

Evaluation of ageing research institutes in Sweden 2004



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Preface

The process of evaluating the two ageing research institutes funded by FAS consisted of two parts: 1) a self-evaluation completed by the institutes and 2) a site visit at each institute. The four referees who conducted the evaluation of the original proposals for the establishment of ageing research institutes agreed to conduct a follow-up evaluation after the institutes' first four years of operation. One of the referees, professor Ursula Staudinger, was unable to attend the site visits. The results of the evaluation is presented in two parts: a main report written by the referees who attended the site visits to which a brief report written by professor Staudinger has been appended. The latter report is based on the self-evaluations only.

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Rune Åberg
FAS Secretary General

Evaluation of the two national research institutes for the study of ageing in Sweden

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Referees' report

This referees report was written after two site visits at which three of the original team were present: Carol Brayne, Sarah Harper and Kees Knipscheer. This report also draws on the structure of the report provided in advance by Ursula Staudinger who was unable to be present, as well as incorporating her views. All referees have read and approved this report. Our brief here was to provide an evaluation of two funded centres, not to provide an evaluation of the overall programme which included other recommendations (network etc).

Objectives of the SFR initiative and evaluative criteria

In 2000 the referees were guided in their consideration of submitted proposals by the information provided in the government document regarding the creation of national institutes of ageing research. This included the recognition of the need for long term, stable research structures, covering broad issues relevant to ageing with a high quality of research component. Several key aspects were recognised:

1. the need to have individuals involved at all ages of their career:
2. excellence within and between disciplines
3. a critical mass of professionals, who were multidisciplinary in nature in their affiliation with universities and integration with practice
4. good networks with potential for dissemination and international collaboration

The institutes should take a long range view of knowledge and competence, be in a position to consolidate theoretical and methodological research and provide a centre of excellence for teaching, most particularly at the postgraduate levels.

The present report is based on the two self evaluations (including appendages) as well as the minutes of the SFR working group meeting on February 21, 2000 and the two agreements between SFR and Linköping University, and Stockholm University and Karolinska institute respectively regarding the establishment of the two centres. Two site visits were made, at which further presentation of activities were provided as well as the opportunity to ask detailed questions about the reports for which the evaluation team would like to express their gratitude.

We have based our evaluation on the following criteria or questions:

1. Were the commitments made by the respective institutions in the agreements fulfilled (e.g. with respect to provision of positions and establishment of educational programmes)?
2. Level and quality of productivity – publications, reports, conference presentations, guest lectures
3. Grant success and level of funding raised
4. Graduate and postdocs affiliated with the centres
5. Quality of multidisciplinary programme including the degree of cooperation between the two centres
6. Policy relevance of output

Ageing Research Center (ARC)

Research

The joint application by Stockholm University and the Karolinska Institute offered two overarching gerontological themes: diversity of ageing and person-environment interaction, with great potential for stimulating truly interdisciplinary work. The proposal builds on four major ageing studies located within the two institutes (the Kungsholmen project, Satsa, Betula and Sweold). The plan was to integrate the new gerontological institute with the already flourishing Äldrecentrum operated under the auspices of the regional government. The self evaluation made it very easy to follow the continuation of the earlier projects and the emergence of new projects since the beginning of the ARC. The authors are to be commended for the clarity of the presentation, with the questions regarding added value, financial structures and institutional organisation covered in the presentations in person. The report shows clearly that the ARC, once officially in existence, was able to implement plans very efficiently and begin to benefit from the promised opportunities, most particularly from the co-location of researchers.

The ARC pursues the following main lines of research at present:

- risk factors for Alzheimer's disease and dementia
- multimorbidity and physical functioning
- cognitive functioning
- brain imaging
- gender differences in brain and cognition
- pharmacoepidemiology
- socioeconomic differences in health and ageing
- health economics

The report describes major findings of the last four years which are major contributions to their respective areas. These topics cover the two areas mentioned in the original proposal – diversity and person-environment interaction. The publication output is impressive both in volume and excellence. Whilst many of these publications might have been in preparation before the formation of ARC the benefit of the multidisciplinary environment can be seen in the more recent output.

Teaching

The faculty of ARC contributes to the undergraduate teaching at Stockholm university and presents an impressive list of ongoing and completed theses. There were two social science dissertations, reflecting the slower integration of these disciplines into the institutional programmes.

The ARC faculty provide courses for graduate programmes, available to the wider community as well as provided in house training for their own postgraduate programme.

Fulfilment of criteria

- Were the commitments made by the respective institutions in the agreements fulfilled (e.g. with respect to provision of positions and establishment of educational programmes)?

Each institution undertook to either create posts or allow devotion of time to ARC. Exact mapping of the agreement to the current situation was not provided. However the loose mapping of three senior positions and three lecturer across three clear domains: geriatric epidemiology; psychology and social gerontology provided clear evidence of effective implementation of the agreement. The posts have been created at different times, with consequent variation in the maturity of the programmes. Because of this difference in timing all six positions have been funded through the FAS grant. This level of commitment goes beyond the basic level provided such that uplift would be necessary to continue all six in any renewal(or funding found from elsewhere).

- Level and quality of productivity – publications, reports, conference presentations, guest lectures

The amount as well as the visibility of the ARC productivity is more than satisfactory. Major findings have all been published in the international literature in the medium of English, several reports have been written for local policy purposes. Much of the output reflects activity ongoing and increasing cooperation with other researchers. On the other hand, given the large volume of social data there is the potential for greatly increased activity in secondary analysis of these data across disciplines.

- Grant success and level of funding successfully raised

Large amounts of dedicated funding have been successfully raised from extremely competitive sources, mainly national. In general the lines of research match the original proposal. Promising novel work has been funded crossing disciplines are in progress such as bringing experimental psychology together with imaging, going beyond the investigation of cognition to emotion. Funding remains weighted towards the biomedical and geriatric areas – presenting the opportunity to raise funds for the analyses and outputs noted in the section above.

- Graduate and post-docs affiliated with the centres

As mentioned above this is excellent, with training opportunities, multidisciplinary discussions, access to senior investigators, co-supervision across disciplines all provided.

- Quality of multidisciplinary programme including the degree of cooperation between the two centres

As noted above the output from social gerontology is not as strong as the other two themes. In discussion it is clear that social gerontology expertise was needed and that in the first instance this input has been at a relatively supportive level. However, the programme is beginning to emerge, although it requires more substance and shape over the next four years. One area for potential development is to use the longitudinal dataset for thorough cohort and generational comparisons from the social angle. These are analyses that are urgently needed to inform policy.

The recommendations made in our original evaluation were designed to bring ISAL and ARC together so that their relative strengths might encourage innovative projects. This has clearly not happened although some attention has been given to interchange at senior and junior levels. It is possible that over the next years such interchange will lead to spontaneous original work.

- Policy relevance of output

ARC and the Äldrecentrum are very closely linked. This provides an effective means of communicating results to both the public and the policy makers, providing a resource. The policy relevance of both would be enhanced if more attention was given to research and policy related questions in quality of life of older people.

General evaluation

Although it was difficult from the reports alone to gauge the value added through the injection of support into these diverse institutions, this became much clearer with the site visits. The ARC team provided a compelling argument for the direct impact of provision of a single location for multidisciplinary research centred on the longitudinal studies ('in the house'), at arms length from the distraction of faculty demands, such as undergraduate teaching and administration.

The evaluators recommend

- a continuation of FAS funding.
- The maintenance of the independence of this inter-disciplinary co-operation and thus maximise the opportunities for such collaboration and productivity,
- that Karolinska Institute and Stockholm University assess whether their financial contribution is as extensive as guaranteed.
- That the Äldrecentrum and its extensive potential for policy influence be given a higher priority in future developments.

General reflections

Each of the institutions has expended tremendous effort in setting up these institutes. The ARC has already achieved critical mass and value added output in our view, sufficient to justify strong recommendation that the ARC should continue. Whether or not FAS should be the funding agency or the universities should recognise the value of these institutes to their own portfolio is not a matter for us to judge. We urge the responsible bodies to ensure the continued funding at an appropriate level of this unique internationally visible grouping.

Institute for the Study of Ageing and Later Life (ISAL)

Research

The presentation of research programmes during the site visit focused on four distinct themes: communication in the life context of older people (led by Cedersund); patterns of action and older people's everyday life (Anbäcken); Age, ageing and the life course (Näsman); and Older people and technology (Hagberg and Shahmehri). This had a far greater focus than the self-evaluation which itemised 6 areas filled with multivarious rather disconnected projects. It was extremely disappointing, however, that the two senior professors (Andersson and Grassman) were not directly involved in these programmes, despite being on site for one year, and that their own presentations of possible future research was limited and general. In terms of the quality of the four research programmes as described, these were innovative, multi-disciplinary and all four had had successful dissemination at an international level.

Teaching

The doctoral programme was very clearly presented. The evaluators were impressed with the cohesiveness and comprehensiveness of this programme and its clear links into the research programme of ISAL. This programme has already been successfully evaluated by the Institute and adapted to more closely reflect current research interests of the team. This is to be commended. We also commend the introduction of Masters Programme, fully funded by the University. The graduate training component of the mandate given to ISAL has clearly been fulfilled.

Fulfilment of criteria

- Were the commitments made by the respective institutions in the agreements fulfilled (e.g. with respect to provision of positions and establishment of educational programmes)?

The agreement between SFR and the University of Linköping covered both positions and doctoral studies, with an undertaking from the university to provide doctoral funding for four students. There was detailed specification of posts in the original agreement. It is not possible to map the current configuration to this exactly, but our impression is that with the appointment and relatively recent uptake of two professorships the commitment in terms of posts is now completed. The doctoral studies and student positions have been developed and filled, but we note that the university has not provided sufficient finance for an intake of doctoral students for the year 2004 despite the provision of a successful doctoral programme.

- Level and quality of productivity – publications, reports, conference presentations.

ISAL comprises a large number of young researchers. Given the time delay in appointing senior professors, there has been a slow start in productivity and the publication output is patchy. The publications were provided by individual lead

author. It would have been more helpful and more confidence inspiring to have had these listed by thematic area and perhaps lead academic. A relatively small proportion was international, although this was felt to be expected given that much of the work is still being presented at conferences and is in Swedish working papers. We see this as a major potential contribution to the international literature in the coming years – this is an area where the Institute needs to provide clear leadership with a publication strategy as a matter of urgency. Institute members have been visible at conferences and it is commendable that doctoral students are actively encouraged to present in international forum.

- Grant success and level of funding successfully raised

A number of granting sources are listed in the evaluation report. After the presentation a list of grants over the past four years was provided. Nineteen grants from a variety of sources are listed – ranging from 25,000 SEK to two of four million SEK, amounting to around 15 million. The group could have made more of this successful achievement and how they intended to capitalise on it. How these grants related to the areas of research was not provided.

- Graduate and post docs affiliated with the centres

Two rounds of recruitment for the doctoral programme have been held, for which there was healthy competition. The group has clearly given a great deal of attention to this doctoral programme. Unfortunately we did not have time to discuss the programme with the student who attended the evaluation meeting, but the impression provided by the team is that this has been a highly successful development of the Institute addressing the mandate of the original agreement. Recruitment has not gone ahead for this academic year due to lack of sustainable funding – this is regrettable as noted above. The intention of the programme was to provide a continuing source of able students trained in ageing theory, method and application within a multidisciplinary setting for the future workforce as well for high quality research. There are three research active postdocs (assistant professors) within the Institute and two further are in the process of being recruited.

- Quality of multidisciplinary programme including the degree of cooperation between the two centres.

Both the self evaluation and the presentations lacked evidence of a cohesive multidisciplinary. However during informal discussion with Institute staff it became clear that a variety of formal procedures (seminars, collaborative initiatives etc) were in existence. These need to be formalised in a structured manner. There had been a disappointing level of collaboration with ARC.

- Policy relevance of output

Although policy relevant research is not part of the original mandate for ISAL, it became clear during discussions that much of the output was policy relevant and indeed that ISAL staff were involved in several policy initiatives.

General evaluation

Despite the slow pace of developments at the Institute, (in part due to the delayed procedures for appointing the new professors) the added value provided by the FAS grant is clear. It is extremely difficult to establish a multi-disciplinary institute from a vision, and ISAL are to be highly commended for the tremendous progress they have made. In particular the commitments from the three faculties have materialised. It is vital however that the ISAL now consolidate and capitalise on the extensive ground work provided. **In particular it is essential that the two new professors move to provide intellectual steerage and leadership.** This is essential in the areas of research development, doctoral and post-doctoral mentoring, international collaboration and to ensure the development of a cohesive intellectual framework for the Institute.

The evaluators thus recommend that given the extensive ground work and the clear potential now established, that the ISAL be awarded a further four years funding with the following proviso.

- That clear strategic plans are drawn up immediately by the two new professors covering research, training and international collaboration.
- That priority is now given to international research dissemination in particular research publication
- That the university gives a clear commitment to supporting the excellent postgraduate training programme to ensure that it does not need to rely solely on FAS money.
- That effort to raise external grant money from local and national sources is continued.

General reflections

ISAL has the potential to contribute a unique methodological and theoretical international contribution to the study of ageing. It is essential that a cohesive strategy is now employed to ensure the integration of its multi-disciplinary research and development focus.

The evaluators felt the preparation of the evaluation paper work was limited and the original report was diverse and not insightful. It did not reflect the extensive work undertaken at ISAL. The additional information presented at the site visit was valuable, well structured and informative but was presented so late in the visit that it was difficult for the evaluators to include it in their on site discussions. In addition the on site visit was very rushed, and insufficient time allowed for extensive questioning and a full site tour. This was regrettable.

In conclusion

The evaluators were very pleased to be invited to see how the work of the two centres selected four years ago had evolved and to see how both had made major steps forward. Each of them has to be evaluated on their own performance.

The evaluators, however, never expected a similar performance in terms of output and international visibility for both of the institutes over the first period of four years.

- The ARC has used its available expertise from the beginning to a maximum to make a big step ahead;
- The ISAL had “the essential innovative aspects for a national Swedish programme in gerontology, (however) ...not an established track” (cited from evaluation 2000).

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