

## BSU Joint Assignment Holders Meetings

### Aarhus 27 February & Copenhagen 28 February 2013

#### Organised by the three thematic Building Stronger Universities (BSU) Platforms:

- Platform on Environment and Climate – EC ([bsuec.org](http://bsuec.org))
- Growth and Employment Platform – GEP ([bsuge.org](http://bsuge.org))
- Platform on Human Health – PHH ([bsuhh.org](http://bsuhh.org))

**Aarhus 27 February 2013 participating assignment holders:** Anders Barfod (AU/EC), Christian Wejse (AU/PHH), Gabriel Gullis (SDU/PHH), Hans Thodsen (AU/EC), Martin Paldam (AU/GEP), Niels Bering Ovesen (AU/EC), Per Kallestrup (AU/PHH), Ulrika Enemark (AU/PHH)

**Other participants:** Bjørg Elvekjær (Coordinator, PHH), Susanne Lildal Amsinck (Coordinator, EC)

**Copenhagen 28 February 2013 participating assignment holders:** Anders Dalsgaard (UCPH/PHH), Anders Ræbild (UCPH/EC), Christentze Schmiegelow (UCPH/PHH), Dirk Lund Christensen (UCPH/PHH), Egil Kaas (UCPH/EC), Helle O. Larsen (UCPH/GEP), Helle Trøst Nielsen (UCPH/PHH), Henrik Bregnhøj (UCPH/PHH), Jens Dolin (UCPH/GEP,PHH), Lars Hviid (UCPH/PHH), Nanette Hale (UCPH/PHH), Pia Frederiksen (AU/EC), Shirley Pollak (UCPH/PHH), Søren Larsen (UCPH/PHH),

**Other participants:** Arne Skov Andersen (BSU Project Manager, Universities Denmark), Bjørg Elvekjær (Coordinator, PHH), Carl Erik Schou Larsen (Coordinator, GEP), Dorte Holler Johansen (Work Package Leader, PHH), Flemming Konradsen (Chair, PHH), Pia Pannula Toft (Communication Advisor, PHH), Susanne Lildal Amsinck (Coordinator, EC)

#### PURPOSE

The purpose with the Building Stronger Universities (BSU) Assignment Holders meetings was to provide a forum for involved resource persons to share information and experience including practical issues and at the same time providing feedback to the BSU Platform Coordinators. The input is important in the process of identifying the main, common successes and challenges in order to improve the existing processes: Making everybody's life easier, and securing maximum impact of the joint efforts.

#### DEFINING INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY BUILDING

The meetings started with a joint exercise prompting participants to reflect on and describe how they perceive '*institutional capacity building*', which is the overriding, comprehensive and multifaceted aim of the BSU initiative. Following associations were named, just to mention a few: Close cooperation, trust, respect, slow process, stand together and work towards the same goal, knowledge sharing, knowledge transfer, improved local knowledge, what knowledge is worth exporting, who selects and decides, need for guiding principles and rules.

## **SHARING AND DISCUSSING VISIONS AND EXPERIENCE**

The participants were divided into groups and asked to share and discuss visions and experiences in the various phases of their contact with and collaboration under BSU: The recruitment process; initial briefings on BSU and the specific assignment; connecting with the partner institution and the South counterpart(s) and/or the PhD student; process of aligning expectations; dividing responsibilities and tasks between North and South; planning and implementation; evaluation and reporting; communication between platforms, universities, assignment holders in DK.

The discussions were guided by questions: What works well? What has been the main challenge(s)? What could be improved?

Please find below main issues, findings, recommendations and conclusions reported back from the groups and subsequently discussed in plenum at the two meetings:

### **Connecting with the partners**

The establishment of an efficient communication flow between Danish and African assignment holders has shown to be more difficult than expected. In some cases this has been due to invalid e-mail addresses and missing contact information. Some Danish assignment holders also reported that the BSU assignments have enjoyed a low priority at the partner institutions, which has caused major delays in e-mail correspondence, subsequently delaying the planning and execution of activities. Some Danish assignment holders reported challenges in engaging African counterparts in the development of the content of activities.

In order to ensure a smoother and more efficient communication between Danish and African assignment holders in the future, face-to-face meetings to build personal relationships as early in the process as possible was suggested as a priority. Placing (maybe adding) visits in the beginning of the assignment periods to introduce partners has not been included in the design of the assignments in BSU Phase I but should be considered in the planning of Phase II. An observation was that South counterparts are not always very well prepared or informed about the process, requirements and extents of the BSU activity/ies they play a part in before the first contact with implementing North BSU partners takes place. Thus, there appears to be room for improvements in the internal communication about BSU and BSU assignments at the partner institutions and between the involved South and North resource persons.

GEP and EC are already planning to arrange a Phase II Launch at the partner institutions, where as many North and South BSU resource persons as possible should be available for bilateral as well as joint meetings. The purpose is to strengthen the ties within the individual teams and the coherence of the Platforms' various efforts at the given institution. It was agreed to consider how PHH could plug into these arrangements at KNUST and UG, to establish relevant ties and coordination between the three Platforms and their resource persons from the outset.

### **Division of responsibilities and tasks**

There are varying levels of affiliation to and commitment from students and staff at the partner universities towards the BSU activities. In some cases, the introduced activities are quite new to the partners and require substantial introduction, input and guidance from North resource persons. In other cases, the BSU

activity feeds directly into already ongoing efforts and can be handled and handed over to the South counterparts more easily. As the BSU initiative progresses it is foreseen that all activities should gradually be managed closer and more directly from the South. Thus the designation of counterparts at the partner institution for all assignment holders is a key and core principle to BSU.

Most assignment holders have met very committed and engaged students. However, in a number of cases the involved staff members have not been able to follow the courses or contribute to the activities the way they were supposed to due to other duties they could not be released from. In these cases, there is a need to ensure a larger degree of support and commitment from the partner universities' management. Activities cannot be carried out timely and effectively if involved staff or students are not available according to plans.

A general question was raised how we deal with insufficient or missing delivery of outputs agreed according to plans. Would we ensure a more consistent level of commitment and delivery from the partner institutions if we introduced competitive calls (like EC and GEP have introduced)?

### **PhD issues**

PhD co-supervisors called for an opportunity to be consulted up front in the formulation of the PhD projects. As it is now the PhD projects are decided and defined by the South institution and more or less fixed when they are announced in Denmark.

In several cases it has been noted that the recruited PhD candidates do not strictly speaking have (all) the qualifications required to start their PhD studies. It would be relevant if there was an available option for such candidates to receive support from BSU to attend selected preparatory courses for a given period to gain the missing skills and knowledge; and/or perhaps even completing a standard, mandatory one-year master programme before initiation of the PhD.

It was also reported that the pool of qualified and enthusiastic PhD supervisors at most of the partner institutions is limited, highlighting the importance of expanding and improving this resource base e.g. via courses on PhD supervision and mentor-programmes and specifically targeting the next generation of supervisors. It was mentioned that there have already been a number of successful Training-of-Trainers courses in PhD supervision in Ghana and Tanzania in Phase I with participants from the PHH, GEP and EC Platforms. These activities are planned to be carried over into Phase II.

### **Coordination and communication among assignment holders within and across Platforms**

The BSU structure with four separate Platforms is not always ideal in terms of coordination and cooperation and there is room for improvements with regard to information sharing among assignment holders even within each thematic Platform. It is continuously being considered how we can ensure synergy in BSU and all assignment holders are encouraged to contribute to this process by frequently sharing their ideas and plans with relevant colleagues. Updated lists of assignment holders including relevant information will be available on the BSU websites.

### **Too many and too many fragmented partners, themes and activities**

A general assessment is that there have been too many small and fragmented partners, themes and activities in Phase I. Uncoordinated stand-alone activities do not feed into long term institutional capacity building. All work on courses should e.g. aim towards and be closely coordinated with efforts to obtain

accreditation. However, due to the two-year period of the BSU Phase I grant we have so far operated only with short-term assignments. There was an agreement among meeting participants that we should make an effort to arrange Platform as well as crosscutting BSU activities in bigger bulks, which would enable us to recruit groups or individuals for a sequence of activities over a longer period of time. This would decrease central administration at the Platform secretariat level and increase focus and coherence of efforts at partner institution level.

It was also suggested that we could aim at having specific partner institutions focusing on specific themes i.e. Zanzibar could maintain and eventually limit its' focus on building capacity in Sexual and Reproductive Health with the aim of becoming a centre of excellence in this field. We cannot sufficiently build capacity in all subjects at all partner institutions.

### **Coordination with partners outside of BSU**

There is still room for improvement in terms of exploring opportunities for cooperation with other like-minded partners working at the same partner institutions. At Kilimanjaro Christian Medical Centre (PHH's partner in Tanzania) this kind of cooperation has already been established and is proving very useful.

### **Ambitions versus resources**

A general problem with BSU is that we have '*a taste for champagne with a beer budget*'. I.e. our ambitions in terms of the volume and quality of input we want to deliver compared to the resources available to cover costs, mainly in the North, do not fully match. Funding from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs favours South by division 60/40 from year two in BSU Phase II. There are two ways to deal with this: Either we try to attract more funding for North activities from other sources and/or we adjust our ambitions and design to fit the realities in the best possible way.

### **Evaluation and reporting**

It was emphasised by the Platform Secretariats how important it is for the assignment holders to evaluate their efforts with their South counterparts to strengthen the collective learning and subsequently to provide systematic feedback to the Secretariats in order for them to continuously adapt and develop the formats and concepts of the BSU collaboration to get most value out of future efforts. The Activity Completion Reports (and for the PhD supervisors this would for the first years be progress reports) are important inputs and should be completed jointly by the North and the South resource persons and forwarded to the respective Platform Secretariat together with relevant course material, participants lists, evaluations etc.

Specific evaluations of courses and other activities are equally important to undertake and share with the relevant Platform Secretariat. Some universities have their own standard evaluation formats that will be used. In other cases the involved resource persons are required to produce and present their own formats. At this point there are no standard BSU templates. [Pascal Magnussen](#) from University of Copenhagen and [Anne Mette Lykke and Anders Barfod](#) from Aarhus University respectively offered to share their previously developed evaluation formats, which have been used in support of BSU activities, for inspiration. ([Both documents available at the website.](#))

Please note that there have been developed a set of certificate templates with BSU and respective Platform logos that can be adapted to any specific course to honour and provide documentation to the participants. These can be downloaded from the Platform websites.

The team from the Department of Science Education at the University of Copenhagen responsible for the joint BSU Training-of-Trainers courses in PhD supervision with GEP, EC and PHH participants in Ghana and Tanzania have even launched a sub-website to share their course materials and findings  
[http://www.ind.ku.dk/english/course\\_overview/tot/](http://www.ind.ku.dk/english/course_overview/tot/).

**BSU as a part of Danida's research strategy**

The mandate and structure of BSU has been somewhat changed since the outset in 2010 and there is still some internal confusion and questioning concerning how fixed the borders are in relation to activities and partners and countries and how this relates to the other research grants from MoFA/Danida. A new research strategy, which is assumed to formally settle these recurring questions, is under preparation.