

Structural Constraints, Practical Possibilities: Reflections from a Graduate School in Development Research

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This essay reflects on the Development Research School, a research school launched in 2022 by Lund University, Uppsala University, the University of Gothenburg, and the University of Ghana. Using this case, the essay explores two central themes: how research schools can add value to PhD education, and the particular challenges of running such a school in the field of development research. Based on the experience of designing and implementing the school, the essay discusses four central challenges: recruiting and retaining PhD students, coordinating international and cross-institutional collaboration, delivering relevant content to a diverse student body, and ensuring longevity beyond the initial funding period. The essay also discusses the pragmatic strategies we adopted in response, including open recruitment, decentralized course delivery, flexible program design, and deliberate legacy planning. While our experience of running the Development Research School illustrates the potential of research schools to add value to PhD education, it also underscores the structural and financial constraints that limit their long-term integration and institutionalization.

Keywords: PhD education, Research schools, Development research, International collaboration

INTRODUCTION

Running a graduate school¹ in a context like the Swedish, where the structures of PhD programs are relatively rigid, is a difficult undertaking. Running one in the field of development research during the 2020s is even more challenging. The decade has seen notable reductions in public funding for development research, in Sweden and globally. Against this backdrop, we discuss our experience of running the Research School on Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction (henceforth, the Development Research School). The school was launched in 2022, as a collaboration between Lund University, Uppsala University, the University of Gothenburg, and the University of Ghana. Its aim is to promote North–South academic exchange and to support PhD students working on sustainable development and poverty reduction. The school does not fund its own PhD students, but supports PhD students already admitted to PhD programs at the four partner universities and beyond. This reflective essay draws on the experience of designing, implementing, and managing the Development Research School to examine broader

¹ In this essay, the terms “research school” and “graduate school” are used interchangeably to denote an educational program for affiliated PhD students (equivalent to the term “forskarsskola” in Swedish).

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questions about the viability and value of graduate schools—both in general and specifically within development research.

The essay explores two interlinked themes: structural challenges in graduate schools and the dynamics of operating one in development research. In doing so, it engages with previous research on the conditions under which graduate schools can generate meaningful educational value (Löfqvist et al., 2024; UKÄ, 2008), the cognitive and organizational demands of interdisciplinary learning environments (Augsburg, 2014; Holt et al., 2017), and the opportunities and limitations of cross-university and international collaboration (Heffernan & Poole, 2005; Tjulin et al., 2021). Situating our reflections within these broader debates, we identify four key challenges. First, it proved difficult to recruit and retain PhD students, especially but not only within Swedish universities, where rigid doctoral program structures leave little room for participation in external courses. Second, while international collaboration was a core ambition, we experienced practical difficulties of coordinating across borders and institutional frameworks. The third challenge was to deliver relevant, rigorous, and accessible content to a highly diverse student group. Fourth, like many initiatives tied to short-term funding cycles, our school faced limited prospects for continuity beyond its initial grant period. In response to these challenges, we adopted a set of pragmatic strategies: an open recruitment structure to reduce entry barriers; a “best-fit” over “best-practice” model of collaboration between institutions; a flexible, agile program design to accommodate student diversity; and deliberate efforts to create a usable legacy.

Through reflecting on the experience of running the Development Research School, the essay contributes to the discussion on how graduate schools can function within the broader landscapes of higher education and development research. Our findings suggest that targeted, well-structured interventions can foster real value in research education. However, our experience also underscores that the longevity and institutionalization of such efforts are constrained without adequate long-term support and funding.

SETTING THE SCENE: GRADUATE SCHOOLS AS AN EDUCATIONAL FORM AND IN DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH

In recent years, a great number of graduate schools have been created in Sweden, many of which have been funded by the Swedish Research Council (VR). In 2019–2024, VR funded 98 different graduate schools, one of which is the Development Research School (VR, 2025).² Such schools have been subjected to surprisingly little research (with Löfqvist et al., 2024 and Van Meeningen & Jönsson, 2025 being exceptions). Graduate schools have the potential to contribute to third-cycle studies by concentrating cutting-edge expertise that may otherwise be geographically or disciplinarily dispersed (UKÄ, 2008), help break potential academic and professional isolation that some PhD students experience (Holmström, 2018), and increase students’ skills in navigating interdisciplinarity (Menon & Suresh, 2020). They could also help overcome problems in Swedish research education of so-called “hyperenculturation”, where enculturation can lead to a narrowing learning culture (Petersson & Sternudd, 2020). The case study by Löfqvist et al. (2024) on a Swedish national graduate school in health shows that many of these potentials can be realized. In their study, most of the graduate school’s participants reported that it added value to their education, by strengthening their interdisciplinary skills, offering tailored learning activities, and deepening their knowledge. However, for graduate schools to fulfill these potentials more broadly, they must successfully

² 2024: 7, 2023: 4, 2022: 38, 2021: 40, 2020: 0, and 2019: 9.

navigate the ‘usual challenges’ of interdisciplinary work (Augsburg, 2014; Mobjörk et al., 2020), secure sufficient support from the university administration and leadership (Jönsson & Van Meeningen, 2021), and find a balance between aims and available resources (Van Meeningen & Jönsson, 2025).

While graduate schools can enrich research education, operating such a school within the field of development research presents particular challenges. In recent years, the reductions in funding for development-related education and research in Sweden and elsewhere have added pressure on initiatives like the Development Research School. The inherently broad and multidisciplinary nature of development research further complicates efforts to design educational offerings that are both coherent and complementary. Interdisciplinarity is central to development research, but is also pedagogically and institutionally demanding. Graduate schools are often expected to provide interdisciplinary spaces that go beyond the disciplinary structures of home departments (Jönsson & Van Meeningen, 2021). Prior research has highlighted the cognitive, communicative, and organizational challenges that this entails (Augsburg, 2014; Mobjörk et al., 2020). Designing courses that go beyond multidisciplinary juxtaposition and achieving real integration is particularly difficult (Holt et al., 2017; Van Meeningen & Jönsson, 2025). These interdisciplinary demands are closely linked to the challenges and opportunities of international collaboration. One of the key strengths of graduate schools is their ability to bring together knowledge, skills, and individuals from different regions and backgrounds. Previous research identifies many benefits of cross-border and cross-university collaborations – including academic development between universities, increasing exposure to varied pedagogical methods, assessment styles, and educational forms, and stimulating international competition (Beelen & Jones, 2015; Bruhn, 2017; Heffernan & Poole, 2005). However, it also sheds light on many obstacles to success. These challenges include the often limited duration of collaborations, which do not extend beyond the timeframe of the designated grant period (Loisel et al., 2009). Additionally, there are the challenges of teaching and learning online (Ryan et al., 2017), problems caused by different administrative rules and norms, and the issue of maintaining participant involvement and commitment throughout the full course of an online initiative (Tjulin et al., 2021).

OUR CASE: THE DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH SCHOOL

The Development Research School deals with sustainable development and poverty reduction in low-income countries, with a particular focus on aspects of governance, power, and inequality. The initial idea was ambitious, aiming to (1) contribute to high-quality and boundary-crossing doctoral research in the focus area of sustainable development and poverty reduction in low-income countries; and (2) strengthen collaboration and networks between the four partner universities and between individual doctoral students within and beyond these universities. It is coordinated and administered by Lund University and a program committee. The school is open to PhD students from any discipline, both from the four partner universities and other universities.

The school’s main activity is to host jointly developed interdisciplinary doctoral courses. The school offers four doctoral courses, hosted by our partner universities. Each course has so far run two to four times, with 8–25 PhD students per round. The original aim was for one partner university to serve as the course convener while involving the other partners as participants to promote cross-disciplinary cooperation. However, in practice, the courses are implemented relatively independently by the four universities. That said, they are coordinated both in terms

of content, form, and when they are offered in order to cater for different interests without competing for students.

The course *Power, Justice and (De)coloniality in Development* is hosted by Uppsala University and fully online. It addresses multiple dimensions of power in the context of development. It critically engages with the ways in which colonial legacies continue to shape global development agendas, while also responding to the increasing calls for the decolonization of development policy and practice. The course *Methodology and Field Studies* is hosted by the University of Ghana and consists of a four-day in-person program. The course aims to broaden PhD students' exposure to research methodologies to support scientific inquiry, and to foster participants' understanding of the importance of research methodological choices in development research in the context of the 2030 Agenda. The course *Making Foreign Aid Work: Managing Tensions Between Top-Down and Bottom-Up Approaches* is hosted by the University of Gothenburg in a hybrid format, with online lectures and a three-day in-person workshop that involves both development practitioners and policymakers. The course explores the workings of foreign aid in a changing world and how foreign aid can be designed and implemented to achieve its goals and deliver development. The course *Governance and the Sustainable Development Goals* is hosted by Lund University and fully online. It provides a critical introduction to the governance of sustainable development and the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals, and emphasizes the challenges of implementing the 2030 Agenda with a special focus on low- and middle-income countries. Together, these four courses constitute the core of the graduate school's educational activities. The Development Research School has enabled these four courses to be developed and implemented, thereby enabling the delivery of research-led teaching.

Beyond the courses, the school's program includes regular research seminars, and capacity-building and skills training activities. The research seminar was established as a partnership with the Department of Economic History at Lund University in January 2024 in the form of *Development Research Lunch*. This series is a bi-weekly, hybrid-format research seminar for all scholars interested in development research, broadly defined. Every other seminar is open to all interested speakers, while the rest are dedicated to PhD students from the Development Research School. Further, the graduate school organizes *Development School Webinars* with relevant presentations on writing skills, career development and publication strategies, and *Works-in-Progress* sessions where a small group of PhD students participate in online group mentorship throughout one semester. A key activity of the school was an in-person workshop in Lund in October 2024, for 15 PhD students. PhD students from the four partner universities, as well as from other universities in Sweden and internationally (the Netherlands, Rwanda, and Kenya) participated. The workshop was organized in conjunction with an international conference and enabled collaboration between our school and the Swedish Development Research Network (SweDev). The school also co-organized a PhD conference with SweDev and the School of Global Studies (University of Gothenburg) in December 2022. During its implementation, the Development Research School has connected with several networks and other graduate schools, e.g. SweDev, the Agenda 2030 Graduate School at Lund University, the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, Stockholm Environment Institute, the Africa Research Universities Alliance, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network Northern Europe, and the African Economic History Network.

In sum, the school's overarching ambitions have largely been realized, though its implementation also underscores the challenges inherent in translating ambitious ideas into practice.

CHALLENGES DURING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH SCHOOL

During the work with the Development Research School, four main challenges have affected its implementation. Some are generic to graduate schools and some specific to creating one in development research, but all applied to our case.

The first is to reach out to PhD students and to integrate them into the school. In the planning phase, we identified a solid recruitment base as the four partner universities each offer several doctoral programs in a variety of disciplines related to sustainable development and poverty reduction. However, expectations of easily attracting 5–10 doctoral students per year from each university proved difficult to realize. Our experience suggests that a main reason for this is the rigid structure of many PhD programs in Sweden, which is based on many compulsory courses and few possibilities to attend elective courses at other departments. Similar structural constraints have been noted in previous evaluations of Swedish graduate schools, where inflexible program requirements can limit students' ability to engage in external learning environments (UKÄ, 2008) and contribute to forms of 'hyperenculturation' that narrow their educational experience (Petersson & Sternudd, 2020). Another contributing factor may be the large number of concurrently funded graduate schools (78 VR-funded graduate schools in 2022 and 2023 (VR, 2025)), which may have created oversupply and competition for the same students. This echoes observations by Löfqvist et al. (2024), who note that when many graduate schools operate simultaneously, participation can become dispersed, making it difficult for individual initiatives to attract a stable cohort of doctoral students. In contrast, recruiting PhD students from Ghana and other international students (predominantly in Africa) did not suffer from a lack of demand. Many of our most active PhD students have been from the University of Ghana and from the University of Rwanda (who gained access to the graduate school through a collaboration with the University of Gothenburg). However, here too the recruitment of students was limited by structural factors, such as that many of the Ghanaian students were not allowed to translate the credits from the Development Research School's courses to their home universities. An additional challenge in recruiting PhD students is the issue of distance and limited resources. For example, our October 2024 workshop received 45 applications and only 2 out of 29 African applicants could be funded due to travel costs, despite many being qualified. In contrast, all 10 Swedish-based applicants were accepted and funded, and the 2 (out of 6) accepted applicants from European universities could also be offered funding.

The second challenge concerns the complexities of international and cross-university collaboration. Earlier research has identified several factors that hinder such collaboration, including the need for shared institutional cultures and coordination routines (Heffernan & Poole, 2005), mismatches in administrative rules and expectations (Tjulin et al., 2021), and the difficulty of maintaining student engagement in online formats (Ryan et al., 2017). Although we did not encounter all these issues, coordinating our work across four institutional settings and two continents did increase the efforts needed to develop shared processes for implementation and to avoid administrative misalignment.

The third challenge is to offer useful content to a highly diverse group of PhD students. The scope of the school has intentionally been wide—seeking to engage PhD students interested in development research and the Agenda 2030 broadly defined, and open to students at any point in the PhD education—but the consequence of this choice is a heterogeneous group. This put pressure on courses and training activities to tailor content to the students' backgrounds.

This reflects a well-established challenge in interdisciplinary research education, where diverse student cohorts require deliberate pedagogical strategies to avoid superficial multidisciplinary and support meaningful integration (Holt et al., 2017; Mobjörk et al., 2020).

The fourth challenge is the school's short time frame with limited prospects for continuation. Much like many other graduate schools (Loisel et al., 2009), there is a high risk that the efforts of the school will not continue after the grant period has ended. The cuts in VR funding to development research in 2023 further increased this risk. By extension, this raises the risk that the effort invested in building a school and its associated network could ultimately be wasted if the program lacks sustainability or institutional backing. For our school, this challenge manifested in that the graduate school was never fully integrated into the doctoral programs of the partner universities. Instead, it functioned more as a short-lived complement rather than an embedded part of the broader doctoral education at the four partner universities.

ATTEMPTED SOLUTIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Addressing these challenges required a process of critical reflection, creative experimentation, and adaptability in both design and implementation. While running the school, we developed and implemented four primary strategies that, while not exhaustive, provided a viable path forward and which could serve as inspiration for other graduate schools facing similar issues.

The first strategy focused on recruitment. We adopted an open structure for the school, allowing PhD students to join stand-alone segments of our program, without requiring upfront commitment to any other activity. This approach was designed to reduce barriers to entry and increase flexibility for potential participants. This model enabled our graduate school to engage a broad range of participants without requiring substantial investments of time or funding, making it a cost-effective way to extend the impact of a program and maximize the return on funding. Additionally, in the post-Covid era, the ability to conduct activities online has proven valuable in easing the process of recruitment. Virtual platforms enable the participation of students and collaborators from diverse geographic locations, broadening the program's scope and inclusivity. This aligns with findings that virtual internationalization can broaden access and participation, even if it does not resolve all engagement challenges (Bruhn, 2017; Tjulin et al., 2021).

In terms of the challenges of international collaboration, our experience is that many of the challenges identified in the literature are real, and that a certain level of pragmatism is needed to overcome them. From our perspective a willingness to accept a pragmatic, "best-fit" approach, over a "best-practice" approach (often cumbersome to implement) can be a winning bet. This pragmatic approach is in correspondence with research suggesting that international and inter-university collaborations are most effective when expectations are adapted to institutional realities rather than ideal models (Beelen & Jones, 2015; Heffernan & Poole, 2005). One way that this is expressed in our work with the Development Research School is to de-prioritize the ambition of cross-university collaboration for the courses, instead allowing each of the four partner universities to take the lead on one course each. While this reduced the benefits of cross-university collaboration, it allowed for a more workable and smoother work process, so that all four courses could be successfully delivered. That all four courses were successfully developed and delivered is a significant accomplishment of the school, which indicates that the pragmatic division of responsibilities was an effective and appropriate solution.

The third strategy involved the creation of an agile structure within the school, where we continuously experimented with different types of activities to meet the needs of our diverse cohort of PhD students. These activities ranged from in-person workshops and online *Works-in-Progress*

sessions to traditional seminars and skills-training webinars. By experimenting with various formats, we were able to better cater to the differing needs and preferences of our students, adjusting our offerings as necessary. Such adaptive design resonates with studies highlighting the value of flexible, multi-format learning environments in interdisciplinary education, where students benefit from varied modes of engagement (Augsburg, 2014; Menon & Suresh, 2020).

The fourth strategy centered on ensuring that the school left a meaningful legacy. This was achieved through two main activities: first, we focused on documenting the school's history and maintaining an accessible written record, which included keeping the webpage and email lists updated, as well as writing closing reports for each activity, including this reflective essay. Furthermore, we actively sought an organization willing to inherit parts of the school, such as the website and email lists, to ensure the continuity of its valuable resources beyond the initial program.

CONCLUSION

This essay has reflected on the design, implementation, and challenges of the Development Research School, contributing to the broader understanding of graduate schools in general and within the field of development research in particular. We have discussed both structural problems and contextual constraints, as well as the strategies we used to address them. In doing so, our reflections echo earlier research highlighting both the value that well-designed graduate schools can bring (UKÄ, 2008; Löfqvist et al., 2024) and the structural conditions that shape their success, including the alignment between program aims, disciplinary structures, institutional support, and available resources (Jönsson & Van Meeningen, 2021; Van Meeningen & Jönsson, 2025). In sum, we believe these reflections offer relevant insights for other graduate school initiatives operating in similarly complex environments.

The four central challenges encountered—recruiting and retaining PhD students, managing international collaboration, delivering meaningful content across disciplinary and geographic boundaries, and sustaining the initiative beyond its initial grant period—highlight the demanding conditions under which graduate schools operate. These challenges correspond with prior work on interdisciplinary and cross-institutional education, which points to the cognitive, organizational, and administrative frictions inherent in such settings (Heffernan & Poole, 2005; Augsburg, 2014; Mobjörk et al., 2020). They also reflect findings that cross-university and online collaboration often face practical limits related to coordination and sustained engagement (Ryan et al., 2017; Tjulin et al., 2021). We addressed the challenges we encountered with pragmatic responses: open recruitment, flexible collaboration, agile program design, and documentation for legacy. While these strategies mitigate several short-term issues, they cannot fully resolve deeper structural constraints such as rigid PhD program requirements or the volatility of funding landscapes.

Taken together, our reflections extend existing scholarship by showing how earlier findings on interdisciplinarity, institutional collaboration, funding instability, and challenges in virtual and cross-university settings manifest in a contemporary graduate school in development research. The Development Research School offers a concrete example of these dynamics and shows how design choices and pragmatic adaptations can ease some structural constraints while also revealing where such strategies reach their limits.

To conclude, this experience underscores that it is possible to create valuable, impactful initiatives with modest resources. However, our experience also shows that the longevity and institutionalization of such efforts are severely constrained without adequate long-term support

and funding, and suggests the need to debate the rationale for research schools in a context like the Swedish, where it is not clear how research school can best add value within the structure of PhD education.

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