Accreditation and quality assurance of doctoral education

<mark>The main component of the third cycle is original research</mark>, which is performed by doctoral candidates in a unique way. This makes doctoral programmes very diverse and difficult to evaluate (both internally and externally) in a uniform way.

Two main areas of evaluation:

- The quality of the doctoral training (educational part)
- The quality of the research (including the quality of research environment, the supervisor, research outcomes, international reputation, etc.)

Main levels of evaluation (see Figure below):

- National factors (general regulations, grants, social security, etc.)
- Institutional factors
- Graduate/doctoral school factors
- Programme level factors

Factors in Quality Assurance of Doctoral Education

Original & excellent research

Access & transparency

Equality of access

Mobility & internationalisation

Administrative structure

HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION
CAREER DEVELOPMENT & STRUCTURES
Offered structures and programmes
Perception of career perspectives
Cooperation with external partners (Industry, NGOs etc.)

GRADUATE/DOCTORAL/RESEARCH SCHOOL
Organisational objectives
Attractive employment & working conditions
Standardised recruitment procedures
Supervision, training for supervision & supervise the supervisors

PROGRAMME LEVEL
Objectives of the programme
Enhancing training, skills & experience of researchers
Added value of a doctorate
Assessment, expectations & outcomes of doctoral programmes
Duration of the doctorate
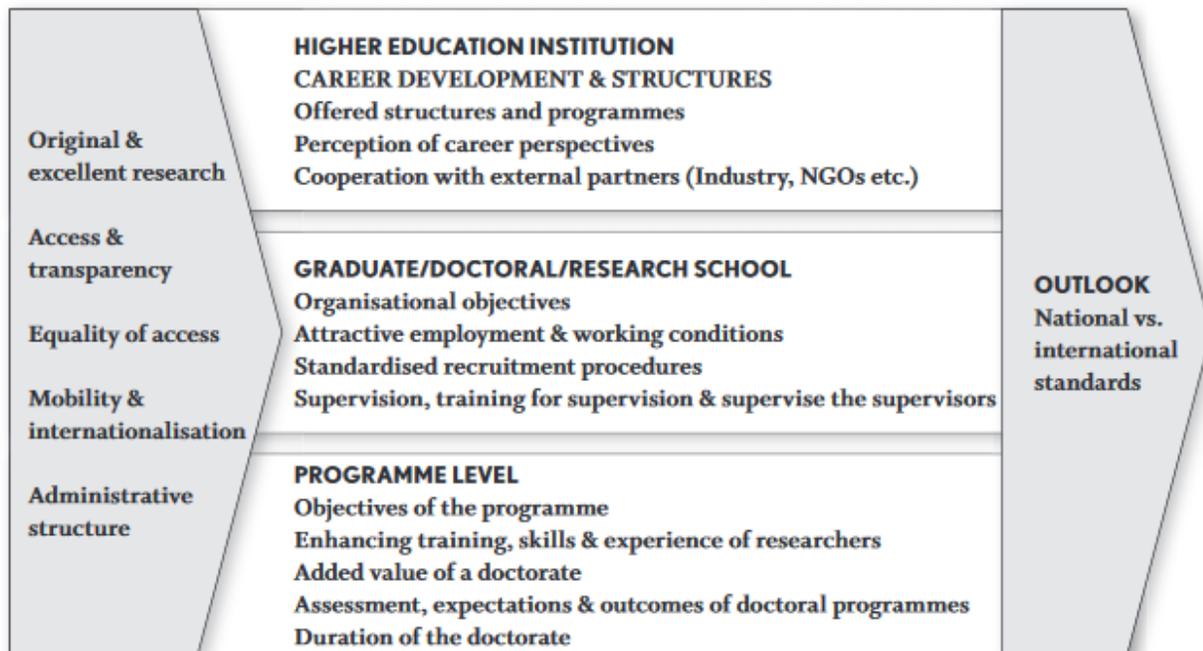
OUTLOOK
National vs. international standards

Figure 1. Factors in Quality Assurance of Doctoral Education

Source: ENQA (2010) Quality Assurance in Postgraduate Education. Link: http://www.enqa.eu/indirme/papers-and-reports/workshop-and-seminar/ENQA%20workshop%20report%2012.pdf

Some of the main areas of evaluation:

- Existence of regulations and agreements that manage programme requirements from students and supervisors
- Existence of standards of access, recruitment and selection
- Inclusion of flexible and optional transferable skills training that fits each candidate's needs
- Introduction of new supervision models and provision of professional development for supervisors
- Regular monitoring of each doctoral candidate's progress
- Supporting internationalisation and mobility
- Ensuring high standards of the process of the thesis defense

Example from Croatia for the initial accreditation of doctoral programmes

In Croatia each new doctoral programme has to go through an initial accreditation procedure first. This process is based on a written template (see below).

Introduction

- Reasons for launching study programme;
- Programme justification (linked national strategic priorities);
- Comparability with programmes of distinguished higher education institutions from abroad, especially from EU member states;
- Past-experience of the organizers in carrying out postgraduate doctoral study programmes.

General part

- Partnership with the industry and business sector in launching and carrying out doctoral study programme;
- Criteria and procedure of student selection;
- Learning outcomes;

- Possibilities for continuing research, for post-doctoral education and employment in public and private sector.

Programme description

- Obligatory and elective courses/activities (participation at seminars, conferences, roundtables, etc.) and ECTS criteria;
- Methods of quality assurance of each subject and/or module;
- System of guidance through study (obligations of mentors as well as doctoral candidates);
- Procedure and conditions for evaluation of doctoral dissertation;
- Conditions under which students who have dropped out or lost the right of studying at one study programme can continue their studies.

Study conditions

- Data on research resources (e.g. scientific equipment, human resources);
- List of scientific and development projects upon which doctoral programme is based;
- Estimate of expenses for carrying out doctoral programme and cost of study per student;
- Sources of financing doctoral programme;
- Institutional mechanisms for improving the quality of doctoral programme (self-evaluation and evaluation, student questionnaires, review of success of doctoral study, quality indicators).

After obtaining permission from the university Senate the faculty submits a request for accreditation of the programme to the Ministry. The Ministry appoints at least two reviewers for each proposed study programme, including at least one reviewer from abroad. Their review report consists of four main parts:

- Justification for opening the study programme
- General structure of the study programme
- Subjects: content, workload and teaching methods
- Teaching and scientific conditions for doctoral study programme

On the basis of the review results, NCHE delivers the Minister its opinion and recommendation whether to grant or deny the faculty a license for the doctoral programme.

Quality assurance of doctoral programmes in the UK

Quality assurance of doctoral programmes is done by the QAA agency. Based on a Code of Practice for Postgraduate Research Programmes each university in the UK submits individual reports to the agency. According to the code, institutions should have regulations/policies in place for the following areas[1]:

- Institutional arrangements
- The research environment
- Selection, admission and induction of students
- Supervision
- Progress and review arrangements
- Development of research and other skills
- Feedback mechanisms
- Assessment
- Student representations
- Complaints
- Appeals

Additional sources:

QAA_Doctoral Degree Characteristics (2011). Link: http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Doctoral_Characteristics.pdf

QAA_Handbook for Institutional Evaluation (2009). Link: http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/9671/1/InstitutionalAuditHandbook2009.pdf

Quality assurance of doctoral programmes in Germany

One of the quality assurance agencies in Germany is the Central Evaluation and Accreditation Agency Hanover (ZEvA). ZEvA's standards are defined for the following areas:

- Academic profile of the programme

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[1] For a detailed presentation of indicators for each area, see Annex 1.

- Entrance requirements and admission
- Structure & curriculum
- Internationalization & cooperation
- Quality assurance
- Financing & organization

In the continuation I present a couple of the indicators under each area. The list is not exhaustive.

Profile

PhD candidates should meet the following requirements:

- Gain methodical expertise and knowledge for highly qualified occupations;
- Acquire competence to participate actively in research activities and to initiate research projects;
- Develop the conception for a thesis that suffices international standards;
- Acquire excellent problem solving capacity;
- Gain the ability to successfully engage in post-doctoral research work;
- Participate in didactical and methodical training for the promotion of teaching skills;
- Enhance the ability to work cooperatively.

Entrance requirements and admission

- The programme has transparent selection procedures;
- The programme is open to the best graduates or graduates with excellent academic records in higher education institutions only;
- The individual selection is be based on academic and personal qualifications;
- Part of the eligibility requirements is the submission of a thesis project and a work plan.

Structure and curriculum

- The programme structure is clearly defined and includes opportunities to work cooperatively;
- The individual research work is complemented by comprehensive courses (e.g. on advanced research methods, research ethics, soft-skills);

- There is an appropriate duration limit for doctoral studies;
- Students participating in a doctoral programme acquire key skills, especially in the following fields:
    - presentation and moderation, conduct of negotiation, project management;
    - ability to teach at university level;
    - foreign languages.

Internationalization and cooperation

- International exchange programmes and cooperation with other universities is included in the programme.

Quality assurance

Quality assurance procedures for the programme comprise of:

- an external peer review to guarantee the appraisal of consistent standards;
- an individual selection of participants on the basis of academic and personal qualifications;
- a course evaluations by the students.

Financing and organization

- The programme (including staff) is funded appropriately;
- A minimum of 70 percent of the course offers is covered by internal staff;
- Internal and external staff work under a legally binding work contract.

Sources:

Quality Assurance in Postgraduate Education (2010). Link:
http://www.enqa.eu/indirme/papers-and-reports/workshop-and-seminar/ENQA%20workshop%20report%2012.pdf