PhD Program Accreditation: Criteria and Standards

Professor K T Wann
Former Deputy Dean of the University Graduate College

Professor of Cell Physiology
School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences
Cardiff University
Wales, UK

Accreditation of PhD Programs

Context: what questions do we need to ask?

What is the PhD program aiming to achieve?

How robust are all the processes?

What does a good PhD Thesis look like?

Who decides on the quality of the Thesis?

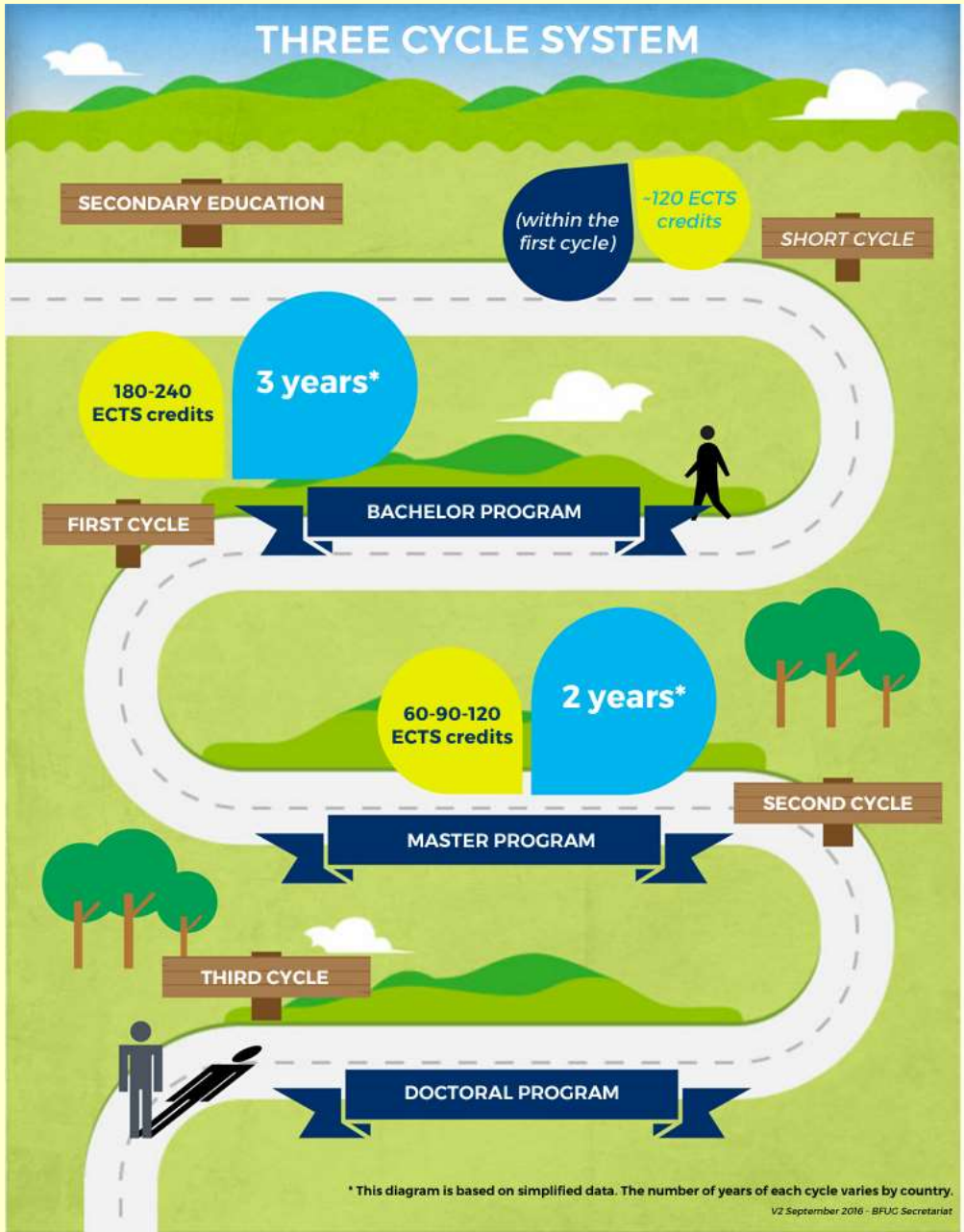
Cycles and level descriptors in tertiary education

Doctoral education belongs to Cycle 3

Level is used to refer to the provision of education, for example in UNESCO's International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED).

ISCED 2011: Level 8 is a Doctoral or equivalent Program designed to lead to an advanced research publication, usually concluding with the submission and defense of a substantive dissertation of publishable quality based on original research

Cycles in Tertiary Education



Principles and Landmarks in Doctoral Education

The core component of doctoral training is the advancement of knowledge through original research. At the same time it is recognised that doctoral training must increasingly meet the needs of an employment market that is wider than academia.

Salzburg Principles, 2005

The European Higher Education Area is structured around three cycles, where each level has the function of preparing the student for the labour market, for further competence building and for active citizenship.

The Bergen Communiqué, 2005

The importance of assessing the quality of Doctorates

Stakeholders: Those with a stake in the quality of postgraduate education (programs and outcomes) include:

- Applicants
- Graduates
- Higher education institutions
- National Research Councils
- Other funding agencies (including International)
- Professional bodies
- Government
- Other higher education sector policy-makers
- QAA (UK)
- Employers

Accreditation Agencies

Many countries have National (e.g. UK) or regional (Germany, USA) quality assurance agencies

Report to HEFCE by Clarke and Lunt September 2014 © HEFCE 2014 summarises this picture for eight countries

In the UK there is periodic review by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) as part of the Higher Education Review

N.B. Professional bodies accredit Professional programs (e.g. in Nursing, engineering or Psychology)

Qualification Frameworks

It is important that there is comparability of standards cross the world

Mutual trust in qualifications is a must

Comparable standards ensures that mobility within the sector is assured

Qualification Frameworks

There are many Qualifications Frameworks in the Countries that engage in Higher Education

e.g. In Europe there are countries that in addition to being within the scope (and hence complying) with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) possess their own framework.

If starting afresh the steer or guide might be to examine the EQF and adapt and / or shape to suit the local circumstances

The National IT and Telecom Agency, Denmark danmark.dk
Telephone: 1881

sp@itst.dk www.netboghandel.dk

Qualification Frameworks

Mainland Europe – European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA): the European Qualifications Framework EQF)

UK - UK Quality code (Clarke and Lunt , 2014)

Germany - German Qualifications framework for Lifelong Learning (DQR)

Austria – Austrian National Qualifications Framework (NQF)

Norway – Norwegian Qualifications framework for Lifelong Learning (NQF)

Australia – Australian Qualifications Network (AQF)

Framework for Qualifications for the EHEA

(2.7 Good practice for the development of national frameworks of qualifications)

- The development and review process for producing good frameworks is most effective when it involves all relevant stakeholders both within and outside higher education. Higher educations frameworks are best viewed and treated as a national initiative. This makes possible the inclusion of, or links to, other areas of education and training outside higher education.

- The framework for higher education qualifications should identify a clear and nationally agreed set of purposes

- Frameworks for higher education qualifications benefit from the inclusion of cycles and /or levels, and articulation with outcome-focused indicators and/or descriptors of qualifications.

CARDIFF UNIVERSITY
PRIFYSGOL CAERDYDD

Good practice for the development of national frameworks of qualifications

- The use of learning outcomes in describing units, modules, and whole qualifications aids their transparency, recognition and subsequent student and citizen mobility. The identification of formal links to learning outcomes should play an important role in the development of national frameworks of qualifications.

- More flexible higher education frameworks of qualifications have the benefit of promoting multiple pathways into and through higher education, and thus through encouraging lifelong learning and the efficient use of resources promote greater social cohesion.

CARDIFF UNIVERSITY
PRIFYSGOL CAERDYDD

Good practice for the development of national frameworks of qualifications

- Higher education frameworks of qualifications benefit from being directly linked to credit accumulation and transfer systems. Credit systems facilitate bridges and links between different forms, modes, levels and sectors of education and can be instrumental in facilitating access, inclusion and lifelong learning.

- Higher education frameworks of qualifications should explicitly link to academic standards, national and institutional quality assurance systems, and public understanding of the place and level of nationally recognised qualifications

- Public confidence in academic standards requires public understanding of the achievements represented by different higher education qualifications and titles. This confidence and understanding is enhanced by the publication of appropriate institutional audits and/or subject review reports.

Good practice for the development of national frameworks of qualifications

- The development and application of national frameworks of qualifications facilitates the development of autonomous higher education institutions by creating clear external reference points that help to promote high quality, responsible and responsive institutions

- National frameworks of qualifications need to articulate in a transparent way with the European framework for qualifications. The process of articulation should involve the careful mapping of national qualifications (their levels, learning outcomes and descriptors) with the cycle descriptors identified for the European framework

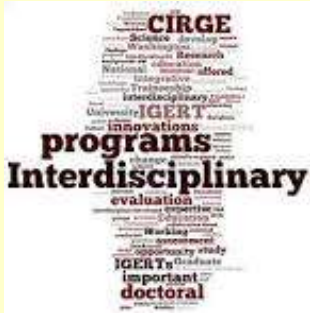
Accreditation of PhD Programs

What is a PhD program aiming to achieve?

We can apply the Dublin descriptors

- Knowledge / understanding and application of that
- making judgements
- communication and learning skills

What about preparation for after the PhD?



What does the PhD look like?
(criteria?)

Awards go to the candidates who:

have made a contribution through original research that extends the frontier of knowledge by developing a substantial body of work, some of which merits national or international refereed publication

Hence:

We need to be assured that it is the candidate who has done the work

We need to somehow evaluate whether there is evidence of sufficient original research (peer reviewed publications could support this)

Accreditation of PhD Programs

An accredited PhD program should:

Meet the expected standards required of the output (University decides this?)

Bear National or International comparison

Ensure that the relevant Institutional support and help is there to guide the candidates (University should deliver this)

Ideally have a Candidate – Supervisor charter (maps out respective responsibilities and expectations)

Robustness of Processes

Admission criteria – candidate selection

Supervisor and project selection

Monitoring of progress

Selection of examiners

The examination process

Outcomes

Documentation of the whole journey

Robustness of Processes

Admission criteria – candidate selection arguably the most important part

- **Advert followed by interview?**
- **Qualifications asked? Proof of language competence checked?**
- **Expression of interest (Vienna- letter of motivation)**
- **Interview lecture?**
- **Selection Panel / committee / supervisors**
- **Attempt to match to project**

Robustness of Processes

Supervisor and project selection

- Supervisor qualifications examined?
- Inexperienced young supervisors
- Supervisor training
- Feasibility of the proposed research
- Relevance to the mission of the University

Robustness of Processes

Monitoring of progress

- What does this look like (periodic reports/ *viva voce* etc)?
- How is this to be executed and managed (e.g. electronically)
- Who does the monitoring (objectivity)?
- Are there planned red flags?
- Is there central archiving of information for purposes of future audit?

Robustness of Processes

Selection of examiners (some considerations)

- How many, and where are they based? (external to University or internal)
- Both relevant competence and objectivity required
- Must not know the candidate personally
- Some familiarity with the candidate's work allowed
- Must not have examined the candidate or had sight of written work previously

Robustness of Processes

Composition of the examining committee can however vary vastly

- Thus in many countries not all the above considerations apply
- For example in Austria, Netherlands, Germany and the USA the supervisor is one of the committee involved in the examination, although in the Netherlands the supervisor takes no part in the "judgement"
- The argument is that the supervisor knows the whole student, and their journey, and can therefore step in if the candidate does not perform, as expected

Robustness of Processes

The all critical assessment process

- The actual process itself does vary immensely even within Europe
- Perhaps the biggest differences exist between the UK and mainland Europe
- The oral defense is not a formality in the UK
- The final examination is much more objective in the UK
- Important that the format of the PhD is conveyed to the examining body

Robustness of Processes

The submission / examination process

Several countries have a "reading committee" that provides written feedback prior to the defense (Germany, France, Austria, Netherlands). That committee gives the green light to submission.

In the Netherlands at least, the examining committee consists mostly of the original reading committee.

Duration of the defense may be short (45 mins in Germany or the Netherlands) or long (up to 4 hours in the UK).

It is a Public (staff, PhD peers, family and friends) defense in some countries e.g. Germany, Austria and Finland

Robustness of Processes

The outcomes of the examination following questioning

Graded or threshold?

Germany has four grades, the highest being summa cum laude ("with honours")

Austria has numerical scores with 1 being very good and 5 being a fail

In the UK there are perhaps five or six outcomes such as pass, pass with minor corrections, pass with major amendments etc

Robustness of Processes

Documentation of the whole journey

- For purposes of audit, all documentation should be archived centrally
- This would include % completion, average time to completion, examiner or committee reports, success rate at *viva voce*, appeals etc

Some final points

- ✓ Successful accreditation is a platform for future development
- ✓ By developing accredited and highly regarded PhD programs you can raise the profile / standing of the University
- ✓ Your PhD graduates will go out into the world and will be ambassadors for your Institution
- ✓ The reputation of the university will be determined in part by how they are regarded
- ✓ Poor results in accreditation causes reputational damage
- ✓ Reward good practice