidates come from Norway (4 out of 29), but those from Denmark and Sweden, being within Scandinavia, could be considered “home” students.

The poor recruitment of PhD students from Norway is a general concern in Norwegian PhD education (Taran et al., 2012). However, while 33% of all PhD students in Norway in 2011 were non-Norwegian (Taran et al., 2012), the percentage for the PhD Program in International Management is 86%. The high percentage of non-Norwegians is a concern though, at the same time, the broad cultural and institutional background of the students makes the PhD program an interesting learning environment for the study of international mangement. Aside from the candidates who have come from the partner universities in Tanzania and Sri Lanka, a few other students also completed their master’s degrees at UiA. Thus, while most candidates come from other master’s programs, UiA is able to supply the PhD program with a number of well-qualified candidates with master’s degrees.

# Student satisfaction and evaluation – A survey

A PhD student satisfaction survey was carried out recently among students from the 2006, 2008 and 2010 cohorts. Results from this type of survey provide information on how PhD students rate their education. The main purpose of the survey was to obtain the PhD candidates’ opinions of their doctoral education. Another aim was to find out whether or not some of the overall objectives of the PhD program are being fulfilled. Finally, knowledge of students’ opinions and their overall impressions with the PhD program is necessary for improving their doctoral education.

**7.1 Students’ background and motivation**

As illustrated in Figure 1, 38 per cent of the students were working as lecturers or in similar positions at universities or other educational institutions when they were accepted into the program. The rest were working for private firms or in the public sector, were students, or were looking for a job. Thus a considerable share of the students were already in academia when accepted into the program. This is particularly the case for those candidates that have come from UiA partner institutions in the South. When they are finished with their studies, these PhD graduates will return to their universities with new qualifications that have the potential to improve their teaching and research activities, and thus could have a greater influence on local students and research stakeholders.

Figure 1. Occupational Backgrounds of International Management PhD Students (2006 - 2010)

Source: Survey conducted in April 2013

Figure 2 shows that the majority of the students (63 per cent) were attracted to the specalized study program of the PhD in International Management. This is a special feature of this PhD program given that other PhD programs at Norwegian business schools are mostly general programs in economics and administration, without a clear focus in one area of business research. Also, many students stated that they chose this PhD program in order to work with expert supervisors in their field of interest (31 per cent), while 38 per cent were attracted by the generous scholarships (which some but not all candidates receive

Figure 2. Reasons for Joining the PhD Program in International Management

Source: Survey conducted in April 2013

## The cohort system

A special feature of the PhD program is that student admissions take place in cohorts every second year. This gives a cohort effect where candidates can support and challenge each other, and provides “economies of scale” in terms of courses and mentoring for the program. The cohort system is, however, also challenging since the time of admission may not fit in with the timing and career planning of all good candidates and does not allow for flexibility when it comes to initiating larger, externally financed research projects that include PhD candidates. Thus, other business schools are generally unable to follow a cohort system. It is therefore very interesting to see that 100 per cent of the candidates surveyed indicated a high appreciation for the cohort system.

## The courses

The students were asked in the survey to rate the core courses that have been offered across the 2006, 2008, and 2010 cohorts. Most respondents gave high scores to the courses, which suggests that the students feel they are receiving a high-quality education. In particular, the courses offered by Professors Joyce Falkenberg, Andreas Falkenberg, and Harald Knudsen received top scores of around 6 on a scale from 1 to 7. Thus, the program’s entreprenuers appear to be highly regarded by the students[[4]](#footnote-4). The respondents generally indicated that they found the courses important for their education:

*“All of the courses have been very useful for me. They have helped me a lot in my dissertation and my research life.”*

However, generally, the candidates expressed the view that the package of core courses is too extensive, and not sufficiently relevant to some candidates’ areas of specialization. The following view illustrates and summarizes comments provided by several of the respondents:

*“Fewer mandatory courses and the opportunity to choose more courses that are relevant to our research topic would be nice”.*

## Ideas for improving the program

In the survey, the candidates were asked to indicate those areas on which the program should put more emphasis. Figure 3 presents their answers (the respondents were allowed to choose several options). 65 per cent of the students selected co-authorship and joint projects with supervisors and/or other professors. 41 per cent indicated that more emphasis should be given to writing articles and getting published in recognized journals, and a similar percentage wanted more emphasis on better supervision. Moreover, when the students were asked to identify particular weaknesses in the PhD program, among the issues mentioned were a lack of flexibility in the mandatory course package, and the importance of teaming supervisors with students at an early stage.

To a large extent, the views of the students have now been incorporated into the program. Consequently, students from the 2012 cohort are being compelled to carry out joint research with their supervisors, the course package has been made more flexible, and a special course on how to write academic articles is now being offered.

Figure 3. Areas of the PhD Program in International Management Requiring More Emphasis

Source: Survey conducted in April 2013

## The strengths of the program

When the students were asked to reflect on the strengths of the PhD program, several mentioned the good funding opportunities, the very international working environment, and the cohort system. Another strength that stood out for being mentioned by several students is that the PhD program is well structured and managed. Also, when asked about the academic guidance received from their supervisors, more than 80 per cent rated this as good or very good. Thus, again, the importance of the program’s entreprenuers stands out since they have supervised most of the students so far.

## Using the Phd program as preparation for employment

The main objective of the PhD program is that, when a candidate has completed it, he/she should be able to contribute to the development of new knowledge, theory, methods, interpretations and forms of documentation within the field of international management research. PhD graduates should also be able to write academic texts according to the norms of international management research, and be able to critically evaluate and pass constructive judgement on scholarly work within the field. Therefore, they are particularly being trained for a career in academia. Indeed, as illustrated in Figure 4, when the candidates were asked where they planned to seek employment after finishing their PhDs, 80 per cent answered that they wished to work in academia.

Figure 4. Choice of Career after Completion of the PhD Program

Source: Survey conducted in April 2013

Moreover, when asked about their professional goals (see Figure 5, respondents coud pick more than one career), 33 per cent of the students indicated that they hoped to become a world-renowned researcher, while 47 per cent are aiming to become a recognized professor at a local university. However, 47 per cent said they were planning to pursue a career in the private sector, and 27 per cent in the public sector.

Figure 5. Professional Goals after Completion of the PhD Program

Source: Survey conducted during April, 2013

These results are in accordance with current Norwegian policy. PhD education not only aims to train the next generation of academic scholars, but must also be seen as advanced training aimed at preparing people for different occupations, sectors, and roles in society (Taran et al., 2012). In a rapidly changing global business environment, highly skilled employees trained in research and innovation are key to maintaining the competitive advantage of organizations. Applicants qualified at a doctoral level have the ability to administer and organize large projects, work under pressure, process large amounts of data, document and report on their work, have strong written and oral communication skills, are resilient and tenacious, and possess the ability to prioritize and juggle a number of tasks at once. Moreover, by obtaining their PhDs they have demonstrated the ability to manage a project over several years and bring it to completion.

# Conclusions

The decision to create a PhD program in international management at UiA was strategic and deliberate, since it reflected the need for such a program in Norway as well as the “readiness” of the Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences to take on doctoral education. Entreprenuers, including Professor Harald Knudsen, were vital in designing and establishing the program at UiA. The program would not have come to life, and would not have reached its current status and reputation, without the entreprenueral efforts carried out by these professors.

Since its instigation, 36 students from 17 countries have been accepted into the program, of which seven have left, five have successfully defended their theses, four have recently handed their theses in to the respective evaluation committees, and an additional six are expected to hand in their theses by the end of 2013.

The typical yardsticks used to assess the success of a PhD program are the dissemination of graduates’ research output, and placements of graduates in reputed private and public institutions or at recognized universities. None of these can be assessed presently, given the short length of time for which the program has been operational, but they should be kept in mind as some of the long-term objectives of the PhD program.

This paper illustrates the importance of the close monitoring of student satisfaction, and the willingness to continually make adjustments to ensure the best possible PhD programs. In the current regime, under which the Bologna process imposes a three-year duration on PhD education, we foresee an increased focus on efficiency in PhD programs in the years to come. We thus recommend more research on which factors may reduce the time it takes students to complete without compromising the quality of their PhD education.

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1. Roy Mersland is the head of the PhD program discussed in this chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. According to the UHR’s (2004) recommendations, an evaluation committee should include the following: both genders, where possible; at least one member who has no association with the appointing institution; at least one member who is from a foreign institution, where possible; only those with doctoral degrees or equivalent. At UiA we aim to fulfill these recommendations. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This number does not include those students that voluntarily decided to leave the program. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Professor Trond Randøy has given the elective course in International Corporate Governance but this was not included in the survey. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)