

Quality assurance and accreditation of PhD-programs in public administration

draft
Discussion paper
for discussion within EAPAA and EGPA

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Quality assurance of PhD studies becomes more important

Since some years, quality assurance (QA) is an emerging issue in higher education (see ENQA standards etc). In the context of “Bologna”-reforms, QA became more relevant also for the third “Bologna” cycle, the PhD studies. In line with the emphasis to streamline and to harmonize higher education in Europe, PhD-studies have been subject of standardization and formalization (e.g. the assumption of a normal length of 3 years and of a workload of 180 ECTS for a PhD study). In some of the continental European countries there is also a tendency to move from the classical master-apprentice-model (“Doktorvater”) of individual research without much taught elements to a more structured concept of PhD training with coursework and with more systematic tutoring und supervision. There is also a tendency of moving from the “big book” thesis as final result of a PhD study to a cumulative process with several journal publications as step-by-step output of a doctoral candidate. Generally, the academic traditions of the continental *Humboldtian* system and of the anglosaxon culture are converging to some extent.

According to actual data (EUA 2009), the three-cycle system of higher education (Bachelor-Master-PhD) has been introduced in most European countries in the meantime. 50% of universities in Europe have already established doctoral programs and teaching elements are becoming more and more common in European doctoral programs (70% of programs).

Internationalization of studying as well as of research is another factor influencing the relevance of QA. The comparability of programs is now more important as some years ago because PhD students want to know about the quality of similar programs for going abroad. The same is true for research programs and for international research collaboration. Finally, funding of PhD programs by government has increased in various countries. Thus, governments want to know more about the quality of programs which are subject of funding.

The described reasons of an increasing relevance of QA in the context of PhD education do also apply for the field of *public administration/management/governance*. PhD education is moving towards more structured patterns and taught elements become more important (Reichard/Kickert 2008 for more details).

Quality criteria of PhD studies in public administration

The following proposal of a possible structure of quality criteria is based on discussions at the last NISPACee conference (2010) and on reflections within EAPAA.

A. Mission and Strategy

1. **mission statement**
2. **existing strategy** (relating to general strategic aims and goals of school)
3. **role and purpose of the PhD program** (academic or professional career?)

B. Content

1. course program

- 1.1 curriculum (course contents, length, workload, obligatory/optional courses)
- 1.2 didactics (learning style, self learning)
- 1.3 assignments (type and number of assignments)

2. research components (type and intensity of involvement into research, degree of own and independent research, transfer of research outcomes)

3. results (development of research skills, evaluation of the final “PhD product” (PhD dissertation and defense), relation of learning and research, contribution to research, preparation for future academic career, drop out ratio)

C. Program management and tutoring

1. recruitment, admission and selection procedures (e.g. qualification requirements, admission and selection criteria and procedures)

2. organisation of the learning processes (e.g. monitoring students’ progress)

3. tutoring by advisors/supervisors (incl. training of supervisors)

4. assessment of students (intermediate assessment of examinations etc, composition of evaluation committee [external or foreign members?], thesis assessment (grading), written review of thesis, feedback mechanisms)

5. governance structures (distribution of responsibilities, eligibility of supervisors, doctoral studies’ regulations, contract between PhD candidate and school)

6. quality assurance (established rules, program monitoring and reviewing, curriculum development)

7. Public Relations

D. Infrastructure and Resources

1. faculty (size, capacity to run a PhD-program, qualifications, involvement of professors in PhD training, diversity)

2. administrative support (program management unit)

3. financial resources (budget, external funding, number of PhD students with scholarships)

4. collaborative patterns (inter-/national partners, involvement into PhD networks, exchange programs etc)

5. support facilities (library, online access, ICT tools, workplaces, meeting room etc)

E. PhD students

1. status of students (“normal student”, “external candidate”, employee)

2. financial support (scholarship, other kinds of financial assistance)

- 3. rights and duties** (completeness, clarity, responsibilities etc)
4. involvement into teaching and research activities of the faculty
any other criteria to be included?

Realizing quality assurance of PhD programs

Regular QA is important – and also possible – for all variants of PhD programs, for the classical version of the individual *Doktorvater*-model as well as for the newer variants of structured and course-based PhD programs. Obviously, not all criteria apply for the classical version, e.g. not those related to the educational part. QA is particularly relevant for structured PhD programs and can to some extent refer to experiences made with QA of “Bologna” cycle one and two programs. The evaluation of the research components is, however, more difficult: There are problems of measurement and attribution of the research results, particularly if research is done in larger teams. The EUA therefore recommends to make a clear separation between QA of the educational part and the research evaluation of the research part of a PhD program.

Since some years there is an increasing debate about QA of PhD programs. An early example is the British Code of practice for QA in research programs (QAA 2004). The EUA has established a separate task force on PhD training (CDE: council for doctoral education).

Is there more evidence of QA of PhD programs in our field?

QA can (and should) be done by internal quality assessment units as well as by external organisations. Internal QA units should regularly check the quality of all components of a PhD program (the teaching part, the tutoring and supervision, the assessment procedures, the support services etc). External QA by appropriate accreditation agencies can provide additional insight and feedback, primarily with regard to the achievement of general quality standards and criteria, based on a comparative perspective.

External accreditation of PhD programs?

Accreditation of PhD programs is not an easy task, particularly with regard to the research components. It seems to be advisable to concentrate on structured programs and within such programs on those parts which can be assessed and evaluated in a sufficient manner, i.e. those components which are closer to “normal accreditation”. With regard to the above mentioned criteria, it is probably reasonable to exclude – at least in the initial phase - the research components and perhaps the overall assessment of the quality and outcome of PhD training.

The main advantages of external accreditation are the expertise of the evaluators and the comparability of results. Nevertheless, there is also a danger that accreditation agencies are concentrating on the “easy-to-measure” and more formalistic criteria (see as an example the German Fibaa PhD program accreditation criteria: http://www.fibaa.de/dokumente/progmuster/Muster_FBK_PhD_HS.pdf). Furthermore, there is the risk that the newly established “accreditation business” takes over the PhD accreditation.

other arguments pro/contra accreditation of PhD programs?

The accreditation of PhD programs seems to be well established in several disciplines and in various countries (simple Google research shows rich results). In PA, however, PhD-accreditation does not seem to be very frequent. NASPAA explicitly says that they only accredit professional (master) programs but not doctoral programs.

Is there any evidence of accreditation of PhD programs in our field?

PhD accreditation by EAPAA?

Obviously, there are some advantages if EAPAA goes into the accreditation of PhD programs. PhD programs are even more disciplinary specialized as “normal” study programs. Thus, a discipline-based accreditation is much more appropriate than evaluation by one of the “everything goes”-agencies. Furthermore, as PhD education is much closer to academic life and action, the accreditation of PhD programs should only be done by academic peers. Both arguments are in favour of EAPAA which is a discipline-based and peer-review-oriented association. And there is a clear risk that – if EAPAA holds off - PhD accreditation will be done by the businesslike accreditation-agencies with all the unintended critical side effects. However, it is still unclear if EAPAA will come to realistic evaluation results of evaluation considering the specific context of PhD studies in various European countries. And also the willingness of PhD programs to ask for such an accreditation is still an open question (is there a “market”?).

Should EAPAA become involved in accreditation of PhD programs?

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