

# 2023 European Quality Assurance Forum

## Internationalisation in a changing world. New trends and challenges for QA

Hosted by University of Aveiro, Portugal  
23-25 November 2023

ISSN: 1375-3797

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Natalia is a graduate of the Faculty of Oriental Studies at the University of Warsaw, with a specialisation in Mongolian and Tibetan Studies. She is currently in the final stages of completing her doctoral thesis in literary studies. Her academic pursuits encompass contemporary literature, gender studies, and issues of equality. Throughout her whole academic journey, Natalia has actively participated in students' union activities at the university, national, and international levels. Since the beginning of her studies Natalia has also been engaged in quality assurance initiatives, serving as a panel member for national and international reviews. She's been a member of the ESU's QA Pool for several years solidifying her commitment to quality assurance in higher education.

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Michał is currently working at the University of Warsaw in team responsible for quality assurance and serves as a member of the University of Warsaw's Senate. He is also working as an expert and secretary at agencies dealing in quality assurance. For a few years he was also member of the ESU's QA Pool. His experience in QA of higher education consists of being a panel member for reviews conducted at national level and international level.

Michał holds a *licencjat* in English Studies and *magister* in American Studies. He currently pursues a *magister* in Administration at the Warsaw University of Technology and PhD in Political Science and Administration at the University of Warsaw.

Michał is an active student and doctoral candidate representative. Since 2005 he has held many positions at local, national and international level working on issues connected with the social benefit system for students as well as with issues of Quality Assurance in higher education context.

## Proposal

**Title:** Quality Assurance of Doctoral Education: A Case Study of the Polish Approach. Reflections on the Past, Prospects for the Future, and the Internationalisation of Quality Assurance Processes.

**Abstract:** The quality assurance of doctoral education could be considered a hot potato of the Polish higher education system. Following the last reform in 2005, external quality assurance for doctoral studies was practically non-existent for several years. It was not until 2012 that elements of quality assurance were introduced through a new type of evaluation conducted by the Polish QA agency, known as institutional evaluation. However, this evaluation was eradicated just four years later, only to reemerge in 2018 with the implementation of a new set of higher education reforms.

In 2018, a new system of doctoral education was introduced in the form of doctoral schools. External quality assurance was assigned to the Science Evaluation Committee as part of this new framework. Presently, Poland is on the cusp of initiating this new procedure. This paper aims to compare the two systems, particularly highlighting the advantages that external quality assurance can bring to the overall quality and effectiveness of doctoral education.

The new procedure must take place entirely in English, which will finally enable foreign experts to participate in accreditations. It must also take into account the needs of foreign doctoral candidates, mobility and innovation in international cooperation and how current approaches affect quality assurance. The paper will also consider what practises universities can use to integrate migrant doctoral candidates and how it can be incorporated into educational quality assurance procedures. Furthermore, we will address the question of whether it is possible to compare quality assurance procedures at the doctoral level given the significant differences in doctoral education across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), and how this quality can be accounted for in joint doctoral programs. Finally, this paper suggests some recommendations for the areas and variables concerning doctoral education assessment, emphasising the necessity for accurate evaluation despite the pronounced national disparities in doctoral studies, with special emphasis on joint doctoral programs.

## Introduction

The development of quality assurance in Polish doctoral education has undergone significant transformation, ultimately becoming a focal point for universities offering doctoral programmes. This paper provides a concise overview of this journey, underscores the growing significance of internationalisation in educational quality assurance, and identifies key areas of relevance in assessing doctoral education within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

## The Past: The Evolution of Quality Assurance in Polish Doctoral Education

Quality Assurance was present in Polish regulations concerning higher education and science since 2002, when the State Accreditation Committee was created after the amendment from July 20, 2001 to Higher Education Act of September 12, 1990<sup>1</sup>. However the quality assurance in this context was reserved to first and second cycle studies, as such was the way the competences of the Committee have been constructed.

The next iteration of Higher Education Act from 2005 saw the evolution and new competences of the State Accreditation Committee which became a more experienced and professional body. However, still among its interests there were only regular undergraduate and graduate studies.

Only a big amendment to the Higher Education Act passed by Polish Parliament in 2011 changed the name of the Committee to Polish Accreditation Committee and gave it powers to conduct so called Institutional Evaluation from October 1st, 2011, which effectively started in 2012<sup>2</sup>. Only at this time the concept of assessing the quality assurance at the level of doctoral education was introduced to the Polish law, and doctoral students started to become part of the review teams. Still it was treated as a

<sup>1</sup> Dz.U. 2001 nr 85 poz. 924 Ustawa z dnia 20 lipca 2001 r. o zmianie ustawy o szkolnictwie wyższym, ustawy o wyższych szkołach zawodowych oraz o zmianie niektórych innych ustaw.

<sup>2</sup> Dz.U. 2011 nr 84 poz. 455 Ustawa z dnia 18 marca 2011 r. o zmianie ustawy - Prawo o szkolnictwie wyższym, ustawy o stopniach naukowych i tytule naukowym oraz o stopniach i tytule w zakresie sztuki oraz o zmianie niektórych innych ustaw

kind of addition. The criteria for the Institutional Evaluation were introduced through the Regulation of the Minister of Science and Higher Education in the following manner:

- “1) functioning and improvement of education quality assurance systems in the unit, taking into account their design and impact on the quality of education in the unit;
- 2) compliance of the unit's activities with the mission and development strategy of the university, in particular in terms of ensuring high quality of education and research;
- 4) cooperation with the socio-economic environment, including cooperation with academic and scientific institutions in implementing the unit's development strategy;
- 5) effectiveness of the human resources policy implemented by the unit, including the development of teaching and research staff;
- 6) support system for students and doctoral students, including financial assistance and scientific, artistic and sports activity development, as well as adapting infrastructure to the needs of people with special needs;
- 7) quality of education in postgraduate studies, including the implementation of the expected learning outcomes and methods verification of achieved learning outcomes;
- 8) quality of education in doctoral studies, including research conducted by doctoral students and implementation of expected learning outcomes and methods of verifying the achieved learning outcomes.”<sup>34</sup>

The above criteria mention doctoral candidates twice – in terms of the support system for them, and in the last criterion that directly mentions the quality assurance at doctoral education. For the next 5 years doctoral candidates took part in on-site visits and became an important part of the process of evaluating quality of education in the third cycle. However the whole process of Institutional Evaluation became less and less popular and only after 5 years, in 2016, it was completely eradicated from the Higher Education Act. Once again doctoral education became a grey area, where in fact quality assurance was not part of any external evaluation. This lasted until 2018, when a completely new Act on Higher Education and Science was promulgated. One of the pillars of this higher education reform was doctoral education. Not only did the doctoral studies become phased out and replaced by new doctoral schools that redesigned the whole education process at doctoral level, but also assessing quality in doctoral schools became part of law, even though deferred for a few years.

### **The Future: The New System of Doctoral Education in Poland**

As mentioned before, changes in doctoral education was one of the most important points of the reform of Higher Education from 2018. An introduction of multidisciplinary, research based form of education at 3<sup>rd</sup> level, where every participant received scholarship, unlike the previous system where only part of doctoral students received any income from the higher education institution, where they were pursuing their degree, and in the middle of the education there is a planned mid-term assessment of the individual research plan, was a complete overhaul of this part of education.

Not only these very important areas make the new system more quality based, than doctoral studies. When it comes to quality assurance we can see the return of external quality assurance in the form of a Science Evaluation Committee, tasked primarily with assessing the quality of research. When it comes to doctoral schools it will serve a similar role to the Polish Accreditation Committee- evaluating quality assurance in doctoral schools. The first evaluation will take place a year after the first people will finish the full course of education at doctoral schools in academic year 2024/2025 by an expert panel which for the first time in external quality reviews in the Polish higher education system will include an expert from abroad. This automatically defines the language of the procedure as English. The scope of the evaluation includes:

1. the adequacy of the curriculum and individual research plans to the learning outcomes for qualifications at level 8 of the Polish Qualifications Framework;
2. the manner of verifying the learning outcomes for qualifications at PQF level 8;
3. qualifications of academic teachers or academic staff working at a doctoral school;

<sup>3</sup> Dz.U. 2014 poz. 1356 Rozporządzenie Ministra Nauki i Szkolnictwa Wyższego z dnia 3 października 2014 r. w sprawie podstawowych kryteriów i zakresu oceny programowej oraz oceny instytucjonalnej

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.pl/attachment/59a2d75b-24fc-469a-aef3-2dc6b693c894>

4. the quality of the recruitment process;
5. the quality of scientific or artistic guidance as well as support in research;
6. the reliability of the mid-term assessment;
7. internationalisation;
8. the effectiveness of doctoral education<sup>5</sup>.

In ensuring the highest possible quality of education at doctoral level the external evaluation of quality assurance is extremely important. As this evaluation, concentrating fully and not only in part on education at this level is a new concept that will be soon tested in action.

### **Internationalisation of Quality Assurance Processes in Polish Doctoral Education**

As mentioned above, the 2018 Act on Science and Higher Education and the 2021 Regulation of the Minister of Education and Science on the evaluation of the quality of education at a doctoral school stipulate that the self-evaluation report and all other documents provided must be prepared in Polish and English. In the event of discrepancies between the information in Polish and the information in English contained in the self-evaluation report, the information in English shall be the basis for the evaluation of the doctoral school. Until now, despite foreign doctoral candidates who are not fluent in Polish, many of the rules and regulations for doctoral studies or the rules for admission to third-cycle programmes were only available in Polish. Therefore, the above change significantly affects the accessibility of doctoral education for foreigners.

The increase in the internationalisation of the doctoral group in Poland is quite evident, as indicated by the Ministry's statistics. In 2019, at the very beginning of the launch of doctoral schools, foreigners accounted for only 8.03% of all people enrolled in doctoral schools, while in 2022, they already accounted for 12.56%<sup>6</sup>. It is worth mentioning that in 2019, the old mode of doctoral education - doctoral studies - still existed in parallel, where doctoral students accounted for only 5.02% of all those studying in this mode<sup>7</sup>. The provision of a scholarship to each doctoral candidate, which had not previously been the case, and financial support applied to a relatively small group of doctoral students, certainly contributed to increased internationalisation among doctoral candidates. However, beyond financial issues, language accessibility to the basic documents that concern doctoral candidates at HEIs is certainly an important and useful element of doctoral education, as highlighted in various doctoral surveys and interviews with representatives of doctoral students' union bodies.

The Act also ensures the presence in each evaluation team of at least one expert with a significant academic or artistic background employed at a foreign university or research institution. This, firstly, increases the likelihood of conducting visits in English, and, secondly, and more importantly, provides an opportunity to transfer good practice within the quality of doctoral education from other countries, in particular the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), and to highlight areas that have been neglected over the years.

The detailed scope of the section on the criterion relating to internationalisation consists of the following subsections:

- (a) the degree of internationalisation of the staff, including scientific or artistic mobility and activity in the international environment of academic teachers or researchers teaching at doctoral schools;
- (b) the degree of internationalisation of the education process at doctoral schools and the scientific activity of doctoral students, in particular conducted on the basis of individual research plans, including scientific or artistic mobility of doctoral students;
- (c) the manner of taking into account the needs of doctoral students who are foreigners in the education process at doctoral schools;
- (d) manners of increasing the recognition of doctoral schools abroad and their effectiveness<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Dz. U. z 2021 r. poz. 1847 Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji i Nauki w sprawie ewaluacji jakości kształcenia w szkole doktorskiej

<sup>6</sup> [https://radon.nauka.gov.pl/raporty/doktoranci\\_szkoly\\_doktorskie\\_2022](https://radon.nauka.gov.pl/raporty/doktoranci_szkoly_doktorskie_2022)

<sup>7</sup> [https://radon.nauka.gov.pl/raporty/doktoranci\\_studia\\_doktoranckie\\_2022](https://radon.nauka.gov.pl/raporty/doktoranci_studia_doktoranckie_2022)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.gov.pl/attachment/59a2d75b-24fc-469a-ae3f3-2dc6b693c894>

It follows from the above that the needs of foreign doctoral candidates should also be addressed during the evaluation, which is a contribution to changes in approach in HEIs. There is also room here for a more in-depth analysis of the doctoral candidates' assessment of the quality of education in the doctoral school and using this to improve the educational process, as well as for cooperation with the doctoral students' union bodies, which usually act as the front line and listen to the needs and suggestions for necessary changes from the doctoral candidates. In addition to this, the evaluation process will provide an insight into what role mobility plays in doctoral education, particularly in the post-pandemic era of COVID-19, and the extent to which innovations in international cooperation occur, both in the teaching process and in the sphere of the implementation of scientific or artistic research.

### **Challenges of quality assurance procedures in Doctoral Education**

The procedures related to the quality of doctoral education present many challenges, seemingly more than in the case of first and second-cycle programmes, mainly due to the significant differences regarding the legal framework of doctoral education in the different countries. Although the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area from 2015 (ESG) is a fairly detailed document, it lacks a broader discussion of the quality assurance of strictly doctoral education, which should concern not only teaching but also research.

In the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) we can distinguish a number of differences related to doctoral training, such as the different number of ECTS credits per programme or no ECTS credits at all and the different number of years of doctoral training. The status of the doctoral candidate varies from being completely equal to first and second cycle students to being equal to young academics, with teaching or no teaching duties. There are different requirements for supervisors, varying numbers of doctoral candidates per supervisor, differently understood and defined doctoral support, and the doctoral process. The conduct of vivascan also differ, with some being public/closed and the very form and formal procedures of the viva varying from reviews or written examinations to presentations before a committee (*viva voce*). The requirements for the language of the dissertation/viva, open or closed access to doctoral theses, and more also differ. In addition to the differences in regulations at the national level, there are variations in practices between HEIs and between different academic areas and disciplines, further complicating matters.

Given these and many other differences in doctoral education, it is difficult to speak of comparable procedures related to the quality of education. However, there is something that unites this type of education, namely the degree of originality of the scientific/artistic research and the independent contribution to the field that the doctoral candidate is developing are crucial. Of course, we also cannot overlook the fulfilment of learning outcomes at level 8 of the European Qualifications Framework in terms of knowledge and skills. With this in mind, some recommendations can be proposed on areas and variables for the assessment of doctoral training, such as flexibility of programmes, relevance of training programmes to EQF level 8, methods of verifying learning outcomes, clearly defined competences that doctoral candidates develop during their training, mobility, research/artistic cooperation, recognition of learning outcomes and mutual recognition of programmes and achievements of doctoral candidates, mentoring in the broad sense (both requirements for supervisors, qualifications of supervisors and the type of support offered to doctoral candidates), the impact of teaching load on the implementation of the curriculum, the acquisition of independent research skills, conditions for research work and self-development, a clear and objective procedure for preparing and defending the topic of the doctoral thesis, the quality of the recruitment process, the financing of doctoral training, clearly defined ethical requirements for conducting research/artistic work, the effectiveness of doctoral training and participation of doctoral candidates in university bodies.

In addition to this long list of relevant areas, it is also worth noting whether the HEI is prepared to support and integrate migrant doctoral candidates, of whom an increased number can be seen in recent years. Integrating migrant doctoral candidates into universities requires a holistic approach that considers both academic and non-academic aspects of their experience. In particular, attention should be paid to the existence of diversity and inclusion policies, mentorship and support programmes, orientation and pre-arrival information, language support, cultural sensitivity training and mental health and well-being support.

To compare procedures related to the quality of education and the internationalisation of higher education and the quality assurance of doctoral education itself, it is worthwhile to approach the above-



mentioned areas and variables as broadly as possible, paying particular attention to whether doctoral candidates are given opportunities to write doctoral dissertations and to fulfil the learning outcomes at level 8 of the European Qualifications Framework. The same principle should apply to joint doctoral programmes. The joint programmes themselves are a considerable challenge for accreditation, and the third cycle programmes in joint programmes cause even more confusion. However, it is worth paying attention to the above-mentioned areas and whether equal opportunities are created in all HEIs co-creating joint programmes.

## Conclusions

The quality assurance process in Polish doctoral education has undergone significant changes, but we will need to wait until at least the academic year 2024/2025 to assess its effectiveness and determine whether doctoral education has improved significantly following the 2018 reforms. Currently, there is no standardised template for the self-evaluation report, and various academic bodies, including the Polish Association of Doctoral Candidates (KRD), are still contributing their ideas. These representatives possess an in-depth understanding of the needs of doctoral candidates. We must remain patient for the final outcomes, but it is evident that this process will have a much greater international dimension compared to other processes within the country.

Doctoral education varies significantly from one country to another within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Consequently, it is currently challenging to establish a single procedure that addresses all these diverse needs. Nevertheless, there is a pressing need to continue striving for a consensus, to incorporate more comprehensive details in the upcoming revision of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), and possibly even consider amending some of the EU-level regulations. These efforts aim to guarantee the highest possible quality of doctoral education which should be the priority.

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