

MINUTES

Conference: How to Assure Quality in New-Style Doctoral Studies?

The conference was held on October 29th at the Vienna University of Economics and Business. It was opened by its rector and President of Universities Austria, Christoph Badelt, and by Elisabeth Westphal, the project director from Universities Austria's projects related to the Bologna Process.

After a general overview, which was given by **Alexandra Bitusikova** and **Thomas Jørgensen** from **EUA**, the following speakers presented four case studies:

- **Lucas Zinner / University of Vienna (Austria)**
- **Alan Davidson / Robert Gordon University (Great Britain)**
- **Anne Gro Vea Salvanes / University of Bergen (Norway)**
- **Ugo Pagano / University of Siena (Italy)**

The conference was chaired by Arthur Mettinger.

In a short introduction both Badelt and Westphal stress the necessity of appropriate funding mechanisms to ensure good quality in doctoral programmes. In Austria, the starting point for thorough discussions on new-style doctoral studies is to be seen in two events: the Austrian Universities Act 2002 and a national conference in 2004, which was a kind of big brainstorming on the future national policy on new-style doctoral studies. At the beginning of 2005, a position paper by the Ministry and Universities Austria was published. Since then many initiatives have been carried out. Among others, Universities Austria installed a working group who published Recommendations on New-Style Doctoral Studies (http://www.uniko.ac.at/upload/Empfehlungen_uniko.pdf) in 2008. Since April 2008, Universities Austria runs three projects related to the Bologna Process, one of them is dedicated solely to doctoral studies.

Besides, Universities Austria is very active on the international level, too. Between 2003 and 2007 the three German speaking Rectors' Conferences have been discussing the development of doctoral studies and programmes in the German speaking world and in other European countries extensively. Universities Austria and some representatives of Austrian universities have actively participated in the different EUA initiatives on doctoral studies, which will be presented in the first speech.

Overview of the Latest Trends in Doctoral Education in Europe with the Focus on Quality

In her speech **Alexandra Bitusikova**, who has been involved since the very beginning in 2003 in EUA's efforts concerning doctoral education, gives a general introduction into the topics. According to her, the most striking characteristic of doctoral education in Europe was its enormous *diversity* in all aspects, which reflects the diversity of Europe's HEIs.

Structured programmes, supervision, transferable skills development, internationalisation and mobility are identified as the current trends over Europe. Coming to the challenges when enhancing the quality of doctoral programmes, she explains that the existing methodologies of quality assurance are not easily applicable in doctoral education, so new methods have to be developed. One method to better monitoring of internal quality assurance is to organise doctoral education in a structured way. She closes by saying that much more discussion on the topic is needed and hopes that this conference will help.

Thomas Ekman Jørgensen: In 2008, EUA launched its Council for Doctoral Education, which is the biggest organisation for doctoral education today. In a bottom-up approach the duties of the council were defined as follows: Stakeholder dialogue (with its members and on a global level), membership activities (such as workshops and a newsletter), recommendations and policy development. A new policy initiative is planned for 2010 and has the working title “Salzburg II”. As a starting point, the Salzburg Principles (2005) will be enriched by concrete experiences of the EUA-CDE’s members. Its aim is to develop recommendations in a series of workshops and issue-specific working groups by November 2010.

Case Study: University of Vienna (Austria)

Lucas Zinner leads the Centre for Doctoral Studies at the University of Vienna, which was installed to implement quality assurance measures for all doctoral studies. In Austria the legal framework does not offer possibilities to select doctoral students and there is a notorious lack of financial support. Consequently, a big share of the doctoral candidates are studying part-time and hence do not feel really connected to their university. In addition, there is no ideal picture of what being a doctoral student means.

At the University of Vienna all doctoral studies had to be changed by winter term/semester 2009/2010 following the European structures of the third cycle of education. Transparent rules and duties for all actors involved have been defined. Doctoral candidates have to submit a research proposal and present their projects within the first 12 months. After the (successful) presentation of the research project, a supervision contract has to be signed between the doctoral candidate, the supervisors and the university. In the contract, a realistic working plan is being agreed on and its successful following is monitored by annual reports. If the goals outlined in the contract are not met, there will be a counselling process for both sides. At the end of the three years, the PhD candidates have to defend their theses ensuring the quality of the student’s as well as of the supervisor’s work. The project aims at raising awareness of the importance of appropriate supervision behaviour as a core element of good quality in doctoral studies.

Discussion

In the discussion the participants agree on the fact, that concerning supervision the circumstances vary broadly within the disciplines. However, there is a need for institutional (minimum) standards. While formal structures are easily introduced, it takes a long time to convince the colleagues of the change of mindset. This could be done by an obligatory training period for new supervisors. Mettinger stresses that these trainings should be embedded in personnel development strategies.

The attractiveness of study programmes to foreign students might be an indicator for their quality. One has to keep in mind that although structured programmes might be easier to be quality assured, their rigid structures might be an impediment to (horizontal) mobility. Mettinger points out that the University of Vienna is interested in students, who have done their degree at a different HEI (vertical mobility). A mandatory publication of the thesis might also be a measure to assure quality. Jørgensen says that although the publication of the thesis is common practice, in most European countries it is not obligatory.

On the European level a stronger engagement in Eastern European countries is suggested to EUA-CDE seeing some of these countries face big problems with scientific quality in doctoral programmes.

Case Study: Robert Gordon University (Great Britain)

Alan Davidson, dean for quality assurance and enhancement at the Robert Gordon University in Scotland, shares his experiences with national and institutional approaches to quality in doctoral education. As a contextual framework, the quality policies and processes that are currently in place in the UK and in Scotland have been presented as well as the institutional approach of the author’s university. A list with further references and information can be found in the handout.

In Scotland, universities do either specialise in teaching or in research. The government acts as a driving force by asking for world-class quality in research and allocating the university budgets

according to the research performance. Smaller universities are to cooperate in order to achieve a critical mass in certain research areas.

At a national level, 20 Scottish universities were reviewed between 2003 and 2007. One finding was that although third cycle students were well socialised in their research environment, mostly they were not engaged in the policy development in their universities. Besides additional student training for career development skills and training for supervisors, an improvement of this situation is on the national agenda.

Discussion:

In a very general discussion, the main benefits of quality assurance to third cycle have been identified as a better relationship between student and supervisor, more transparency, the introduction of institution-wide standards and the promotion of best practice. Even if guidelines and examples of good-practice are not legally binding, their importance as reference points for universities has been stated.

Being asked if the focus of quality assurance measures lies rather on the process than on the actual result, Davidson states that both are important for good quality. The university management has no decisive power and its only influence is to select and train the supervisors and to install a properly qualified examination board.

Case Study: University of Bergen (Norway)

Anne Gro Veia Salvanes gives an overview of the structure of doctoral studies in Norway and at her institution and showed the routes that have been taken to improve quality of doctoral education. She was pro-rector at the University of Bergen, which is a research-focused university, between 2005 and August 2009.

She reports that while until 1990 doing a PhD used to be a “life project”, nowadays it should be done at the beginning of a career. In Norway there are national regulations for the doctoral studies and the University of Bergen has released institutional regulations. Additionally, a handbook for Doctoral Education was developed by the University of Bergen (http://www.uib.no/filearchive/handbook_phd_uib_1.pdf), which sets expectations and responsibilities.

While there are well-established standards to measure quality in the first and second cycles, the third cycle is defined by the following criteria: independence, judgement and innovation, which makes quality assurance more difficult. Nevertheless, the status of doctoral education has been evaluated by the UiB by comparing the indicators “completion rates”, “time to degree” and “drop-out rates” with universities abroad. After the analyses eight areas of improvement were identified (for further details please consult the PowerPoint Presentation). For example, there exist clear rules on the status of PhD-students stating that if a PhD student does not complete within the fellowship period, he/she must provide a progress plan for completion within one year. The bottom line is that top-down decisions have to be combined with strong bottom-up-involvement.

Case Study: University of Siena (Italy)

Ugo Pagano presents the Italian way of introducing doctoral schools with a special regard to the doctoral school “Santa Chiara” which was established at the University of Siena. In Italy modern doctorates (*colleggi*) were introduced in 1980 changing the prevailing paradigm of a 1 to 1 relationship between professors and students into institutional organised doctoral schools. In Italy this had two (negative) consequences: Firstly, the supervising professors did not feel as responsible as in the old times and the fields were too narrow, because professors tried to create monopolies in certain fields.

In a reorganisation process, the doctoral schools were aggregated at the disciplinary level - reducing 60 doctorates to 32 doctoral schools - and evaluated them at the same time. Some doctorates that did not meet the criteria set out were terminated. At the University of Siena, a graduate school named “Santa Chiara” was founded. By offering housing facilities and dinner to both the students and professors, a lot of formal and informal exchanges could be achieved. At the end, Pagano suggests to make exchange programmes for third cycle degree students more common, giving to students the possibility to do supervised research abroad for one month.

PLENARY DISCUSSION

In the plenary discussion the issue of a definition of quality was raised, which turned out to be quite complex. Among the different aspects of quality in the third cycle, a general distinction between the actual *research* quality (e.g. the thesis) and the *supervisory quality* can be made. Supervisors have the obligation to fulfil a double task: producing high quality scientific results and educating the future generation of Europe's researchers.

Seeing that quality standards are unlikely to be achieved by control, the creation of quality cultures, where good quality is expected among the colleagues and where the traditions of non-interference are broken are preferred. Mandatory presentations in front of the faculty are seen as a method to create such cultures and have been introduced in a lot of European universities. It is crucial to create ownership within the group, standards of achievement and open communication in the research groups. A possible approach to a definition of quality cultures would be: *It is the way we do things round here.*

It seems that graduate schools are widely considered as the appropriate mean to introduce good quality in the third cycle. One has to take into account that this institutional approach might lead to discussions about structures rather than about quality: while the introduction of transferable skills courses in the third cycle might be an indicator of quality enhancement, this does not guarantee that graduates will actually get the required skills by attending these courses. Bitusikova highlights the crucial role of adequate funding and underlines that an indicator for a good trainer might be her/his price. Salvanes continues by saying that the evaluation of the outcome – the actual thesis – should not be overlooked. In order to ensure its quality, the final evaluation should be done by an international committee in a public defence.

Excellent research quality depends of course on the knowledge of the incoming students and in order to get the best students, the introduction of a special procedure to go into PhD after first year of MA studies is being thought of. The integration of students in the quality process is mostly done by evaluation after the courses, but also in the phase of project development (e.g. University of Vienna). Bitusikova points out that in a survey of possible topics at the EUA-CDE launch conference in Lausanne, student involvement was of very low interest.

The “time to completion” or the average age of graduates is also frequently used as an indicator of the quality of doctoral programmes. Empirical data shows that there are big differences throughout Europe. On the one hand, graduating early is seen positively by a lot of governments in terms of career development. On the other hand, (professional) experience of an older PhD candidate might be valuable to the university. Regulations concerning completion times should not be too rigid in order to ensure that a PhD can also be done part time.

Jørgensen states that there is a huge diversity in implementation of doctoral programmes throughout Europe. There is, however, a large gap between very advanced structured programmes and very traditional ones. Mettinger closes by saying that there seems to be a lot of knowledge available, which is collected by organisations such as the EUA-CDE and also on national levels by the rectors' conferences and spread through conferences such as the one that has just ended.

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