

Content

The 4+4 PhD Study – points of attention	2
1. Practical circumstances regarding part A.....	2
1.1 Travel	2
1.2 Access to printers, equipment etc.....	3
1.3 Use of department cars	3
1.4 Insurance when working in laboratories	3
1.5 Work obligation	3
1.6 Hourly paid work	3
1.7 Holiday	3
1.8 Parental leave	3
1.9 Illness	4
1.10 Seniority/pension	4
1.11 Financial aspects going from part A to part B	4
1.12 Termination of the PhD study during part A	4
2. The contents of the 4+4 PhD study	4
2.1 Master’s thesis exam/status seminar:.....	4
2.2 Relation between master’s thesis and PhD thesis	5
2.3 Courses	5
2.4 Study abroad and travelling for courses/conferences during part A	5

The 4+4 PhD Study – points of attention

The 4+4 scheme differs in many ways from the standard 5+3 PhD study. Both in terms of contents and because of the practical challenges you may encounter along the way. On the other hand, it is an opportunity for those who wish to pursue a PhD and a research career to get an early start. You will also have a longer time horizon for your research, even though the PhD programme is still formally set at 180 ECTS. This is because you will be part-time during the first two years of your enrolment period.

The following is a must-read for PhD students, supervisors, heads of programmes and administrative staff involved in the 4+4 scheme. In the following we will present the (known) special circumstances you must be aware of and take into consideration when you decide to begin a 4+4 PhD study. Please note that this information is directed at all Doctoral School's at Aalborg University currently using the 4+4-scheme. More specific information, e.g. on the study part of the programme may be found at the website's of the individual Doctoral Schools.

1. Practical circumstances regarding part A

During the first two years (part A) the candidate is enrolled 50% as a master's student and 50% as a PhD student. The candidate must follow the study regulations for the master's education in question (unless an individual study plan is approved). The candidate must also follow the standard rules and regulations at the Doctoral School. A PhD plan containing information regarding the completion of the master's degree must be uploaded through PhD Manager after two months of enrolment. This timeframe applies even though 4+4 PhD students are only enrolled part time, for the first two years.

During Part A, 4+4 PhD students receive SU PhD grant portions in accordance with the Danish SU Act, Chapter 12. A total of 48 portions can be paid out, each corresponding to the current SU rate for students living away from home. The portions are paid in advance, with 2 portions disbursed per month. The university is responsible for paying the SU PhD grant portions. In addition, the individual student may also be eligible for regular SU for the Master's part during Part A (the first year of part A). Inquiries regarding this should be directed to: <https://www.studerende.aau.dk/vejledning/su>.

Paid work alongside the PhD study, beyond the 16 hours of paid work offered by the department (see section 1.6), must be approved by the department and the main supervisor.

4+4 PhD-students are not employees during part A. They are students. It is critical to be aware of the differences between being employed and only enrolled. Overall, it means that during part A the 4+4 PhD students do not have the rights or the obligations of employees.

In the following we will present some of the practical challenges that may arise when not being an employee. At the same time, we will also present ways of meeting these challenges. However, it is imperative to understand that the presented solutions are not 1:1 the same as for employed PhD's.

1.1 Travel

Travelling to conferences, courses and going abroad is an integral part of a PhD study. However, when you are not an employee there are certain aspects, you must be aware of.

Insurance. 4+4 PhD students are not automatically covered by the university's travel insurance during part A. The head of department can decide to include the PhD student in the university's travel insurance. This means that the department accepts the financial cost of including the PhD student in the insurance scheme (as for employees). The department must contact the travel department directly to include the PhD student in the insurance. The university cannot pay for any insurance bought privately by the PhD student.

Travel costs. There are limits to the travel costs that the university can reimburse for non-employees. Only documented expenses can be covered e.g., flight/train/bus tickets, hotel. Per diem allowance is not possible. Also note, that the PhD student must pay taxes of expenses covered by the university when travelling in Denmark. More information is available here:

<https://www.ansatte.aau.dk/regler/okonomi/studerendes-rejser>

1.2 Access to printers, equipment etc.

During part A the PhD student must have an access card to AAU. Through this you can give access to buildings, printers, laboratories etc. This is the same for all PhD students not employed at AAU.

1.3 Use of department cars

It is not possible for non-employees to drive cars owned by the university. This may be solved if the department rents a car. The expense for renting the car must be covered by the department.

A new solution where non-employed PhD students can borrow a car is expected as of June 2026 – read more here: <https://www.update.aau.dk/it-will-be-easier-for-you-to-borrow-an-aau-car-n164150>

1.4 Insurance when working in laboratories

The university has an accident insurance policy that covers all students at AAU, including PhD students, who engage in laboratory activities and conduct experiments as part of their studies, including to the extent that such activities or experiments are carried out in connection with excursions, trips, internships, etc. This is because laboratory work is associated with certain risks. AAU is self-insured but has special authorization under the University Act to take out accident insurance. The special authorization aims to enable universities to provide coverage similar to employees in the event of accidents and harmful exposures under the Workers' Compensation Act. It should be emphasized that the department has a responsibility to ensure that students incl. PhD students without employment working in the laboratories do not have access to chemicals, equipment, etc., for which they are not insured.

1.5 Work obligation

During part A the PhD student is not covered by the 840 hrs work obligation that applies to employed 5+3 PhD students. When entering part B, the PhD student will have a work obligation corresponding to 2/3 of 840 hrs. The work obligation is part of the AC Collective Agreement.

1.6 Hourly paid work

During part A 4+4 PhD students are offered hourly paid work at the department amounting to 16 hours per month during the two years. The type of work is decided by the department but should e.g. be teaching assignments, assistance with research projects, dissemination, and other work that can relieve the rest of the academic staff. The hourly paid work will be put on hold during periods of leave. The hourly paid work must not be mistaken for the work obligation that applies to employed PhD students cf. section 1.5.

1.7 Holiday

During part A the candidate is not covered by the Holidays Act and is therefore not able to accrue holidays. Holiday should be agreed upon with the supervisor and notice should also be given to the department.

1.8 Parental leave

You are entitled to supplemental SU PhD grant portions for up to 9 months parental leave. If you are a single parent, you can apply for an additional 3 months leave. You will receive 2 SU PhD grant portions per month. Special rules apply if both parents are entitled to SU PhD grants. Parental leave must be reported to both your department and AAU PhD (aauphd@adm.aau.dk).

Extensions due to parental leave during Part A must be completed within Part A and therefore cannot result in an extension of Part B.

1.9 Illness

Long-term illness must be reported to both your department and AAU PhD (aauphd@adm.aau.dk). A duration certificate (in Danish: varighedserklæring) from your doctor must be submitted as soon as possible. When the PhD study is resumed after illness, this must also be reported to AAU PhD.

Supplementary SU PhD grant portions may be granted for up to a maximum of 4 months if the PhD student has been absent due to illness within a continuous 12-month period. Supplementary portions are only paid for full months of absence. If the absence exceeds 4 months, the payment of SU PhD grant portions will stop, as supplementary portions can only be granted for up to 4 months of absence. The payment of any remaining portions will resume when the PhD study is resumed.

Extensions due to illness during Part A must be completed within Part A and therefore cannot result in an extension of Part B.

1.10 Seniority/pension

As 4+4 PhD students are not employed during part A you are not entitled to pension contributions. Once you have obtained your MSc degree that concludes part A you will receive a two-year employment contract as a PhD fellow. Seniority follows from the AC Collective Agreement and is counted from the time of the award of the MSc degree.

1.11 Financial aspects going from part A to part B

During part A the PhD student receives a SU-PhD scholarship which, like regular SU, is paid in advance. During part B the PhD student receives a salary which is paid in arrears. This means that there will be a period of two months from the last payment of SU-PhD scholarship (1 August) to the first salary is paid (30 September). This is normal and something that all students experience when going from SU to salary.

1.12 Termination of the PhD study during part A

What happens if you decide during part A that the PhD study is not for you. Or if you fail to progress according to the PhD plan and as a result is terminated from the PhD study. In these instances, you have the right to complete your MSc studies as a full-time MSc student. Please contact your local study board for further instructions on how to proceed.

2. The contents of the 4+4 PhD study

The following sections describes the contents of the of the 4+4 PhD study with special attention to the areas that differ from the regular full-time 3 year PhD study.

2.1 Master's thesis exam/status seminar:

After two years of study, an oral exam is held for the student to acquire the master's degree. The student's written work and oral presentation must be assessed according to the criteria for the master's thesis in the current curriculum. The examination can also serve as a status seminar / oral progress report – check the rules applying to your Doctoral School. Thus, the student must in his/her presentation explain the results obtained so far seen in a research context and present the plans for the remainder of the PhD project. In summary, the assessors for the thesis exam 1) assess written material and oral presentation according to the applicable curriculum and 2) evaluate written material and oral presentation according to the guidelines of the status seminar. In general, it is a good idea to inform the external examiner of the special

nature of the exam. Most examiners should be familiar with this type of examination as the 4+4 model is not exclusive to AAU.

The master's thesis is the conclusion of the 1-year master's education that the student has undertaken simultaneously alongside the 1 year of the PhD study. It is imperative that by the time of the master's thesis exam the PhD student has completed 1 year MSc education and 1 year of PhD studies. In the end the scope and level of the PhD study must be the same as 5+3, i.e., 180 ECTS:

MSc
PhD

5+3 PhD:

4+4 PhD:

As can be seen from the figure, it is not a 4-year PhD, but a 3-year PhD stretched to 4-years because time is also spent finishing the last year of the master's study.

It is important that the timing of the master's thesis exam is correct. The exam must take place in the month of August two years after the enrolment date (1 September). When the PhD student passes the master's exam, he/she will receive a two-years employment contract from the following 1 of the month after the exam, i.e. from 1 September when the exam is scheduled in August. If the exam is scheduled for a previous date, e.g., in June like many other students, the PhD student will lose 2 months of the total study period because the employment contract will be from 1 July. The employment contract cannot be prolonged by the two months.

2.2 Relation between master's thesis and PhD thesis

Material from the master's thesis cannot be a part of the material used to assess the student for the PhD degree. However, elements from the master's exam thesis can be included in the PhD thesis if this is deemed relevant e.g., for obtaining a coherent/self-contained exposition. If material from the master's thesis is included in the PhD thesis, this must be properly referenced according to good scientific practice. It should also be explained in the preface of the PhD thesis how material from the master's thesis has been included.

2.3 Courses

In addition to the courses that must be completed for the master's degree, the candidate must obtain 30 ECTS from courses during the PhD study. These must be courses on a PhD level and cannot overlap with the courses that are required for the master's degree.

2.4 Study abroad and travelling for courses/conferences during part A

As mentioned in the section concerning travel special rules apply in connection with travelling while not employed at AAU. Financial support is more restricted compared to employed PhD students. Non-

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employed PhD students are not entitled to tax-free daily allowances such as per diems or mileage, and they cannot receive travel advances. Only actual documented travel expenses—such as flight tickets and hotel invoices—can be reimbursed. It is important to note that these reimbursements are considered taxable income if travelling in Denmark. Therefore, it may be worth taking this into consideration when planning participation in courses and conferences outside of AAU during part A.