

Quality Assurance in Doctoral Education: European experiences



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Quality Assurance – questions to ask

What is any PhD program aiming to achieve?

What are the risks to quality?

How robust are all the processes?

Who or what is the watchdog of the quality processes?

What does a quality PhD Thesis look like?

Who really decides on the quality of the Thesis?

Principles and Processes 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

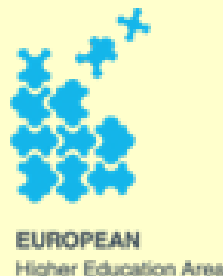


Cycles and level descriptors in tertiary education

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

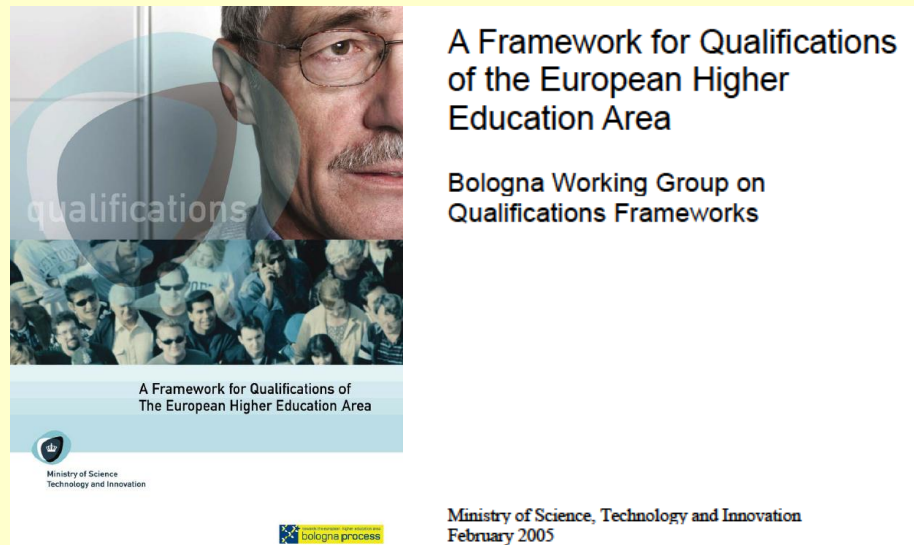


Qualification Frameworks

The ideal is that there is comparability of standards cross the world

Mutual trust in qualifications is a must

Comparable standards ensure 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



Accreditation Agencies

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

A report to HEFCE by Clarke and Lunt (2014) summarises this picture for eight countries (Germany / Norway / Scotland / Spain)

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

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)

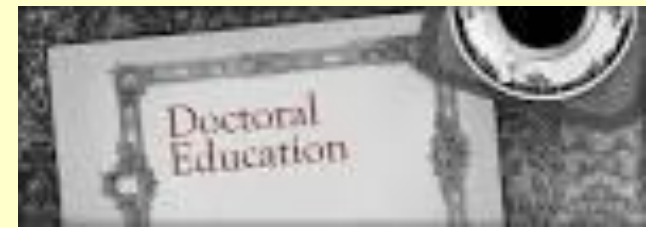
Norway – Norwegian Qualifications framework for Lifelong Learning (NQF)

Australia – Australian Qualifications Network (AQF)

The importance of assessing and assuring 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**



What is a PhD in Europe ?

The **Dublin (2004) descriptors** were developed and provide generic statements of typical expectations of achievements and abilities.

The Dublin descriptors were built on the following elements:

- **knowledge and understanding**
- **applying knowledge and understanding**
- **making judgements**
- **communications skills**
- **learning skills**

The goal of the PhD Program

(what is expected in Europe is encapsulated in the Dublin descriptors)

Awards go to the candidates who:

- 1) have demonstrated a systematic understanding of a field of study and mastery of the skills and methods of research associated with that field**
- 2) have demonstrated the ability to conceive, design, implement and adapt a substantial process of research with scholarly integrity**

The Dublin descriptors

Awards go to the candidates who:

3) 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

4) are capable of critical analysis, evaluation and synthesis of new and complex ideas

The Dublin descriptors

Awards go to the candidates who:

5) can communicate with their peers, the larger scholarly community and with society in general about their areas of expertise

6) can be expected to be able to promote, within academic and professional contexts, technological, social or cultural advancement in a knowledge based society

Assuring quality

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Hence:

- We need as Institutions to support this.
- 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).

Robustness of processes is vital

(to minimise things going wrong)

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 candidate to project

Robustness of Processes

Supervisor and project selection

- Supervisor qualifications / competencies 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

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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

- ✓ Embedding quality assurance underpins successful accreditation which 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
- ✓ Low quality and hence poor accreditation results causes reputational damage
- ✓ Reward good practice within the Institution