



Research evaluation AU 2025

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Summary

Aarhus University has conducted an evaluation of research quality across all 31 departments/schools. The evaluation was based on self-assessment and external assessment by international expert panels, and its aim was to advance the strategic development of AU's research communities through open discussions and input from international specialists.

The evaluation has established a solid basis for future development and has underlined Aarhus University's position as a research-intensive university with international reach and societal relevance.

Main conclusions:

- The quality of research was assessed as very high overall, and several research communities were highlighted as world leading. The research spans a broad range of fields and is conducted with a high level of academic integrity.
- The quality of research is expressed in various ways:
 - The university has major international impact – this is evident in international research collaborations and publications in internationally recognised journals.
 - The research conducted across disciplines at AU has a major societal impact.
 - Researchers are securing a large – and increasing – amount of external funding, especially from the EU and private foundations.
- Targeted work is being done on recruitment and career development.
- It is widely acknowledged that well-functioning, collegial and diverse work environments lead to higher research quality.

Observations and development opportunities:

- There is a need to balance growing internationalisation with national impact and relevance. This is especially true in fields that are closely related to Danish society.
- Outreach activities could be supported strategically and better integrated into structures for academic career advancement.
- The research infrastructure at AU, which was highlighted as a strength, could be utilised even more effectively through enhanced strategic governance and coordination to ensure broad access and long-term quality.
- There is a need for clearer career paths and support for early-career researchers.
- There is a need to maintain focus on gender balance, especially at senior level.
- Management and coordination work well overall, but cross-disciplinary collaboration and support functions could be optimised.
- Research communication could be enhanced.

A note for future research evaluation processes

- It is important to maintain the locally anchored, inclusive and learning-oriented approach.
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1.0 The evaluation process

1.1/ Aim

In 2023, the senior management team launched a comprehensive evaluation process that included all 31 departments/schools at Aarhus University. By adopting a constructive and forward-looking approach, the aim of the evaluation was to enhance and further develop research quality at the university. The evaluation was designed to allow space to reflect on the results and the structures and conditions that promote strong research communities. It was also intended to help develop local, forward-looking research strategies.

1.2/ Framework

The evaluation process was informed by discussions held in the university's five academic councils. It was important that the evaluation could be adapted to the academic profiles of the faculties. For this reason, the senior management team decided on a simple, common framework with two main components: 1. a self-assessment report, prepared by the department/school itself and, 2. an external assessment report, prepared by an international expert panel on the basis of a site visit. The two reports together constitute the evaluation of the departments (schools at Arts). The university's cross-faculty research committee allocated DKK 4 million to support the process, which was distributed among the faculties.

Within this framework, each faculty was given the freedom to develop a process tailored to its local academic context. To ensure the results were relevant and useful to the research communities at the faculties, members of academic staff were involved in planning and conducting the evaluation.

The process was also inspired by the European Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment (2022), to which Aarhus University is a signatory. An important principle of this agreement is to avoid internal competition. For this reason, it was decided that the department/school reports would only be shared with the staff and the faculty leadership team. Each faculty wrote a brief summary report based on the reports it received from its departments/schools. Based on these faculty reports, an AU-wide summary was prepared and shared with the senior management team and the AU Board. This approach helped maintain a focus on learning and development within individual research communities and ensured that the choice of evaluation themes and external panel members was made to promote development and receive constructive advice, rather than for oversight purposes.

1.3/ Data

The evaluation focuses on the research environment as a whole. The Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment recommends the responsible use of quantitative data alongside qualitative evaluations, so the faculties selected data that supported academic discussions and contributed to a nuanced understanding of its research communities' strengths and development opportunities.

2.0 Cross-faculty themes: Strengths, observations and development opportunities

A number of themes appear across the five faculties and the 31 departments/schools. These include: research quality, internationalisation, interdisciplinarity, societal impact, research infrastructure and research funding. They also include career paths, academic career advancement, diversity, inclusion, collegial culture, leadership, organisation and communication.

Each faculty has its own strengths, observations and development opportunities within these individual themes. In this AU summary, the focus is on general patterns and insights that span at least two faculties.

2.1/ High research quality

Across Aarhus University's faculties and departments/schools, the external evaluation panels assess the quality of research as high. This assessment is confirmed by the departments'/schools' own assessments, which document that research communities have strong academic profiles and a high level of academic integrity. Several research communities are highlighted as international centres of excellence and as world leading in their respective fields. The reports also point to a considerable breadth in academic expertise – from basic research to applied research.

Observations and development opportunities

Although the overall quality of research is high, several of the evaluations identify opportunities to further increase the national and international impact of research conducted at AU. These opportunities apply to interdisciplinary research in particular, because this type of research is considered key to innovation and attracting external funding. Aarhus University already has outstanding interdisciplinary collaborations, both internal and external, and the university is well placed to further develop in this area. But doing so requires more strategic and systematic support – at department/school level, faculty level, and across faculties.

2.2/ Significant international impact

International impact is a key indicator of research quality. The evaluations show that the university's research communities are actively engaged in international networks and collaborations, which is reflected in a high number of publications in recognised international journals. This underlines the university's well-established international orientation and its contribution to international knowledge production.

Observations and development opportunities

The evaluation also identifies challenges in relation to increased internationalisation. The strong incentive to publish in English in international journals has led to a decline in the number of Danish-language publications. In some fields, this may reduce the accessibility and relevance of research for national stakeholders such as policymakers, practitioners, educators and the general public. There is therefore a need for some research fields to achieve a better balance between international and national impact, especially in areas directly relevant to Danish society. This entails that publications in both English and Danish are recognised as valuable research contributions.

2.3/ Major societal impact

The evaluation shows that the research being conducted at Aarhus University has a significant societal impact across disciplines. This research plays a central role in innovation in business and industry, policy development and public debate. Several research communities have long-standing collaborations with ministries, business and industry, and international consortia and contribute to areas such as climate monitoring, pollution studies and food innovation ecosystems. Others participate actively in political committees and commissions, and there are many examples of reciprocal collaborations with civil society.

Observations and development opportunities

Several panels identify a potential to further increase societal impact by adopting a more strategic and structured approach to outreach activities. This includes focusing on the commercialisation of research results, spin-outs and patents as well as enhancing research communication.

It is positive that research's contribution to society is being increasingly recognised, yet there is still a need to rethink the merit system for academic career advancement. The current uncertainty regarding academic merit is particularly challenging for early-career researchers, who often need to prioritise publications in high-ranking journals to secure permanent positions – at the expense of activities with societal impact. A modernisation of processes for recruitment and academic career advancement should be carried out in accordance with the principles of the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment, which supports a broader concept of research.

2.4/ Success in attracting competitive research funding

External research funding is essential to carrying out projects with high academic and strategic relevance. It is therefore important to focus on securing a stable and long-term financial foundation that enables research activities to be planned, developed and carried out. In recent years, Aarhus University has attracted significantly more external funding, particularly from EU grants and Danish private foundations. This development testifies to the high quality of AU's research communities and ability to attract prestigious funding from foundations such as the ERC, the Danish National Research Foundation, the Villum Foundation, the Carlsberg Foundation and the Novo Nordisk Foundation.

Observations and development opportunities

The evaluation identifies a need to take a more strategic approach to securing external funding; for example, by exploring funding channels that are not yet fully utilised. It also reveals an uneven distribution of grants and a limited tradition of external funding in certain research fields. The evaluation therefore recommends intensifying strategic fundraising efforts, increasing application activity for selected instruments, and better integrating mentoring into application procedures. It also reveals the importance of administrative and application support for maintaining and advancing the university's competitiveness in this area.

2.5/ Research infrastructure as a necessary foundation

The university's research infrastructure constitutes a key strength and serves as the foundation for both basic and applied research projects. Several departments have access to advanced core facilities and technical equipment that support high-level research, and there is broad consensus that shared access to these facilities not only enhances research quality but also promotes collaboration and efficient use of resources. The panels highlight several examples of equipment and resources shared

across research communities, which contributes to a more integrated and collaborative research culture. They also recognise strategic investments in future technologies – such as artificial intelligence, cryo-electron microscopy and quantum technology – as evidence of a forward-looking approach to role of research infrastructure in the university's development.

Observations and development opportunities

Research infrastructure should increasingly be regarded as a platform for collaboration, talent recruitment and international visibility. In order to maintain the quality and continuity of AU's research efforts, it is necessary to ensure the long-term planning and maintenance of key research facilities. Although access to modern facilities was assessed as good overall, several panels identify the need for better organisation and governance. A strategic approach to the organisation and development of the infrastructure will support the university's ambitions for academic excellence and global presence.

2.6/ Career paths and talent development

Strategic recruitment, career development and the retention of researchers is essential for the quality of research. Even high-performing research communities can be vulnerable if there is a lack of researchers in key subject areas. In recent years, faculties and departments/schools have prioritised talent development and launched a number of initiatives that support researchers at all stages of their careers. The evaluations show that recruitment practices are assessed as effective overall, and that early-career researchers in particular receive relevant support.

Observations and development opportunities

There is still room for improvement. The composition of research staff is changing, partly as a result of changes in funding structures. This has created structural challenges that affect researchers' long-term development opportunities. Postdoc positions, for example, have become more widespread, but they are often characterised by short employment horizons, limited career perspectives at Aarhus University, and varying access to academic exchange and supervision. Support structures can vary in quality, and the international mobility of early-career researchers is uneven. The evaluations highlight the need for clear and transparent career paths that create continuity and development opportunities – also beyond formal promotions. A better balance between requirements and responsibilities will improve career development and contribute to more sustainable research communities.

2.7/ Diversity, inclusion and collegial culture

The departments/schools at Aarhus University are diverse and have many international members of staff. This is why diversity, equality and an inclusive workplace culture are key strategic priorities – both for recruitment and organisational development. Several panels highlighted the good work environment and high levels of staff satisfaction at the departments/schools, which were also praised for having a collaborative culture built on openness, respect and shared responsibility. Although there is still a clear gender imbalance, especially among senior researchers, increased use of open calls for appointments has helped create a better gender distribution and to attract researchers with different backgrounds.

Observations and development opportunities

Despite positive trends, gender imbalance remains a challenge – especially at leadership levels, where 'the leaky pipeline' is particularly pronounced. There is a need to promote inclusive practices, especially in leadership roles and in supporting underrepresented groups. The panels note that diversity and inclusion efforts are visible

at several departments/schools, especially in terms of international representation and gender balance among early-career researchers, which is positive, but there is still a need to address imbalances at senior level.

2.8/ Leadership, organisation and communication

To make strategic priorities, use resources efficiently and support researchers' core tasks, it is essential to have effective leadership and clear organisational structures. The evaluations show that both faculties and departments/schools have a clear and focused approach to leadership.

Observations and development opportunities

Several evaluations highlight the potential of optimising governance structures and organisational transparency in order to promote interdisciplinary research collaboration – both internally between units and departments/schools, and externally across faculties and institutions. Clear structures can support collaboration and strategic capacity building. The same applies to support functions, which should be robust, stable and of high quality to ensure continuity and efficiency.

Several evaluations also identify a need to communicate research strengths more clearly. There is a need for audience-specific communication that balances academic conventions with society's demand for knowledge and expertise.

3.0 Lessons learned from the evaluation process

Overall, the evaluation of research quality has been an instructive and valuable process that has improved both managers' and employees' understanding of research quality – both within and across Aarhus University's 31 departments/schools. The evaluation process has not only confirmed the high level of research being conducted at AU; it has also created room for reflection and development with a view to ensuring that the university's departments/schools continue to be sustainable and deliver international research of the highest quality.

Adopting a qualitative approach adapted to specific research fields, inspired by the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment, was instrumental in generating the learning outcomes of the evaluation. There was broad support for the inclusive method, and the departments/schools engaged openly and constructively in the process.

The international expert panels played a key role in identifying both strengths and untapped potentials. These insights will now form the basis for further dialogue and strategic follow-up between the deans and department/school leadership teams.

In addition, a number of lessons learned have been collected to inform future evaluations – expected in about six years. To better support future evaluations and strategic initiatives, a more systematic approach to data collection is recommended to underpin both reflection and decision-making.

4.0 Faculties – brief summaries of faculty reports

4.1/ Arts

The research evaluation shows that, overall, the research being conducted at Arts is at the highest international level. The research communities at the faculties have high international visibility and engage in high-level national as well as international collaborations. This supports the societal and academic impact of the research as well as its contribution to policy and practice-oriented agendas.

The evaluation also identifies a number of challenges and development opportunities. The variety of publication types and languages is becoming increasingly limited. The increase in external funding raises questions about whether the growing number of postdoc positions relative to permanent appointments is appropriate. The way research is organised is often perceived as opaque, highlighting the need for clearer and more consistent structures. Finally, there is a clear demand for better recognition and documentation of research impact and knowledge exchange – also as part of recruitment and in academic career advancement.

On the basis of the research evaluation, a number of specific development areas and initiatives have been identified. The evaluation has thus served as an opportunity to rethink the framework, resources and forms of recognition for research at the Faculty of Arts. It points the way forward to a coordinated effort to enhance the faculty's research through targeted and long-term initiatives.

4.2/ Aarhus BSS

The research evaluation shows that all departments at Aarhus BSS deliver research of the highest quality, and that all research communities have undergone a positive development in terms of both the volume and quality of their research output. The evaluation process also highlights a number of common strategic observations and focus areas that Aarhus BSS will address in the ongoing and future development of the faculty's research activities.

With a view to promoting the quality of research both locally and across Aarhus BSS, the strategic work will primarily focus on three faculty-wide initiatives. 1. Aarhus BSS will strengthen its support for talent development by ensuring clear and transparent career paths for early-career researchers. The goal is to create a research environment in which early-career researchers have access to resources, networks and support that promote their academic progression and retention. 2. Aarhus BSS will intensify its efforts for strategic research funding by supporting research communities with great development potential and establishing new excellent research communities both within and across the business and social science fields. 3. Aarhus BSS will promote a research culture in which research quality goes hand in hand with societal relevance and dissemination. To achieve this, researchers will be supported in disseminating their results widely – both to their academic peers and to the public – and in strengthening collaboration with relevant external stakeholders.

The research evaluation process has thus prompted a rethinking of the structures and strategies for research at Aarhus BSS, pointing the way forward to a coordinated effort to enhance the faculty's research profile through targeted and long-term initiatives.

4.3/ Health

The evaluation of research quality at Health confirms that the faculty has high-performing and diverse research communities conducting research of high international quality with clear societal relevance.

Across Health's five departments, there are common strengths and development opportunities, including the need for more strategic research leadership, improved use of research infrastructure, and enhanced interdisciplinary collaboration. All departments are working actively to create good work environments and to optimise governance and organisational coherence. Recruitment and talent development are prioritised highly with a focus on attractive and inclusive career paths. The evaluation highlights the positive interplay between research and teaching.

The evaluation also highlights the departments' significant research impact. However, it also identifies continued potential to work more strategically with visibility, external communication and political advocacy. One way to do this is to involve external stakeholders to a greater extent in research processes and enter into strategic partnerships with actors from the business community, civil society and other institutions.

Overall, the evaluation provides a solid foundation for the further development of research at Health – with initiatives that support quality, collaboration and societal engagement in an increasingly complex and global research landscape.

4.4/ Natural Sciences

The research evaluation of the departments at the Faculty of Natural Sciences shows that, overall, Nat is well positioned to achieve its ambition: excellence in the natural sciences for the benefit of society. The panels independently highlighted several common strengths, such as academic excellence, research impact, access to modern research infrastructure, and an effective culture of collaboration.

The evaluations also provided a valuable insight into the departments' individual development opportunities. Many of these can be grouped under five strategic areas for development: internal collaboration (between research communities, departments and faculties); collaboration with external partners; visibility and dissemination; interplay between internal organisation and external communication; staff policy (including strategic recruitment and retention, diversity and inclusion, development and academic career advancement).

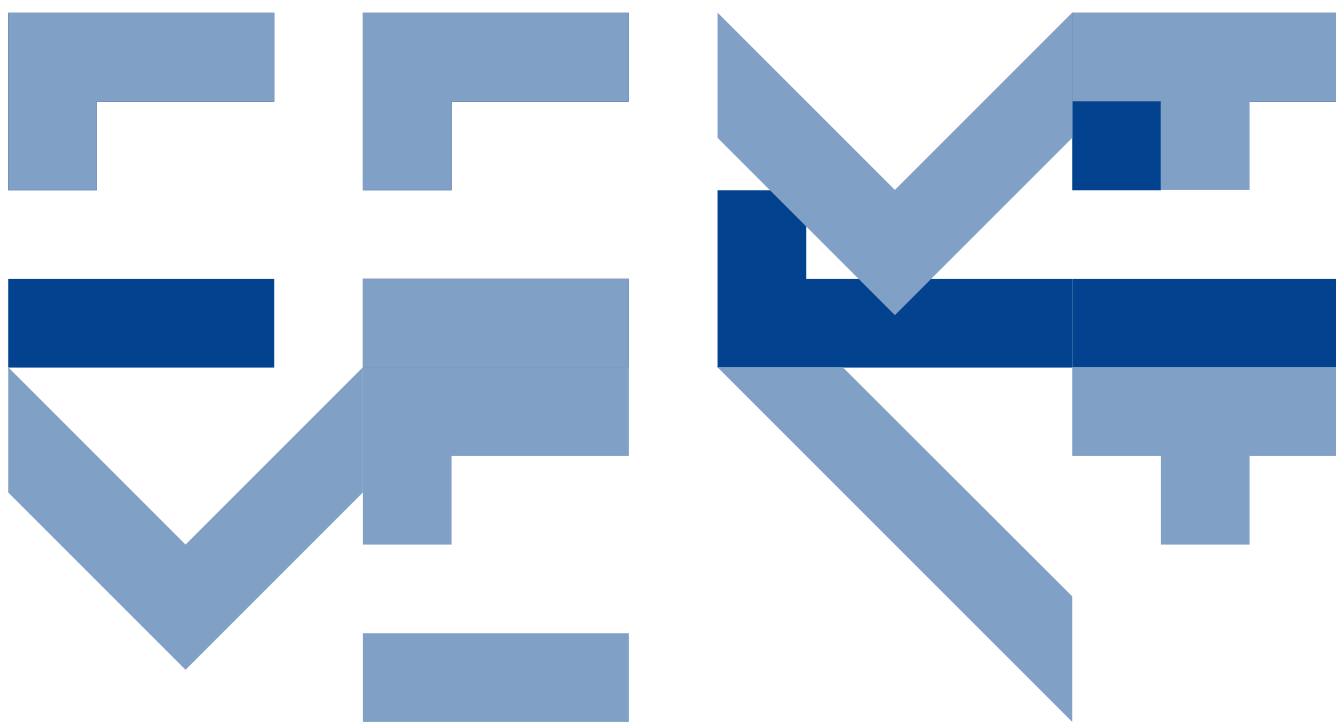
On the basis of the evaluations, concrete and targeted development initiatives have been outlined at both department and faculty level. These initiatives address one or more of the development areas and will be implemented in the coming years.

4.5/ Technical Sciences

The research evaluation shows that the Faculty of Technical Science (Tech) holds a strong position in both basic and applied research and that several departments are world-leading in specialised fields. The research is closely linked to national priorities such as the green transition, digitalisation and sustainable systems.

There is an increased focus on inclusive leadership and interdisciplinary collaboration. International recruitment and gender balance among early-career researchers are improving, but there are still challenges regarding gender equality at senior level and in leadership positions. Structured support for early-career researchers is a recurring need.

Across Tech, the departments hold a strong position in terms of leadership, modern research infrastructure, and effective stakeholder engagement. Key challenges include increasing international visibility, strengthening inclusive leadership, and improving support for early-career researchers.



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