



## Utvärdering av ämnesmiljöers utbildning och forskning

### Bedömargruppens yttrande

<b>Ämnesmiljö: <i>Medie- och kommunikationsvetenskap</i></b>	Diarienummer: 4225-2.1.3-2022
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2023-10-04

Bedömargruppens medlemmar: <i>[fylls i av bedömargrupp]</i>	
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### Om formatet för bedömargruppens yttrande och gruppens arbete

Detta dokument fungerar som en mall i vilken bedömargruppens yttrande skrivs. Det är viktigt att strukturen följs. Bedömargruppens yttrande ska baseras på självvärdering och samtliga övriga bedömningsunderlag.

- I bedömargruppens yttrande ska varje verksamhetsområde bedömas var för sig utifrån de styrkor och utvecklingsområden som ämnesmiljön tar upp i självvärderingen samt utifrån det som framkommer i de övriga bedömningsunderlagen.
- Bedömargruppen ger ett omdöme utifrån sin bedömning för varje avsnitt : *Tillfredsställande kvalitet* eller *Inte tillfredsställande kvalitet*. I de fall ett verksamhetsområde ges omdömet *Inte tillfredsställande kvalitet*, ska

bedömargruppen ge förslag på förbättrande åtgärder (frivilligt vid omdömet *Tillfredsställande kvalitet*).

- Bedömargruppen har även möjlighet att lämna en kortare övergripande kommentar om ämnesmiljön som helhet, där även delar ur beskrivningen kan tas upp. Den ska dock inte påverka omdömena.
- Något samlat omdöme för hela ämnesmiljön lämnas inte.
- Total omfattning av yttrandet bör hamna på max 4500 ord (Fakultetsnämndens instruktioner borträknade).

*I de fall bedömargruppen upptäcker att del i inkommen självvärdering, eller annat bedömningsunderlag, saknas (alternativt inte är tillräckligt utförligt) ska den skyndsamt begära in komplettering från berörd ämnesmiljö. Detsamma gäller övriga bedömningsunderlag.*

Samtliga i bedömargruppen förväntas delta i arbetet med yttrandet.

Bedömargruppens ordförande skickar gruppens gemensamma yttrande till [utvardering.fakultetsnamnden@sh.se](mailto:utvardering.fakultetsnamnden@sh.se), enligt tidsplan inför beslut av Fakultetsnämnden om slutligt omdöme.

## Utbildning på grundnivå (max 1000 ord)

Bedöm utbildningen på grundnivå utifrån självvärderingen och övriga bedömningsunderlag. Bedöm även de självständiga arbetenas kvalitet och de styrkor och svagheter som identifieras i dessa. Ge forskningsmiljön omdömet *Tillfredsställande kvalitet* eller *Inte tillfredsställande kvalitet* utifrån er bedömning. Ge förslag på kvalitetshöjande åtgärder (obligatoriskt vid omdömet *Inte tillfredsställande kvalitet*).

**Skriv i denna ruta (expanderbar)**

**Omdöme** (*Tillfredsställande kvalitet* eller *Inte tillfredsställande kvalitet*)

Tillfredsställande kvalitet

**Bedömning samt förslag på kvalitetshöjande åtgärder (om möjligt, i prioriteringsordning)**

In general, undergraduate courses are not only satisfactory but of high quality, with some aspects that could be improved. Like the research within the subject, the courses have a cultural-theory/critical orientation, which is clearly evident in the documentation, including the Bachelor's theses. One of the main strengths of the courses is the proximity to both faculty members' and contemporary media and communication studies research. The subject's teaching profile and courses contents are in line with both national learning objectives and society's changing needs, regarding, for example, questions about media and sustainability. Here, MKV/SH sets an example, nationally as well as internationally.

From an international subject perspective – on a more concrete level – it should be noted that the evaluated courses are in Swedish. At the same time, the subject has a relatively high number of incoming exchange students. A persistent problem at Swedish universities recurs here as well: the number of incoming students is higher than outgoing (34 incoming and 12 outgoing in 2022/2023). Perhaps the staff and the university as a whole can work toward creating a better balance.

Even though the evaluated courses have an impressive proximity to research, important classical theories/works/focus areas are included too. In other words, a clear and comprehensive representation of the media and communication subject emerges, which distinctly includes its foundations, results, development, and current focus. This impression is reinforced by the fact that several members of the faculty have authored textbooks that suit the courses/programmes offered (and other institutions' MKV courses).

The syllabuses and reading lists reflect an ambitious combination of depth and breadth, and in some respects a high level of difficulty – another major strength. At the same time, this requires a lot from teaching, especially as MKV/SH attracts many students from homes with lesser experience of higher education. The broad student base is commendable, but may also require a flexible, elaborate and innovative pedagogy; which in turn requires adequate educational, administrative and financial resources. The subject's problem with completion rates – which in the self-evaluation is explained by such widened recruitment – is, without a doubt, the most important area for improvement in undergraduate education.

As we understand it based on the provided documents and faculty interview, there is ongoing work with the student completion rates issue on the Bachelor level course, and we hope to contribute with further support in this work. The efforts already made show that development is headed in the right direction. The undergraduate theses included in the documentation are of satisfactory to high quality – with depth, demonstrating solid

academic skill (including theoretical, methodological, empirical, and analytical rigor). The only minor objection is that they are "front-heavy" (the thesis framework makes up about 50% of the work). That all three theses included in the documentation suffer from this can of course be a coincidence (many students structure it this way unless supervision dissuades it). But it can also be a sign of limited tutoring resources (44h per 3 theses), which forces supervisors to prioritize. The resources for supervision at undergraduate level appear relatively low despite the good quality of theses, which may indicate that supervisors are not compensated for the amount of time they spend. If the completion rates of the bachelor's course remains high (as in 2022), the supervision is possibly adequate, but if it continues to vary to the degree it did throughout the evaluation period (2020–2022), extended supervision time may be a solution. All students need supervision, but students who are new to higher education are completely dependent on solid supervision at the bachelor's level.

Of course, the pandemic may have had an impact, but the completion rates on the first level course have remained low and even decreased in 2022 (when the effects of the pandemic subsided): in 2020 it was 61%, in 2021, 52% and in 2022, 44% completed. There is room for considerable improvement here. Since the second-level course shows better results (approx. 90 % all three years) and the bachelor level course improved significantly in 2022 (2020: 57%; 2021: 46%; 2022: 94%), we recommend continued evaluation of the efforts already made and more active efforts at the first level. These include increased resources and a broader analysis of the problem.

The reasons stated in the self-evaluation and the interview (wide recruitment, students dropping out early due to difficulties with studying English at a higher level) can be developed and analyzed further, for example in relation to: a) the course's pedagogy, level and profiling, b) the teachers' opportunities to become meritorious/excellent (currently two meritorious teachers among staff), and c) students' access to support measures/activities (language support, disability support, study advise/guidance, student health, etc.). The question of the university's and/or faculty's general priorities in terms of completion rates vs. outcomes (and related incentive structures) is still not fully answered: is the problem general at the university/faculty, and/or does it relate to a one-sided focus on number of registered students over completion ratio? If it is the latter, we believe that there is reason to actively weigh these against each other, since students who drop out or fail their studies are affected in several ways, even if the subject meets its planned output.

A related issue is that of staff contact with the students and available support units. Staff failed to recruit students to participate in the interview, which impacted the evaluation. And support or administrative staff are not formally involved in the evaluation procedure (course/programme administrators, study advisors, etc.). It seems that the college's contact/relationship with student groups and/or support units could be strengthened, which can bolster the work with completion rates. During the staff interview, it became clear that recruitment had relied on the student union. Here we believe that the union's responsibility/role should be problematized: it does not represent all students, and is an independent unit.

A final aspect here is course evaluations, which many universities struggle with since the introduction of digital surveys. Here we advise the subject to consider oral and/or paper formats (preferably on mandatory occasions), even though they require more work. The quality of the students' response in relation to the question of completion rates is directly dependent on the response rate (weak students are unlikely to fill out digital surveys, especially if they have already dropped out).

## Utbildning på avancerad nivå (max 1000 ord)

Bedöm utbildningen på avancerad nivå utifrån självvärderingen och övriga bedömningsunderlag. Bedöm även de självständiga arbetenas kvalitet och de styrkor och svagheter som identifieras i dessa. Ge forskningsmiljön omdömet *Tillfredsställande kvalitet* eller *Inte tillfredsställande kvalitet* utifrån er bedömning. Ge förslag på kvalitetshöjande åtgärder (obligatoriskt vid omdömet *Inte tillfredsställande kvalitet*).

**Skriv i denna ruta (expanderbar)**

**Omdöme** (*Tillfredsställande kvalitet* eller *Inte tillfredsställande kvalitet*)

*Tillfredsställande kvalitet*

**Bedömning samt förslag på kvalitetshöjande åtgärder (om möjligt, i prioritetsordning)**

The Master's program in Media, Communication and Cultural Analysis has a clear structure and offers subject-related immersion and good preparation for postgraduate studies. On a general level, the program's profile matches the staff strengths very well, even if, based on the data, we were not able to comment on the staffing of specific courses. The program also has a good level of applications and succeeds in attracting both Swedish and international students. The program's educational plan contains adequate learning objectives for the level, even if the sorting of the objectives in the different forms of knowledge is not always logical (Objectives 4 and 5 under Knowledge and Understanding are more about skills and abilities). Furthermore, both the education plan and the provided course plans lack goals that are linked to the Higher Education Act's letter on sustainable development.

The course plans that have been evaluated link to the goals in the education plan. The evaluation could have been richer regarding the quality of the courses in relation to the educational plan if more course plans had been provided to the assessment group. But the course plans we assessed contain clear learning objectives (even if they are not divided into different forms of knowledge), and describe the course content and examinations. If there are several examination stages, for the sake of clarity, it may be good to print out how many credits each examination stage is worth. The literature used is relevant. Depending on the course, the students are familiarized with current research (many times via scientific articles) or classic media texts.

The Master's theses in the documentation are of a satisfactory to high quality and live up to the learning objectives of the program. The essays also bear witness to a thematic freshness where new social phenomena are studied and made relevant from a media and communication science perspective, which also breaks new ground subject-wise. Here the students benefit from being in an active, dynamic and outstanding research environment.

The problems we see with the program lie in its implementation and center around the completion rate which we consider very low. We assume that the low completion rate is regarded as a problem by both the subject and the faculty in general and therefore we regard it as lowering the quality of the education. (We also emphasize that it would have been valuable to talk to program students during the evaluation.)

Completion rate is, in relation to quality, a double-edged sword. On the one hand, a low completion rate can testify that the teaching team does not compromise with quality requirements, which then explains a low completion rate. On the other hand, a low completion rate can have its basis in problems in the actual implementation of the training.

If we look at student intake HT18-HT20, between 35-47% percent of the students have been examined per intake, which means that a minority of registered students complete the program. This is surprising considering the staff, who are highly qualified to teach the program. The picture we get from the interviews with members of the faculty is that the students drop out early during the education for various reasons. One hypothesis we have had is that the program's strong theoretical and research-preparatory character makes study motivation difficult for some students who may not be prepared for this. In the interview, the subject emphasized that ad texts etc. do not give the impression that the education would be anything other than what is offered, which then should not attract prospective students who want a different educational content. The explanations for the low completion rate should therefore be found elsewhere. We find two things that may be linked to the low completion rate: resources provided as well as admissions processes and administrative support.

The course resources for the master's program are to be regarded as very low. A course of 7.5 credits, and with a maximum number of 30 students, gives 76 hours. That gives 2.5 hours per student, or 15.2 hours per week. Compared to MKV at Jönköping University and Lund University, the course resource at Södertörn University is less than half as large. Supervising a master's thesis of 30 credits gives 24 hours, which is at least 8 hours less than at the mentioned universities. Even if the low resource does not in itself explain the low completion rate, it is something that in any case does not help in the context. A low course resource can cause the teaching team to "save" on teaching moments, which may not help to motivate the students who have trouble with the knowledge requirements and/or too much independent study. In addition, a low course resource can work against high-quality teaching, if the actual teaching burden for the teacher takes up too much time.

A related challenge concerns admissions and administration. In the documentation, it is not completely clear how international students are accepted and/or ranked. One way to get better insight into the applicants' knowledge levels and ambitions is to get the applicants to write a letter of intent in connection with their application, or to have the department interview the applicants. In this way, you get closer to the applicants and have more opportunity to determine how suitable the applicants are for the program. Discussions about this are ongoing in the subject group, as far as we understand. At the same time, such work costs resources, as those who carry out this administration need time to carry out the work. This type of administrative support is something that the subject in the self-evaluation believes needs to be improved, and increased resources in relation to the admission of students can be part of this.

Proposals for quality improvement measures:

- That faculty members make an action plan to improve the completion rate of the program
- Increased resources for the program's courses
- Increased administrative support, especially regarding the admission of international students
- Possibly to reduce the number of training places on the program so that it better matches the number of students who complete their studies
- Review the learning objectives in the education plan and possibly link to sustainable development

## Forskarutbildning (max 1000 ord)

Bedöm forskarutbildningsmiljön och forskarutbildningen utifrån självvärderingen och övriga bedömningsunderlag. Ge forskningsmiljön omdömet *Tillfredsställande kvalitet* eller *Inte tillfredsställande kvalitet* utifrån er bedömning. Ge förslag på kvalitetshöjande åtgärder (obligatoriskt vid omdömet *Inte tillfredsställande kvalitet*).

**Skriv i denna ruta (expanderbar)**

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Tillfredsställande kvalitet

### **Bedömning samt förslag på kvalitetshöjande åtgärder (om möjligt, i prioriteringsordning)**

The Ph.D. program at Södertörn currently has 11 Ph.D. students (1 inactive) of which 9 have lead supervisors based at the department. Funding for current doctoral students comes from a variety of sources: Östersjöstiftelsen (3), Vetenskapsrådet (3), faculty money (2), Capes (2) and Samverkansdoktorand (1). The department has also, from 2012 to 2021, graduated 14 Ph.D. students and 1 Licenciate. All but one of these 15 students had their studies financed by Östersjöstiftelsen. The students that have graduated to date have done so within their allocated financing time. There is a marked gender imbalance among current Ph.D. students, with 10 women and 1 man. A number of these students are connected to doctoral schools operating in collaboration with Södertörn. The following are the central issues reviewed, including some comments regarding areas that could do with attention.

**Courses & Progression:** Students are required to take 15hp in general courses, 22.5hp in subject area courses, and 22.5hp in elective courses (unless students are part of the Östersjö BEEGS school, in case they take a 7.5hp on Baltic research and 15hp elective). The courses cover key areas of theory, with one required course on methods. It should be noted that the one required Methods course is one that can be either a standard course or an individual reading course. While the use of individual reading courses is an understandable alternative, it is worth asking if even these courses might not be required to at least cover a clearly-defined element of research. It might also be worth considering having at least one more course in methodology as part of the 22.5 “elective” courses. Finally, there is some ambiguity regarding what qualifies for points under the elective 22.5hp courses (for example, what precisely would be involved in the presentation of work “genom egna muntliga och skriftliga forskningspresentationer, granskning av andras forskningsuppgifter”?).

**Supervision:** The department demonstrates a good and constant level of supervision with students, and the listing of doctoral supervisors shows an even and egalitarian spread of doctoral supervision among staff (with no one or two staff members monopolizing supervision duties). There is a clear ISP process in place through which supervisors chart doctoral progression. The fact that students have, to date, graduated on time at least suggests that students are not having problems keeping time according to their financing.

**Departmental service/work/teaching:** Departmental work/service among active Ph.D. students is relatively low. Of the 11 active students, two are on 20% time, one on 13%, four on 7-8%, and four on 0% (of which one is inactive). Of course, these numbers often fluctuate depending on where students find themselves in the Ph.D. process, and can go up and down in rapid time. Experience in departmental work is a key component of doctoral education, especially in teaching. Language is likely one element hindering the participation of Ph.D. students in undergraduate teaching, with non-Swedish speaking

students unable to take larger roles in classes. This is a common issue for Ph.D. programs in Sweden. To the evaluation committee, increasing involvement of doctoral students in Master's level courses is not a viable solution, as MA-level teaching should not be conducted by those who only have an MA as their highest degree.

**Integration into departmental environment:** Documents and interviews indicate that the department has done a good job in integrating Ph.D. students into the departmental research environment through research seminars and events.

**External Financing.** The issue of the role of external financing rears its head again at the doctoral education level. The department has done an admirable job in obtaining the funding and collaboration needed to maintain a good flow of doctoral students. But, as with the discussion on the impact of external financing on the overall research environment, it is worth asking what even a modest reduction in external financing would mean in the long-term for doctoral education, let alone a more significant reduction. With all but two students financed with "external" money, the Ph.D. program is largely the product of external money and collaboration. While there are a good number of students in the pipeline for the coming years, 4 are scheduled to graduate in 2024-5 (and one is inactive).

## Forskning (max 1000 ord)

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### **Bedömning samt förslag på kvalitetshöjande åtgärder (om möjligt, i prioritetsordning)**

The research environment in the Department of Media & Communication Studies at Södertörn University is marked by a high level of academic production, as well as a track record of obtaining external financing for research projects. In terms of written work, from 2018 to 2022 researchers in the department have produced the following publications in a wide variety of national and international outlets (including a number of high-quality book publishers and journals):

- 5 book monographs
- 19 edited anthologies (as editor or co-editor)
- 66 peer-reviewed journal articles (as solo, lead or co-author)
- 96 book chapters (as solo, lead or co-author)
- Large number of national and international conference presentations, along with additional popular publications and reports.

From 2018 to 2022, researchers have been awarded a total of 15 grants (as lead and/or as co-applicants), ranging in size from 743.000kr to 7.308.000kr, and with a majority based at Södertörn. In total, the department has been awarded just over 70.000.000kr in research financing during this 5-year period. Of the 15 grants, 7 were from



Östersjöstiftelsen, 3 from Riksbanken, 2 from Vetenskapsrådet, 2 from Formas/Forte, and 1 from Wallenberg. Grants from Östersjöstiftelsen made up just under 47% of the grants obtained by the department, and just under 60% of its external research financing from 2018-2022. For both publication and research grants, there was a good spread in terms of productivity, with no evidence that a small number of scholars were “making up the numbers” for the entire department.

External research financing was particularly important for the department, especially so given the fact that most researchers are not given any significant volume of research time as part of their jobs. With the exception of Göran Bolin (on 60% research), the remaining research staff had either 20% research time (5), 15% (1), 10% (2) or, most commonly, 0% (8). Externally-funded time for those with money varied between 15%-67%, with only three of the 17 listed staff having no externally-funded research time.

While the research environment at Södertörn is clearly one which has allowed staff to achieve a very good degree of success, there are a few issues which (while likely known to the department) will be addressed here. It is important to note that these are not issues that have led to a ranking of *Inte tillfredsställande kvalitet*, but are nevertheless issues that the department, faculty and/or university should consider with an eye toward future stability. These issues will be addressed in order of perceived importance.

**Securing research time.** We are aware that this is an issue that has been much-discussed, but it needs to be repeated that the lack of research time given to faculty as part of their ordinary working time likely places a considerable amount of pressure on staff to obtain external funding, and that this pressure to obtain external funding is related to the other issues on this list of topics in need of attention.

**Reliance on Östersjöstiftelsen (ÖS): Research Direction of the Department.** While it is not necessarily a problem with a department getting a significant volume of funding from a single body or source, that volume raises natural questions about both the research direction of the department, and the future viability of the organization should that source of funding be reduced or eliminated. In relation to the first issue, in interviews with staff it was stated that money from ÖS did not make the department an “Area Studies” department, or one that specializes in Baltic research. Yet, with roughly 50% of all grants and 60% of all research money coming from ÖS over the last 5 years (and for several years before that), it seems difficult to avoid the fact that research focusing on the Baltic region has marked and shaped the research of the department over a number of years. This factor should be addressed in departmental descriptions and goals.

**Reliance on Östersjöstiftelsen (ÖS): Planning for the future?** The second issue related to the role of ÖS has to do with planning for the future. While it is entirely understandable that a department with little or no research time baked into their contracts should seek funding where possible, it is also important to ask how the department would deal with a change in that specific funding in the future: either through changes to ÖS funding policies/frameworks, or even the disappearance of the funding altogether. It would benefit the department (and for future evaluations) if an analysis is done addressing a possible future where ÖS money is reduced or eliminated. How would this impact the department financially, and thus in terms of teaching and research possibilities? How long could the department continue with a 30% reduction in external money? Or 50%?

**Impact of external research funding on teaching?** Finally, an issue or question that occurred to the external reviewers is the extent to which the high level of external research funding may have impacted the allocation of teaching hours. Does the high volume of external financing mean that staff are allocated fewer teaching hours in order to make the hours work? The reviewers considered that staff were allocated relatively few hours for, for example, MA theses, and wondered if this low number was because staff with external research funding had few hours available to teach.

**Departmental diversity.** While the issue of staff diversity could have been raised in other sections of this evaluation, we have placed it in the Research section. While a problem facing almost all departments to Swedish universities, the lack of ethnic diversity at Media & Communication Studies needs to be noted. And, again, while we are aware that quota systems or targeted hiring are not possible, the diversification of the department is an issue that should be addressed and considered.

## Avslutande/övergripande kommentarer om ämnesmiljön och dess ingående delar (frivilligt) (max 500 ord)

### *Skriv i denna ruta (expanderbar)*

In this final section, we will briefly summarize (based on our impression of the department the results outlined above), as well as re-state the areas, issues and questions we feel are in need of attention and/or consideration.

Media & Communication Studies at Södertörn is a dynamic institution with high-quality, international researchers and instructors, as well as a diverse student body. Our overall impression of the department (and the working environment) is of one that is marked by very good teaching and research, and also one that is clearly in line with the requirements and guidelines for higher education in Sweden. The programs at all levels (BA, MA and Ph.D.) follow a logical pedagogical progression, and the student work submitted suggests graduates who are familiar with key concepts and intellectual trajectories within Media & Communication Studies. Consequently, we found the BA, MA and Ph.D. programs, as well as the research environment to be of acceptable quality.

As we note above, there are a few issues we feel are in need of attention. They are as follows:

1. While this is a dynamic department with good faculty recruits and a diverse student body, the diversity of the student body is not reflected (other than in gender diversity) in the teaching and research staff. We are aware of the complication and difficulties related to recruitment, but nevertheless encourage a discussion regarding how greater diversity may be achieved.
2. The BA and MA programs are of good quality, but we have some concerns regarding the completion rate of the students both the BA first-level course and MA level, as well as the teaching hours offered to staff at both the BA and MA levels, which we feel are low (especially in relation to supervision).
3. While the Ph.D. program is of good quality with a timely graduation rate, one area in need of attention is the engagement of Ph.D. students in departmental teaching and activities. If this is an issue of language (with international Ph.D. students), we feel that flexibility within courses (more lectures in English, for example) to allow greater engagement would be of benefit.
4. The department has an impressive research output (volume and quality) as well as an excellent track record of securing external financing. The issue of dependency upon external financing (particularly from ÖS), however, and the implications of that reliance for long-term planning should be addressed (in relation to all areas within the department: teaching, Ph.D. students, research, departmental identity). What, for example would be the implications of a 20%, 25%, 50% drop in external financing over a 5-year period?