

Tips and advice for course evaluations of doctoral courses

At Uppsala University, evaluation of doctoral education is mainly done through follow-up of individual study plans for doctoral studies, evaluations according to Uppsala University's model for review of study programmes (UFV 2015/475), the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ) evaluations, and, at regular intervals, university-wide surveys. The Higher Education Ordinance's requirement that higher education institutions give students the opportunity to express their experiences of and views on individual courses (HEO Ch. 1, section 14) also applies to doctoral courses. [Uppsala University's guidelines for course evaluations](#) (UFV 2010/307) state that doctoral courses also are to be evaluated. Since these courses sometimes have few participants, the forms of course evaluation may need to be adapted. Special arrangements may also be needed for other reasons. This document contains some advice when working with course evaluations of doctoral courses.

What is a course?

How we define a course determines whether a course is to be evaluated through a course evaluation. If doctoral students are given credits for a course towards their doctorate for any study activity, this should be defined as a course. As a rule, doctoral students are then to be offered the opportunity to evaluate the course through a course evaluation, which is to be compiled and evaluated within the framework of a course report (see below).

The requirement for a doctoral course syllabus is not regulated in the same way as for undergraduate and master level courses, for which the Higher Education Ordinance states that there is to be a syllabus for a course (HEO Ch. 6, section 14) and that the syllabus is to state "the course level, number of credits, goals, requirements for special eligibility, forms for assessing student performance and other regulations that are needed" (HEO Ch. 6, section 15). However, there may be local regulations at the disciplinary domain/faculty level. For example, the local guidelines for the disciplinary domain of medicine and pharmacy require that the regulation in the above HEO is to apply also to doctoral courses.

Establishing the same formal requirements for syllabuses for doctoral courses as for courses at lower levels has several advantages. For example, content of the exam can be documented and the basis for giving doctoral course credits can be specified.

How can the course evaluation be conducted?

Guidelines for course evaluations at Uppsala University state that a course evaluation normally is to be in written form and should be filled in anonymously. Responding to a course evaluation is always voluntary, but the University needs to provide the opportunity to do so. However, when only one or a few doctoral students participate in the course, the usual course evaluation methods may be less suitable and special arrangements may be needed. Course evaluations can be of a simpler, more informal nature. Some suggestions and tips when evaluating courses at the doctoral level:

- It is important to design the course evaluation to reveal the doctoral students' honest opinions. Since the course director assigns grades, this can make honesty more difficult, especially if the course director is also the doctoral student's supervisor. Regardless of whether the course evaluation is in oral or written form, such problems can be solved by having someone more independent than the grading course director carry out the evaluation. For example, this could be the director of studies for the doctoral programme or the equivalent, or an administrator.

This external person then has the task of compiling and summarising responses to the course evaluation. This type of procedure may also be appropriate for courses with very few participants to promote anonymity in the answers.

- If the doctoral students who have participated in a course feel comfortable with it, an oral discussion or a conversation in which the course participants' views are noted can be an alternative to a written course evaluation.
- As an alternative, the participating doctoral students can discuss course strengths and areas for improvement with each other without the course director's participation. Participants can then write a short summary of the group's joint opinions and submit it to the course management. If this type of method is used, it should be clear that participation in the evaluation discussion is voluntary, so that group pressure to participate does not become a factor (also applies to the previous point).
- A written course evaluation can also be more informal. For example, course participants can be asked to write down the course's strengths and weaknesses at the end of the course, and then a simple compilation of the responses can be made.
- An alternative is also to use *formative* course evaluations: an evaluation made during the course to get information of how the course works and to make adjustments during the course, if necessary. Formative evaluations should be supplemented with a final (*summative*) course evaluation that also includes the course participants' assessment of the examination and the course as a whole. In these cases, the summative assessment may be less comprehensive. If a formative evaluation has been carried out, it should be mentioned in the course report.

Compilation of results, course report, and feedback

Regardless of what form a course evaluation takes, the results are to be compiled. This *compilation* is also to be summarised and evaluated within the framework of a *course report* (see Guidelines for course evaluations, UFV 2010/307). The course report is to provide both the summary of the doctoral students' views and the course director's assessment of their views. The course report can also be relatively simple. At a minimum, it should state *which course it concerns, the semester in which the course has been given, strengths and weaknesses according to the course participants, the course director's reflections on this and suggestions for possible measures*. If no changes are planned, the reason for this should be stated, so that when the doctoral students receive feedback, they can clearly see that their views have been considered. If the course evaluation is short or the course is small, the entire compilation can be included in the course report.

The compilation and course report are to be registered and made available to anyone given the opportunity to complete the evaluation and to new course participants the next time the course is offered. Any decisions on measures also are to be made available to both old and new course participants. It does not matter if these documents are available digitally or on paper, as long as the doctoral students know that the documents are available and where to find them.

As specified in the Higher Education Ordinance (HEO Ch. 1, section 14), feedback of results of course evaluations are to be given to undergraduate/master's/doctoral students. However, the Uppsala Student Union and the Swedish Higher Education Authority (Report 2020:07) have identified feedback of course evaluations as an area in need of improvement at Uppsala University.

Aside from the statutory requirements, feedback on course evaluations is also a way to increase the response rate because it indicates that recipients want to see the results and that course participants' feedback is taken seriously and followed up.

What is important to ask – and how to ask it?

Survey questions should be focused on improvements and be action oriented. The following areas are particularly important to ask about in a course evaluation:

- Background/pre-conditions for the course (such as sufficient prior knowledge and expectations)
- The process (such as course requirements/degree of difficulty, type of instruction, examination)
- Outcome/result of the course (such as perceived goal attainment)
- Overall assessment of the course

The Unit for Quality and Evaluation has compiled a “[Question Bank](#)” that can provide inspiration when designing course evaluation questionnaires. Here are a number of course evaluation questions and examples of response scales arranged under the main headings “Pre-conditions”, “Process” and “Outcome/result”. The Question Bank includes questions on topics like prior knowledge, expectations, requirements, the teacher’s efforts, the student’s efforts, study climate, examination, connection to research and to working life, and goal attainment. Some examples of themes that may be particularly important to ask about when evaluating doctoral courses:

- The course’s contribution to enhanced knowledge/understanding of the current research subject/project
- The course’s contribution to breadth in the research domain
- The course literature
- Active connections to research (that is, methods of direct relevance to the student’s own thesis)
- Working life perspective and collaboration
- Requirement level
- Workload
- How students were treated and the administration of the course
- How the form of examination contributed to learning (especially relevant if the course consists of such things as a seminar series or conference participation for credits)

In addition to questions with fixed response alternatives, *open-ended questions with free-text responses* can also be used. Open-ended responses can contain very useful information but are more unstructured and require more processing. Open-ended questions can work well for course evaluation of small courses where the goal is to get more unbiased views about the course from the doctoral students. If there are few course participants, the processing of the open responses will be less time consuming. Note, however, the above advice about having someone other than the course director collect and compile the answers to promote anonymity and honesty. If you want to carry out a simpler form of course evaluation, it may be sufficient to ask a few open-ended questions such as:

- *What was particularly good about the course?*
- *What needs to be done to improve the course?*
- *What suggestions/recommendations do you have for how the course could be improved?*

Additional support

A special document with recommendations is available (in Swedish) titled “[Course evaluations and other educational evaluations – part of the quality assurance work](#)”, which provides important starting points for the work on quality assurance as well as more practical advice and tips.

In addition, the Unit for Quality and Evaluation's page in the [Employee Portal](#) contains more support concerning course evaluations, such as suggestions for compiled course evaluations for use or inspiration, examples of how to design a course report, and information concerning future course evaluation seminars.