

External evaluation report: NIH PhD programme 2025

Executive Summary

Purpose and scope of the evaluation

This external evaluation of the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences (NIH) PhD programme was conducted as part of NIH's periodic quality assurance process. The review aimed to assess the scientific quality and overall effectiveness of the programme against national and international standards. The evaluation covered the programme's structure and educational components, supervision and research environment, administrative support and infrastructure, internationalisation, candidate satisfaction, dissertation quality, and programme attractiveness. The panel's work included analysis of written materials, interviews with key stakeholders, including the Committee for Research Education (KFU), course leaders, supervisors, PhD candidates, coordinators, and NIH PhD and Postdoc Organisation (NIHSPO), and an on-site visit.

Key strengths of the PhD programme

The PhD programme benefits from supervisors who possess strong subject expertise and are dedicated to supporting candidates' academic development. While the presence of research groups varies across departments, candidates generally have access to knowledgeable teams who guide them in their chosen fields. The programme is further supported by administrative structures and infrastructure, which together provide a stable environment for research and learning. A set of compulsory in-house courses are offered and complemented by opportunities for external, specialised training. Furthermore, candidates can rely on the administrative staff for effective support throughout their studies. NIH's reputation as a leading institution in sports sciences continues to attract a high number of qualified applicants, and the overall institutional culture encourages academic achievement and professional growth.

Main areas for improvement

Despite these strengths, several areas require attention to ensure consistent PhD candidate experiences and outcomes. Communication and transparency regarding the actions and annual reports of KFU could be improved, as both supervisors and candidates expressed a need for clearer information and feedback. The roles and responsibilities of PhD Coordinators are not yet clearly defined or consistently implemented across departments, which limits their potential to provide effective support. Supervision quality varies, with some candidates experiencing insufficient support or unclear expectations, and there is a lack of collective structures for supervisor professional development and cross-departmental collaboration. Completion times for

the PhD are longer than the nominal duration, with significant variation between departments and limited incentives for more timely completion. Career development support and tracking of graduate outcomes are not systematically incorporated. Finally, the alignment of courses and activities with programme learning outcomes could be made more explicit, and the flexibility of course delivery, including hybrid and online options, should be further explored.

Overall Assessment and the summary of recommendations

The NIH PhD programme delivers high-quality research training and maintains a strong reputation; however, the programme would benefit from addressing the identified gaps in structure, supervision, progress monitoring, and career development. In this report, the evaluation panel provides several suggestions for improvement. The key recommendations are as follows: (1) strengthen communication and feedback mechanisms between KFU, supervisors, and candidates; (2) clarify and expand the role of PhD Coordinators; (3) develop collective structures for supervisor training and collaboration; (4) address factors contributing to extended completion times; (5) enhance career development support and tracking; and (6) ensure that course offerings and delivery methods align with programme learning outcomes and candidate needs. By implementing these recommendations, NIH can further enhance the quality, efficiency, and attractiveness of its PhD programme, supporting both academic excellence and candidate wellbeing.

Background and Scope of the Evaluation

The Norwegian School of Sport Sciences (NIH) conducts a periodic evaluation of its PhD program every five years, as part of its core quality assurance processes. It is mandatory that representatives from the professional and community sectors, external peers relevant to the study programs, and PhD candidates contribute to the evaluations. The previous external evaluation was held in 2018. The planned periodic evaluation in 2023 was postponed until 2025 due to other assessments carried out in 2021 as part of the NOKUT project.

For the current evaluation, the panel included Professor Mikael Quennerstedt (GIH — the Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences, Sweden), Senior Researcher Ida Svege (Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and Education and the Faculty of Health Sciences, Oslo Metropolitan University) and PhD Research Fellow Ingild Linnestad (Department of Teacher Education and Outdoor Studies, NIH), and was chaired by Associate Professor Eija Laakkonen (Faculty of Sport and Health Sciences, University of Jyväskylä, Finland).

The primary task of the external evaluation committee was to assess the scientific quality of the programme, considering national and international standards, and to prepare a report outlining their observations and potential recommendations for further development. The panel was specifically asked to address the following aspects:

- the programme structure and the educational component (including the mid-term evaluation),
- supervision and research environment,
- administrative support, resources, and infrastructure,
- internationalisation,
- candidates' satisfaction,
- the structure and scientific merit of doctoral dissertations, and
- the attractiveness of the program for new applicants.

The panel was initially provided with a comprehensive package of written material (listed in the appendix), and additional information was supplied upon request (such as statistics on PhD completion times, supervisors, etc). In September 2025, the panel held a kick-off Teams meeting with the Head of the Committee for Research Education (KFU), Professor Truls Raastad, and Senior Adviser Mari Corell (the Department of Academic Affairs), during which the on-site visit program was agreed upon. The on-site visit took place on 14 October 2025, during which the panel met with various representatives of NIH's doctoral program. In addition, a short tour across the research facilities was organised. The panel continued working together on the second day to reflect immediately on the visit and then finalised the report remotely.

Resources, Infrastructure and Administration

NIH is a close-knit scientific community with about 240 employees and 64 current PhD candidates. NIH is led by an elected Rector (4-year term), who also serves as the Chair of the Board. The teaching, research and dissemination activities are executed by four academic departments: Department of Physical Performance (IFP), Department of Teacher Education and Outdoor Studies (ILF), Department of Sports Medicine (IIM), and Department of Sport and Social Sciences (IIS). Each department has a dedicated Department Head (4-year terms) and an Office Manager. Furthermore, NIH has two research centres: the Oslo Sports Trauma Research Center, hosted by IIM and the Centre for Children and Youth Sport, hosted by IIS. However, it remained unclear if these centres had any role in PhD training. In addition to academic departments, NIH has six administrative departments: Department of Finance and Accounting, Department of Operations, Department of Human Resources, Department of Academic Affairs (STA), Department of Information Technologies and Department of Communications, each led by a permanent Division Head. Division Heads form the Administrative Leadership Group, which advises the Managing Director, who is the leader of all technical and administrative operations at NIH.

Although there are several departments, NIH has a single PhD programme, which includes all PhD candidates regardless of their original discipline or employment. The PhD programme is led by the Committee for Research and Education (KFU), which is administratively supported by the STA. KFU has six members, including two representatives of PhD candidates and one academic staff member from each of the four academic departments. The term of KFU members is three years for academic staff and one and a half years for PhD candidates. The Head of KFU cannot be simultaneously the Department Head to ensure independence in decision-making.

Internal PhD candidates are employed in research fellow positions within departments, regardless of their funding source. In addition, a PhD candidate can be employed outside of NIH. The internal PhD candidates have dual roles and responsibilities, the employee obligations for which they are ultimately responsible to the Department Head and PhD student obligations for which they answer to KFU.

The evaluation committee met with the Rector, vice-Rector (unofficially), and interviewed representatives of key stakeholders, including KFU, course leaders, supervisors, PhD coordinators, PhD candidates, and NIHSPPO, but was not, due to their overlapping occupations, able to meet with the department heads. In addition, a short tour of the facilities was organised. The tour provided the evaluation committee with an overview of NIH's physical infrastructure. All parties interviewed expressed general satisfaction with the infrastructure and how it supports their work. As the infrastructure of NIH—including laboratories, training facilities and equipment—meets high standards, and as research projects and PhD candidates appear to have equal access to these resources, the

committee has no concerns regarding availability or adequacy of physical resources for doctoral education.

In principle, the organisational structure and management of the PhD Programme were positively evaluated, and this was reflected through the interviews. However, the role and actions of KFU were considered somewhat distant and unclear from the supervisors' and PhD candidates' point of view (as further pointed out in the following chapters). KFU adequately provides annual reports (later referred to as the KFU annual report) about the programme to the board, but the reports are not effectively communicated to supervisors and PhD candidates, thus it remains unclear what kind of actions are taken after internal evaluation.

Two departments, IIS and IFP, have also established a PhD Coordinator position, which can be considered as an additional layer of support offered to the PhD candidates of the corresponding departments. The roles and duties of PhD Coordinators seem not well defined, likely because the positions are fairly new. IIS established the position about 1.5 years ago, and IFP only 1.5 months ago. Nevertheless, the committee considered this to be a fruitful innovation, which could be beneficial for all departments as a link between the PhD candidates and the formal system of KFU and heads of departments. Especially if the department does not have a strong research group culture, the PhD Coordinator can serve as a facilitator for discussions, which otherwise naturally occur within the research group. However, the need may differ from department to department, and the duties of the PhD Coordinator should be fine-tuned and described accordingly. For instance, if the department already has active seminar and group discussion practices, then the role of PhD Coordinator could be more on the side of personal support and acting as a mediator in "difficult conversations" if such a situation were needed; however, it must be ensured that the role does not become that of a supervisor. In principle, PhD candidates should turn to their supervisors, KFU, or department heads with their worries; however, that can understandably be difficult at times, and being able to discuss their concerns unofficially with someone could be helpful. In addition to supporting PhD candidates, the PhD Coordinator could also support PhD supervisors by providing space for collegial discussions and peer support in any matters related to supervision. These types of discussions and peer support events within departments and between departments seemed to be largely missing.

Admission Procedures and Programme Structure

The *Standard regulations for the Doctor of Philosophy degree for candidates enrolled after 1 August 2020* (Standard regulations for PhD 2020) were introduced following the periodic evaluation in 2018, replacing the previous *Standard regulations for the Doctor of Philosophy degree for candidates enrolled before 1 August 2020* (Standard regulations for PhD 2019). The regulations apply to all doctoral education leading to the PhD degree in Norway. The majority of candidates at NIH are currently enrolled under the 2020

regulations, with approximately ten candidates still following the earlier programme structure.

Between the beginning of the academic year 2020 and the end of 2024, 64 candidates were admitted to the PhD programme. To be eligible for admission, applicants must normally hold a five-year master's degree (120 ECTS) in sport science or a cand.scient. in sport science, with a minimum grade point average of B/2.5. In exceptional cases, applicants may be exempted from this requirement if they can demonstrate extensive knowledge of sport science, particularly in research and development. Since 2017, NIH has aimed to facilitate admission for candidates with other relevant, quality-assured academic backgrounds. This allows applicants with degrees not directly related to sport science to be considered, provided their qualifications are deemed relevant for the scientific exploration of sport-related topics. Admission based on equivalent qualifications is considered important when such expertise enhances the research value and quality of the proposed project. Since 2020, twelve candidates have been admitted on this basis. Deviations from the standard requirements typically concern the grade average, the credit volume of the master's degree, or the disciplinary background.

PhD candidates who are employed at NIH must apply for admission to the PhD programme within six weeks after employment. If the candidate fails to apply within the deadline, the contract may be terminated. Applications are submitted to the STA and must include a project description, semester-wise progress plan, ethical/legal statements, CV, educational background, supervisor proposal and confirmation, research group affiliation, funding plan, plans for research stays, dissemination strategy, and any restrictions on intellectual property rights. An external committee, appointed by NIH and approved by KFU, evaluates the applications and assigns a grade. A minimum grade of 4 is required for admission, though most candidates receive a 5 or higher. Based on the committee's recommendation, KFU makes the final admission decision. If the project description is not approved, candidates may submit a revised version within 14 days for re-evaluation.

Admission is formalised through a written agreement outlining the rights and responsibilities of all parties. This agreement is intended to ensure timely completion and regular participation in an active research group. Together with their supervisors, candidates are responsible for maintaining and updating a progress plan and reporting any delays or issues to KFU via annual reports. Based on these reports, KFU is supposed to initiate corrective actions when necessary. According to the KFU annual reports, the aim is to admit all candidates within three months of employment. About 50 % met this target, while others are admitted within four months (often due to revision needs) or later. Delays may result from illness, verification of international qualifications by the *Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills*, holiday periods, or slow

appointment of committee members. In the worst-case scenario, delayed admission may result in termination of employment—a consequence that stakeholders interviewed by the committee considered unfortunate and overly inflexible. The previous programme evaluation (2018) emphasised the importance of research group membership, yet the documentation and information provided to the evaluation committee did not clarify whether all PhD candidates are actively involved in research groups, nor whether KFU monitors how research group participation contributes to the overall quality of the programme.

The standard employment period for candidates without teaching duties is three years. Candidates with a 25% teaching obligation are employed in four-year positions. Of the current 64 PhD candidates, 30 hold three-year positions, and 32 have four-year contracts. One candidate holds a two-year position, an option available for candidates already engaged in their research project at the time of admission. One candidate has a six-year contract, corresponding to 50% allocation to the programme—the minimum allowed progression. Of the candidates, 52 were employed by NIH—26 of them by external funding— and 12 by other institutions, such as universities, research institutes, organisations, or companies. There is a good balance between the sexes, as 58% of candidates are female.

NIH is responsible for ensuring that the required coursework and the work involved in the doctoral thesis constitute an education at a high academic level in accordance with international standards. The coursework, together with the research project, must be designed to achieve the anticipated learning outcome in accordance with NIH's qualifications framework. The coursework must consist of at least 30 credits, of which two-thirds must be completed following admission to the programme and never more than two years before the date of admission. These regulations, combined with a compulsory course structure, were perceived as somewhat inflexible from the PhD candidates' and supervisors' perspectives. Each candidate needs to take 20 ECTS of compulsory courses provided by NIH, including Introductory seminar (2 ECTS), Philosophy of science and ethics (4 ECTS), University pedagogy (2 ECTS), Method course in qualitative or quantitative research methodology, adapted to the candidate's needs (5 ECTS), Midterm evaluation of the candidate's own PhD project (5 ECTS) and Thesis seminar (2 ECTS). The KFU annual reports from over the past five years indicate that the mandatory courses generally receive positive feedback. Course leaders aim to make the learning tasks meaningful and relevant by aligning them with each candidate's research project. However, discussions with stakeholders revealed that it is not always clear how these courses contribute to the development of the knowledge, skills, and general competences outlined in the programme's learning outcomes. Developing a clearer system to link coursework with the national qualification framework could help candidates and supervisors monitor progress, identify areas needing further attention,

and recognise those that are sufficiently addressed and also help course leaders to recognise areas for course improvement. Strengthening the connection between coursework and the broader development of academic competence could also help clarify what a PhD entails and what it qualifies the candidate for.

The programme revision following the periodic evaluation in 2018 introduced the midterm evaluation as a mandatory activity. The midterm evaluation provides an opportunity for the candidate to present their work to academic staff outside their supervisory team, to receive constructive feedback and recommendations for further work on the dissertation. The supervisor is responsible for guiding the committee to ensure the evaluation is conducted at an appropriate level. KFU reviews all midterm evaluations and finds that, with few exceptions, they provide good feedback and function as intended. An important aspect that should be emphasised is that for the midterm evaluation to function as intended, it should be carried out no later than 1.5–2 years after starting PhD (always net time) to allow it to result in changes if those are needed. Moreover, candidates should be supported and followed up to develop their projects based on the feedback and suggestions provided by the evaluation committee. KFU can consider including this as activity 8 in the work description for the midterm evaluation.

In the mandatory courses, the course leaders report an increasing number of requests from candidates regarding attendance via digital platforms. One reason for this might be that candidates find it challenging to attend mandatory on-campus teaching during periods when they are engaged in data collection or participating in international mobility programs. Other international candidates have work obligations in their home country that make on-campus participation a challenge. At the same time, the way the courses are structured today enables hybrid solutions, although this is not always optimal for learning and engagement from the course leaders' point of view. The courses are based on face-to-face interactions and discussions among candidates across the four departments. Engaging with candidates across departments is also valued by the candidates, for both educational and social benefits. Nevertheless, alternating different kinds of set-ups for the courses—digital, hybrid and on-campus options—would increase the flexibility asked for by PhD candidates and supervisors.

The remaining minimum 10 ECTS credits can consist of optional academically relevant courses and other academic activities (max 5 ECTS). The optional courses can be external academic and/or methodologically relevant PhD courses or internal department-based PhD courses. Other academic activities can be conference participation and presentations, popular science dissemination and participation in national or international research seminars. This coursework component should be planned in collaboration between the candidates and their supervisors. All obligatory coursework (mandatory and optional) should be done and passed no later than six

months before the candidate submits the thesis for assessment to avoid any delays in the assessment process due to missing credits. The elective courses provide the candidates with the opportunity to take courses outside of NIH that are more tailored to the candidates' methodological and/or theoretical needs. Both candidates and course leaders highlight this as an advantage. It provides the candidates with more flexibility in terms of finding courses specifically tailored to their needs. Taking external courses can also present some challenges. Candidates and supervisors report that candidates are put on waiting lists and are not able to secure a spot in relevant courses, as they are prioritised after the institution's internal candidates. In general, the KFU annual reports state that the PhD candidates make good progress in completing the elective part of the training program.

The most important component of doctoral education is the independent research project (150 ECTS credits). To be awarded the PhD degree, candidates must successfully complete the required coursework, deliver an approved trial lecture on an assigned topic, and publicly defend an approved doctoral thesis. The thesis may be submitted as a monograph or a collection of a minimum of three scientific papers, of which at least one must be accepted in a recognised international peer-reviewed journal. For article-based dissertations, a synopsis (Kappe) is required. It includes an introduction leading to the research question(s), a methodology section, a summary of research findings, and an overarching discussion with conclusions and suggestions for further research. Article-based dissertations are by far the most common format: Of 48 theses recommended for public defence between the academic years 2019 and 2024, 45 were article-based and three were monographs. Regardless of format, all PhD projects are always carried out under close academic supervision. How this supervision is structured and organised is determined by the individual supervisor or team of supervisors and supported by the respective departments. The supervisors themselves describe their role as not formally defined, and this offers an appreciated flexibility. Candidates, in turn, reported varied experiences and expressed a need for more general guidance to reduce reliance on individual supervisors. This is discussed in more detail in the Candidate's Experience and Outcome chapter.

Supervision and Academic Environment

One of the most important aspects of a high-quality PhD programme in terms of completion, educational and research quality, as well as candidate wellbeing, is the supervisors and supervision (e.g. Almlöv & Grubbström, 2024; Haley et al., 2025; Pyhältö et al., 2015). Research, for example, reveals that important competences of a successful supervision include more obvious ones, such as knowledge in the subject area and knowledge in the particular research methodology used. However, studies also highlight the importance of pedagogical competences in terms of supporting the candidate to

become a critical scholar and providing feedback, relational competences in terms of social support and collegiality, and functional competencies such as “setting a schedule for regular meetings, identifying steps for following student progress, and setting aims and expectations” (Haley et al., 2025, p. 1973).

According to the 23/24 KFU report to the board, 45 main supervisors were appointed in the PhD program. Just over half of these (29) supervise 1 PhD candidate, 13 supervise 2 candidates, and 3 supervise 3 candidates. Four main supervisors are employed at external educational institutions. As NIH’s general rule, all PhD candidates should have two academic supervisors. Still, other documentation reveals that 6 candidates have only one supervisor.

Generally, supervision seems to work well at NIH, according to the documents provided, and according to supervisors’ and PhD candidates’ reflections during the interviews. According to evaluations, a large majority of the candidates are satisfied with the academic supervision in the program. It is also stated that there are a few problems with supervision at NIH. Further, the duties and academic competence of the main supervisors are better recognised, while the role and responsibilities of co-supervisors are less clear (see Almlöv & Grubbström, 2024). The problems that the candidates highlighted in the interviews were all related to individual supervision situations, and it was not always the case that the candidates’ concerns were listened to and taken seriously in the system provided. Here, the PhD coordinators in two of the departments appear to play a potentially positive role as academics to talk to in these matters.

The system quality of the PhD programme also seems to work well regarding quality indicators such as dissertation quality, international composition of evaluation committees, internationally renowned research groups, and the follow-ups in annual reports from candidates and supervisors. What is not as clear is the quality assurance of the supervision during the process. In the documentation, explicit quality indicators pinpointing the educational quality of the programme in terms of supervision are unclear and thus difficult to follow up on for KFU and heads of departments in terms of the collective responsibility for the programme. It seems that few collective discussions in supervisory meetings (e.g., handledarkollegium) across all departments occur, and it is difficult to see in the data provided and from the interviews how the research groups as a whole provide support so that all PhD candidates and their supervisors can benefit from the academic collective of a group.

In the interviews, candidates were also explicit about the fact that their PhD experience and the process of their PhD journey are largely dependent, and sometimes maybe too dependent, on who the assigned supervisor is. Some individual problems with supervision were addressed by the group of candidates, but also examples of really good supervision and participation in research groups. The important issue is the ways in which NIH handles problems, so that candidates feel they are listened to if supervision

is not working as expected, for example, in terms of supervisors' presence and availability for the candidate.

The annual progress reports, according to the documentation, "ensure quality in each candidate's study progress (research project(s) and educational pathway), the supervisory relationship, and the institute's follow-up of each fellow, so that any deviations can be addressed" (Annual report 23/24). In the reports, followed up by KFU and heads of departments, PhD candidates and supervisors separately describe the candidates' progress regarding time plan, project changes and progression, coursework, supervision, tasks besides the PhD work, and internationalisation. What is not included in the reports, however, is the progress in relation to the overall learning outcomes defined for a PhD degree as knowledge, skills, and general competence. In the interviews with supervisors, these goals were not always clear in relation to the tasks of the supervisors, even if the goals are what the candidates should strive for and achieve by the end of the program.

One way to enhance the educational quality of the program and provide opportunities for cross-departmental discussions is through offering continual professional development for all PhD supervisors. In the 2018 evaluation, supervisors highlighted the need for more in-service training for all supervisors, and one of the recommendations was that NIH should develop and implement a systematic approach concerning the pedagogy of supervision. Since the 2018 evaluation, it is a requirement that all new PhD supervisors complete and pass a course in research supervision. What is still missing is opportunities for *all* supervisors to discuss pedagogies of supervision based on their own experiences and research on PhD supervision as a means of professional development.

The number of candidates not completing their PhD at all, and the reasons for this, is not known or not reported in the KFU annual reports. Available data on completion times from admission to submission further show that few PhD candidates at NIH finish within the nominal timeframe. The average net completion time (excluding leaves of absence and teaching obligations) between 2020 and 2025 was 3.97 years, with the 2023/24 KFU report indicating an average of 4.6 years and a median of 3.7 years. Although 75% of candidates complete their degree within six years, there are notable differences between departments, and neither candidates nor supervisors appear to be under pressure to finish on time. This lack of incentives or expectations was not questioned in interviews. The committee noted that the supervisor's ability to monitor progress, identify challenges, and adjust plans accordingly is crucial to timely completion. Both the initial peer review of the PhD proposal and the midterm evaluation could serve as important checkpoints to support this process, but their potential is not always fully utilised as a source of feedback that would be followed up by candidates and supervisors and monitored by KFU. Several factors may contribute to delays, including unequal support after the funded period, unclear policies on whether teaching or committee work warrants extensions,

and the increasing integration of PhD projects into larger research initiatives. The balance between individual doctoral work and broader project demands may also affect completion time. These aspects merit further attention to better understand and potentially improve progression across departments.

In relation to KFU, the supervisors call for more flexibility, particularly regarding admission, demands to be on-site, and courses. Also, the role, support and expectations between KFU and supervisors are described as unclear. Talking to all 'categories' involved, we find the program as a whole generally quite flexible, although we can see examples of where greater flexibility could be practised in individual cases. However, this does not require any major changes in the program, but rather clear channels of communication between supervisors and KFU. One way to do that is to collectively discuss the KFU annual reports as part of the quality work in NIH's PhD programme and as feedback to the supervisors.

Candidate Experience and Outcomes

The PhD candidates are enrolled in a programme resting on strong foundations: a) dedicated supervisors who provide committed mentorship in strong, research-oriented collegiums, b) a set of in-house PhD courses delivered by experienced staff combined with an opportunity to participate in specifically relevant courses at other institutions, c) a strong student network and an active student organisation that sustains peer support, and d) an institution with pride and interest in developing strong research and researchers.

These strengths attract and produce engaged candidates, solid methodological research and dissertations, and many successful completions. At the same time, variability across departments and supervisors, questions regarding course scheduling and content, and limitations in progress monitoring and formal support and quality assurance structures create uneven experiences and outcomes.

As part of NIH's quality assurance system, an annual survey is conducted for all candidates enrolled in the PhD programme. Overall, the results of the survey present a positive picture of satisfaction with supervision in the doctoral programme. In the 2024 survey, 90% were satisfied or very satisfied with the scientific quality of supervision, while 66% of candidates were satisfied or very satisfied with the PhD programme in general. Regarding the candidates' ability to influence the content and structure of the PhD programme, half responded neutrally, indicating a possibility for improvement.

With respect to organisational and administrative structures, 71% were satisfied or very satisfied with administrative support, 58% were satisfied or very satisfied with IT services and support, and 51% were satisfied or very satisfied regarding the role and work of KFU. Some candidates request more information about KFU's work and timelines, and there

seems to be limited knowledge regarding the KFU annual reports. In addition, candidates would like to have better information and an overview of relevant courses for the elective part of the training component of the PhD programme.

In general, most candidates benefit from committed supervisors who offer strong intellectual guidance and timely feedback on research ideas and work. Where supervision works well, supervisors routinely help with project planning and execution, offer advice on the choice of courses and other programme-related issues, and facilitate networking and professional development. NIH may consider developing general advice on supervisory practice, including outlining the responsibility of the parties, and also providing suggestions regarding, for example, meeting frequency, as well as any expectations related to teaching, dissemination, travelling and career-related activities, etc.

The PhD candidate's dependency on the supervisor(s) is well-known, and the lack of a supportive, engaged and present supervisor poses a critical threat to candidates' ability to complete their studies, as well as their personal experiences and development during this process. This risk is potentially lessened by assigning all candidates at least two supervisors and establishing explicit structures for changing supervisors. Furthermore, informal support structures for PhD candidates facing difficult situations, which NIH appears to lack to some extent, could be beneficial.

Overall, the proposed research protocols were considered to be of high quality when assessed by external peer reviewers prior to uptake in the PhD programme, and the proportion of candidates completing their PhD within six years is higher than in most Norwegian institutions. On the other hand, as discussed in the earlier sections, completing in the recommended 3-to-4-year period is rare. Almost all dissertations are article-based, and the 2020 change from four to three required did not seem to improve completion time. However, it is suggested by the supervisors that this change has resulted in a better quality of each article. The majority of the articles included in the dissertations were published, and most (10 of 12 in 2023/24) dissertations were approved without conditions for revision. According to the KFU annual report, the doctoral evaluation committees generally found the dissertations to demonstrate sound methodology and theoretical grounding, and relevant contributions to the field.

PhD candidates benefit from supervisors' professional networks, project-aligned training and learning, and exposure to and experience with applied research methods. Most candidates are given opportunities to present and discuss research plans and results with other researchers (both within and outside of NIH), and to present their research at scientific arenas nationally and internationally, providing them with relevant experiences valued by future employers. Furthermore, approximately half of the candidates hold four-year PhD positions with teaching obligations, giving them highly relevant experience for

their future career. Some peer-led initiatives regarding career development and possibilities, mostly by the NIHSPO, are also available.

However, career development support seems to be somewhat insufficiently and inconsistently embedded across departments. Such support often relies on informal practices, and there are limited systematic initiatives to prepare candidates for a career within or outside academia. Opportunities for internships at and collaboration with other institutions across different sectors are arbitrary and dependent on personal connections and interests, which restricts the programme's ability to demonstrate career possibilities for PhD candidates and limits access to non-academic career pathways.

In general, PhD candidates and their supervisors seem to be highly focused on their PhD work and, to a lesser extent, concerned with future career opportunities. To strengthen career readiness and transparency, the programme should consider integrating simple structures for career development and providing an overview of relevant career opportunities. Alumni surveys can provide useful information on career opportunities as well as feedback regarding the relevance and possible improvements of the doctoral education at NIH with respect to readiness for future work and career. Furthermore, a stronger focus on project-relevant engagement and collaboration with non-academic partners and society may increase the candidates' ability to chase relevant jobs and careers at organisations and companies outside the university sector.

Internationalisation and Attractiveness

The PhD programme is primarily promoted through the NIH website, which is available in both Norwegian and English. In addition, the extensive international networks of staff are utilised to identify and attract prospective candidates. NIH's strong reputation as a research and higher education institution in the field of sport sciences contributes positively to its appeal. The NIH PhD programme attracts a high number of qualified applicants, with 331 applications received for 11 advertised positions in 2024. About 31% of current PhD candidates are non-Norwegian. Thus, it seems evident that the institution and programme have a strong reputation and that it is able to recruit strong candidates.

PhD candidates are encouraged to engage in international activities, such as research visits and participation in academic conferences. The extent to which these opportunities align with individual study and research plans varies among candidates. Internationalisation did not feature strongly in the interviews, which the evaluation committee interpreted as an indication that it is not currently a source of concern. As a minor observation, the committee was informed that information and instructions provided in English are occasionally less comprehensive than those in Norwegian, and some inconsistencies between translations were noted.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Collective responsibility and cooperation between supervisors:

A strong culture of collective responsibility and collaboration among supervisors is essential for maintaining and enhancing the educational quality in the programme. By improving communication, fostering cross-departmental cooperation, and ensuring that all candidates are well-supported within research groups, the programme can better address challenges and promote consistent, high-quality supervision across all departments. The following recommendations are proposed to strengthen these aspects:

- The collective responsibility for the overall educational quality of the programme should be strengthened by fostering cross-departmental collaboration among supervisors. This could include regular meetings for supervisors across departments to exchange practices, discuss supervision challenges, and share experiences.
- KFU is recommended to develop its communication practices to enhance transparency and to ensure that follow-up actions based on the annual reports by PhD candidates and supervisors are clearly communicated.
- The KFU's annual report to the Board should be communicated in the staff meetings of the departments. This would help clarify how internal evaluations are translated into concrete measures and improve the perceived accessibility and responsiveness.

Support for PhD candidates and supervisors:

Strengthening support structures for both PhD candidates and supervisors is essential for ensuring consistent quality and well-being across the programme. Experiences with PhD Coordinators suggest potential benefits in offering department-level guidance and peer support. Providing opportunities for supervisors' professional development—such as training and peer exchange—can help ensure more consistent supervision practices and strengthen the overall academic support system. In addition, active participation in research groups contributes to a more collaborative and academically supportive environment for all candidates.

- Evaluate the need for PhD Coordinators based on current practices. If found beneficial, introduce them with tailored roles across departments. Shared positions could work well in smaller units, providing support for both PhD candidates and supervisors, without overlapping with existing structures and supervisory responsibilities.
- Continual professional development for all supervisors should be prioritised, with opportunities for cross-departmental discussions and training in supervisory practices.
- Connecting all PhD candidates to active research groups and strengthening the role of these groups in the programme's quality assurance would enhance the

educational environment. This would ensure that candidates benefit from collective academic support, peer engagement, and shared expertise, regardless of their departmental affiliation.

- Consider facilitating the establishment of informal learning arenas for PhD candidates and strengthening NIHSPO's role and contributions.

PhD course quality and purposefulness:

The quality, timing and relevance of PhD courses are central to supporting candidates' academic development and ensuring alignment with programme learning outcomes. Strengthening the connection between coursework and the national qualification framework, securing access to specialised courses, and exploring flexible teaching formats can enhance both the educational value and accessibility of the programme.

- Ensure that the relevance and timing of core courses are adequate, and secure alignment of each course with explicit programme learning outcomes.
- Integrate into yearly reports carried out by the candidates and supervisors a section where candidates reflect on how courses have supported their learning and the development of competences described in the PhD programme. This would also give insight into areas that may need strengthening in future revisions of the courses.
- Consider establishing more formal collaborations with other institutions nationally and internationally to make sure the candidates have access to relevant PhD courses.
- Evaluate the potential of alternating on-campus, hybrid and online teaching formats to increase flexibility and to reduce vulnerability caused by low participant numbers (which is the case in some courses). However, the quality of the educational components of the course should not be compromised.
- Consider expanding course offerings in NIH's areas of expertise to benefit both internal and external candidates and ensure that course development and teaching are recognised in staff service planning. Opening such courses to international PhD candidates outside NIH would simultaneously increase internationalisation opportunities for NIH PhD candidates. Given NIH's status as a top university within sport science, these courses are likely to attract strong international interest.

Supervision quality and PhD completion time:

Ensuring high-quality supervision and supporting timely completion are central to the effectiveness of the PhD programme. Strengthening quality assurance mechanisms, improving progress monitoring, and providing structured support for candidates and supervisors can help reduce delays and promote consistent academic development across departments.

- Develop clearer quality indicators for supervision as part of the programme's educational quality assurance, and create structures for supervisor collaboration and training across departments.
- Integrate the general goals for a PhD—knowledge, skills, and general competence—into the annual progress reports submitted by candidates and supervisors, including reflections on research, coursework, and internationalisation in relation to these goals.
- Investigate the reasons behind current net completion times and departmental differences, and introduce targeted measures and incentives to support timely completion without compromising quality.
- Consider establishing structures that can support PhD candidates experiencing difficulties or delays. Such structures could be provided at the department level (e.g., included in the role of the PhD coordinators) or at the PhD programme level (under KFU).
- Make efforts to reduce the time from employment to admission to the PhD program.
- Ensure that midterm evaluations are conducted within 1.5–2.0 years after admission, and require documented follow-up actions from candidates and supervisors.
- Reduce dependency on the main supervisor by ensuring that all candidates have two internal supervisors and are actively involved in a research group. Consider the role of PhD Coordinators in supporting candidates and supervisors, particularly in cases of delay or difficulty.

Transferable skills and career planning:

Preparing PhD candidates for diverse career paths—both within and beyond academia—requires structured support and better visibility of graduate outcomes. Strengthening career guidance, integrating transferable skills training, and fostering engagement with non-academic partners can help candidates navigate future opportunities with confidence and clarity.

- Develop structures to facilitate engagement with non-academic partners and society, both to improve research relevance and to prepare candidates for possible employment outside academia.
- Encourage supervisors to include career planning milestones in supervision meetings and document these in action plans.
- Incorporate a structured career development course, including workshops on career pathways, CV writing, and interview preparation.
- Publish aggregate data on graduate destinations to inform candidates, programme development and stakeholder engagement. Also consider conducting an alumni survey to provide inputs to the structure, content and

outcome of the NIH PhD programme from previous candidates looking back from their current positions.

References

Almlöv, C., & Grubbström, A. (2024). 'Challenging from the start': novice doctoral co-supervisors' experiences of supervision culture and practice. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 43(1), 17-31.

Haley, A., Holmqvist, M., & Johansson, K. (2025). Supervisors' competences from doctoral students' perspectives—a systematic review. *Educational Review*, 77(6), 1971-1990.

Pyhältö, K., Vekkaila, J., & Keskinen, J. (2015). Fit matters in the supervisory relationship: Doctoral students' and supervisors' perceptions about the supervisory activities. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 52(1), 4-16.

Appendix:

Pre-evaluation supportive documents provided for the external evaluation panel

1. Annual reports from 2020 (course evaluations are provided to the committee if needed)
2. Mandate and minutes from the KFU meeting where the committee was appointed (meeting minutes available if needed)
3. Program plan
4. Regulations
5. Qualification framework
6. Course descriptions
7. Overview of completed degrees
8. Recommendations from evaluation committees (dissertations available if needed)
9. List of current occupations of graduates (compiled spring 2024)
10. Overview of current Ph.D. candidates
11. [Link to the program webpages \(for Norwegian, please see here\)](#)
12. The program evaluation report from 2018