



Recommendation concerning Cristine Sundbom's application to doctoral studies

This recommendation concerns an application to PhD studies at the Umeå Institute of Design (UID) made by Cristine Sundbom and received at the department on 25 October 2016. The application was made in relation to a joint position based at UID but also in collaboration with the Umeå Centre for Gender Studies (UCGS). This recommendation is thus made by Heather Wiltse as director of PhD studies at UID with an additional comment from Annelie Bränström-Öhman as director of PhD studies at UCGS.

Background

A joint PhD position between UID and UCGS and a corresponding employment at UID was offered to Sundbom in June, and the employment and enrollment scheduled to begin on 1 September 2016. After agreement among all parties involved (Sundbom, UID, and UCGS) in mid-September, the formal application to doctoral studies was intended to be submitted for consideration at the UID decision meeting in October, along with a recommendation to accept and to backdate the decision to reflect admission by 1 September. However, the application was not submitted by that deadline, which resulted in both formal issues needing to be resolved regarding the employment, and in meetings and discussions among the involved parties to address this as well as the situation with the enrollment to the PhD program. UID and UCGS representatives have assessed the application in light of these processes and events, and based on previously submitted materials and interviews pertaining to the application process for this position.

Considerations

The issues raised during the enrollment process have highlighted significant differences in expectations and understandings of the resources, processes and formats of PhD education between the involved parties. While Cristine Sundbom's outstanding qualifications related to the subject areas of design and gender remain unchanged, concerns have arisen regarding the ways in which she relates to the structures of the PhD program and organisation more generally. The significant difference in expectations from Cristine Sundbom's side on what kind of support could and should be provided, in relation to what the procedures, formats and resources at UID and UCGS could actually allow and support, lead us to now question if it would in fact be possible to provide adequate support for Sundbom's successful pursuit of a PhD in collaboration between our environments.

The main concerns can be summarized in terms of two broad and interrelated sets of issues.

The first is the *availability of supervision and other resources*. The joint assessment of UID and UCGS is that a substantially increased amount of supervisory resources would be needed – at least for the initial year or years – in order to provide Cristine Sundbom with the guidance and support necessary to adjust to and successfully initiate the PhD education. Specifically, a higher amount of time than usually distributed for individual supervision and also guidance/information/communication with directors of PhD studies and other roles in both environments would be necessary. With regard to the small scale of UID's available persons with competence to be primary supervisor in relation to the number of enrolled PhD students, it is not possible to provide this kind of extended support. Related to this is the consideration that the previously intended supervisor Johan Redström should not be assigned the role as primary supervisor. As Rector of UID and thus ultimately responsible for both the

educations and the staff issues at UID, there have already in this early stage of the admittance process arisen issues that, for Redström, lead to conflicts between the roles as Rector and (intended) supervisor and that are difficult to manage. The other possible main supervisor, Erik Stolterman, is based in the United States and would carry out supervision and meetings over e-mail and Skype, which we believe would also not be the ideal formats for the supervision setup for adequately supporting Cristine Sundbom. Related to the issue of providing adequate supervision is also the differences in views of responsibilities and mandates in bringing in additional support in the form of a third supervisor or other types of forms of supportive mentoring competencies. Also, the limited time and resources available in terms of persons in other supporting roles at both UID and UCGS would not allow for providing Cristine Sundbom with the kind of extended support in terms of guidance, information and communication which would be needed in this case.

The second, and related, concern revolves around the *possibility to communicate transparently and effectively*. Cristine Sundbom has expressed that she has felt confused by what she has been told by different people, and that better and more transparent forms of communication are needed. We wish to underline that we also see communication as a key issue here, but feel that we have been as open and clear as possible in describing the PhD education formats, how and where decisions are made regarding PhD education, and also broader issues that have to do with the employment and enrollment process. Despite our best efforts to be clear and to coordinate thoroughly within UID and between UID and UCGS to ensure that we give clear and consistent information, it is obvious that there have arisen quite serious misunderstandings which have affected not only the formalities of the process but also relations between the involved parties. Given that this is a joint position between UID and UCGS, the smooth communication and links between the two environments, and between these and the PhD student, is a must. From our experience of this process, we realize that we can provide neither the frequency and amount nor the unambiguous and univocal type of information that would be both needed and expected in order for the communication to work between all involved parties.

Recommendation

Based on the above considerations, I regretfully recommend that Cristine Sundbom's application to PhD studies at UID be denied.



Heather Wiltse

Director of PhD Studies
Umeå Institute of Design

Additional comment to letter of recommendation, concerning Cristine Sundboms application to doctoral studies

Joint PhD education is a both rewarding and demanding undertaking for all parts involved. At the Graduate School for Gender Studies/UCGS we have 15 years of experience within this collaborative and interdisciplinary field. Throughout these years we have found it to be a key aspect to establish good routines and means of communication as soon as the collaboration begins, to avoid future misunderstanding between the departments involved and the doctoral student – as well as between doctoral students and supervisors.

When the board of UCGS in May 2016 made the decision to offer Cristine Sundbom a joint PhD position, in collaboration between UID and UCGS (and the corresponding employment at UID which was offered to Sundbom in June), we had already been engaged in a dialogue between the departments for several months. As a director of PhD studies at UCGS I found it very impressive to see how UID put a lot engagement and effort, alongside with good routines, into making communication as transparent and effective as possible.

Therefore, it is with surprise and concern that I have received information on several occasions from UID, from the beginning of September and until now about serious misunderstandings between Cristine Sundbom and the involved parties. This has caused delays and difficulties both in regard to the formalities of the employment and in relation to the forms of collaboration and organization of a joint PhD education.

To conclude: it is indeed a must in a joint PhD education to establish smooth and consistent communication and links between the two environments, and between these and the PhD student. I have full confidence in UID:s capacity, experience and skills in this as in every other aspect of our collaboration. All through this process I have been continuously informed by UID and I know that we share a deep regret for the severe misunderstandings that have occurred. However, it is obvious that the difficulties these circumstances have caused in trying to establish a sustainable agreement on functional working relations and planning for a research education are of such complexity that they demand resources that neither UID or UCGS can provide for the time being.

Given this, and the above considerations presented by Heather Wiltse, I fully understand and agree upon UID:s description of the present status of the situation.

I hereby support the recommendation to deny Cristine Sundbom's application to PhD studies at UID.



Annelie Bränström Öhman

Director of PhD Studies, UCGS