



In search of excellence and efficiency in the European PhD - a research project

Gab van Winkel¹, Hans Sonneveld², Cornelis van Bochove³, Rudy Rabbinge¹
¹ Wageningen University, ² University of Utrecht, ³ University of Leiden, The Netherlands



Introduction

During the last couple of decades, the number of PhD candidates in Europe has increased enormously, and so did the demand for PhD graduates, both within and outside academia. Inspired by the Bologna process, many European countries established graduate schools that provide courses, monitored supervision and a quality-control system. There are, however, still large differences among PhD studies in Europe: differences in entrance level, in financial and legal status of candidates, style of supervision, course programme, nominal and actual duration, and requirements for the PhD thesis. The inevitable consequences, e.g. differences in quality (of PhD theses and graduates) and differences in efficiency (time to degree, completion rate), however, are largely unknown. What kind of PhD programme is the most desirable outcome of the Bologna Process? There clearly is a need for indicators that provide a basis for future policy regarding PhD programmes in Europe.

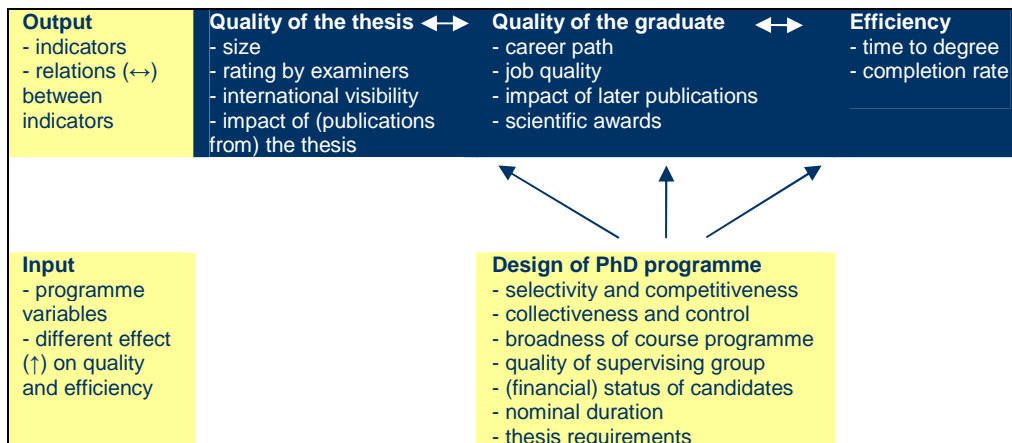
After twenty years of hands-on experience in research policy and particularly in building up a graduate school, the first author is now returning to science and wants to address a 'design question' that is high on the European agenda.

Design question:

What would an excellent and efficient PhD programme look like, and why would such a programme be better than others?

Conceptual framework

How do excellence and efficiency interrelate and how do they correlate with the design of the PhD programme?



Scientific background

World-wide, separate case studies have been done on indicators for excellence and efficiency in the PhD, e.g. on time to degree and completion rates, and on the further career of PhD graduates. Also supervision and examination, both essential factors in the PhD, have been studied. Apart from a very few examples, international comparison of the quality of PhD theses, however, still has remained a black box.

Never before, a study has been done on how excellence and efficiency in the PhD interrelate and how they correlate with the design of the PhD programme itself. That approach makes this study unique.

Work plan

- Focus on the sciences, because an international comparison using bibliometric indicators is more feasible in the sciences than in social sciences and humanities.
- Project will last three years and will consist of two parts:
 - development of indicators for excellence and efficiency by two case studies,
 - validation of those indicators by a comparison of PhD programmes in several countries within and outside Europe.

Outcomes

- A framework to assess and compare PhD programmes
- Tools to improve PhD programmes
- Evidence for 'branding' the European PhD programmes
- A stronger position for Europe in the global 'battle for the brains'

Workshop

Wageningen University will host a EUA-CDE Workshop on 'Assessment of PhD programmes' on 16-17 April 2010.