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## **Quality assessment of the doctoral programmes as a supplement of the institutional evaluation – Polish model and experience**

### **Abstract**

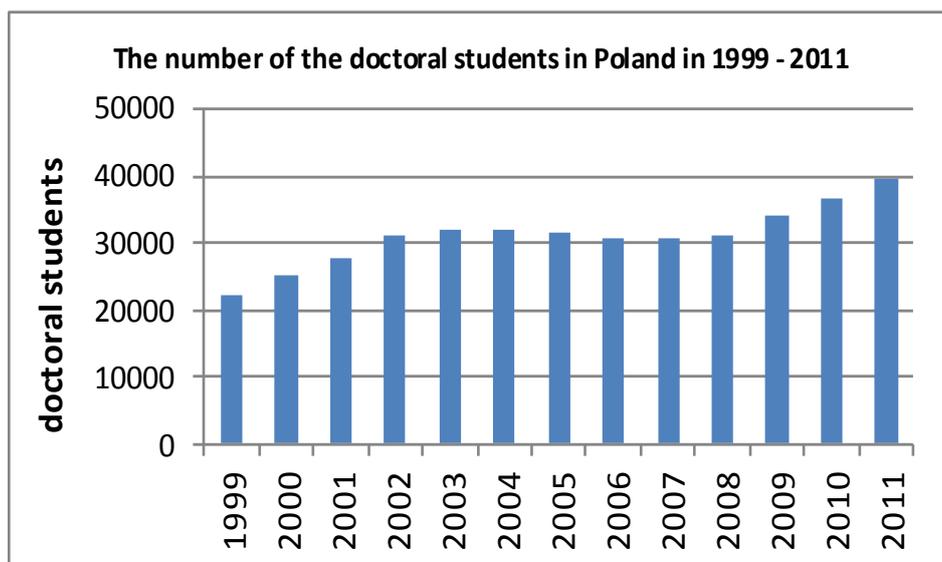
The main purpose of the paper is to present the concept for assessment of the doctoral programmes implemented by PKA as an important supplement of the institutional evaluation. The paper presents the criteria adopted by Polish Accreditation Committee and the introduced evaluation procedure. It attempts to summarize the current experiences and obstacles in the evaluation of doctoral studies. It also presents the inclusion of one group of stakeholders - doctoral students into PKA's quality assessment procedure.

### **Introduction**

In Poland, doctoral programmes can be offered by organizational units of higher education institutions or scientific institutions which are authorised to confer either the academic degree of *doktor habilitowany* or the academic degree of *doctor(PhD)* in at least two different disciplines of a given area of science[1].

The subject of the offered doctoral programmes must be correspondent with the field of scientific disciplines in which the institution has the right to award degrees. Higher education institutions are in fact granted with almost complete freedom to create doctoral programmes and choose the methods for their provision.

The doctoral programmes are offered by approximately 700 organizational units of more than 80 both public and non-public Polish higher education institutions. The number of the doctoral students has almost doubled during the last 10 years, which is shown in the chart below:



Furthermore part-time doctoral programmes are becoming more and more popular in Poland. They are fully paid by the doctoral students. Thus some of them have become almost commercial.

The increase in the number of the both full- and part-time programmes doctoral programmes and students is highly motivated by the economical reasons. The tuition fees and the state funding for those programmes are considerably higher than for the first and second cycle programme. It is important to mention, that because of their exclusive character, the doctoral programmes are very seldom included into internal quality assurance systems. It results with the growing complaints of the academic society about the quality of the doctoral programmes. It has been pointed out that some of the doctoral programmes are delivered without any structured programme, significant lacks in the qualified teaching and scientific staff or even proper facilities.

The most of the doctoral programmes offered by the Polish higher education institutions have never undergone any external quality assessment procedure. Thus far only the randomly selected final Ph. D. thesis were externally assessed by the Polish Central Committee for the Scientific Degrees and Title. This institution is also entitled to grant the rights to award the academic degrees.

Thus the external quality assessment of the doctoral programmes became necessary. Therefore the assessment procedure of those programmes has been included in the amendment of the Polish legal regulations.

Amendment of existing Polish Law on Higher Education which was adopted in march 2011 has enabled Polish Accreditation Committee to introduce institutional assessment procedure. These legal regulations also include involvement of the doctoral programme assessment into the institutional evaluation procedure.

### **Scope of the institutional assessment**

By the amendment in the legal regulations Polish Accreditation Committee has been obliged to evaluate the quality of the doctoral programmes within the institutional assessment. The Minister for Science and Higher Education, by the executive regulation, determined the conditions and the scope of the assessment[2].

According to the Polish legal regulations the programme assessment is mandatory for every study programme which results in qualifications of level 6 and 7 of the European Qualification Framework.

The institutional evaluation can be made to the organizational unit of the higher education institution which offers doctoral studies or meets the following conditions:

- a. The unit has not received a negative assessment on the programme level within 5 years prior to the institutional assessment; in case of a conditional assessment, the shortcomings of the internal quality assurance system were not the reason for the conditional assessment
- b. Most of the programmes offered by the unit have been assessed with the positive result

The institutional evaluation includes the assessment of:

1. The relation of the strategy of the unit with the strategy of the higher education institution
2. The internal quality assurance system, including its construction and impact on the quality enhancement
3. The quality of the non-degree postgraduate programmes offered by the unit
4. The quality of the doctoral programmes education process offered by the unit
5. Cooperation with the external stakeholders

### **Assessment criteria**

Towards the determined conditions and the scope of the assessment Polish Accreditation Committee has developed the general criterion for the assessment of the doctoral programmes[3]:

*The organizational unit shall apply a consistent description of the programme objectives and learning outcomes achieved within the doctoral studies and apply efficient and reliable system for verification and confirmation of their achievement<sup>1</sup>.*

The level of fulfillment of the main criterion is verified by the assessment based on the detailed criteria:

- the unit ensures that the achieved learning outcomes relevant to the concerned research area and enables to obtain the degree of doctor as a result of doctoral programme,
- internal and external stakeholders are included in the process of development of the intended learning outcomes

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<sup>1</sup> This general criterion also refers to the assessment of the non-degree postgraduate programmes, which was skipped in this text as not relevant for the further analysis.

- the unit shall implement the ECTS system, in which the number of credits is based on the doctoral student workload necessary for achievement of the intended learning outcomes
- the unit shall develop a credible, transparent and widely available system of the assessment of the achievement of the programme objectives and intended learning outcomes.

The assessment process of the doctoral studies is thus focused on the study process and excludes the evaluation of the final thesis. The evaluation of the PhD. thesis has remained in the powers of the Polish Central Committee for the Scientific Degrees and Title.

Besides the criterion mentioned above, devoted strictly to the assessment of the doctoral studies, The Polish Accreditation Committee has adopted seven other general criteria for the institutional assessment. Each of the general criterion consists of several detailed criteria, which also refer to various aspects of the doctoral studies conducted by the assessed institution. These are<sup>2</sup>:

1. The unit shall elaborate its development strategy
  - 1.2. The unit shall elaborate the conception for the bachelor, master, doctoral and post-graduate studies, consistent with its strategic aims
  - 1.4. Internal and external stakeholders shall be involved in the educational offer and the quality culture development process
2. The unit shall implement the efficient internal quality assurance system
  - 2.1. The decision making process within the quality management is transparent and includes participation of the staff members, students, doctoral students, post-graduate students and external stakeholders
  - 2.2. The internal quality assurance procedures are complex, prevent pathologies and allow for verification and assessment of efficiency all the factors affecting the quality of education
4. The unit shall provide the staff, material and financial resources, sufficient for achievement of the strategic aims and the intended learning outcomes
5. The unit shall conduct the scientific research
 

The unit shall conduct research within the areas, fields and disciplines related to the provided studies and the results are used within the education process. The unit shall provide the conditions for conduction of the independent research by the doctoral students and enables the participation in the research by the students.
6. The unit shall participate in the domestic and international students, doctoral students and the staff exchange programmes and cooperates with the domestic and international academic institutions, companies and other institutions
  - 6.1. Students, doctoral students and staff members shall participate in the international programmes
  - 6.2. The unit shall undertake actions for internationalization of the education process, including the development of the indented learning outcome and the realization of the study programme
  - 6.3. The unit shall cooperate with the domestic and international academic institutions
  - 6.4. The unit shall cooperate with the external stakeholders in the process of achievement of the intended learning outcomes

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<sup>2</sup> The list includes only selected criteria relevant for the assessment of the doctor al studies. The full list of the criteria for the institutional assessment includes 8 general and 23 detailed criteria

7. The unit shall provide students and doctoral students with appropriate scientific, educational and social support in the process of the achievement of the expected learning outcomes
  - 7.1. The unit shall have developed the scientific, educational and social support system, which also includes the needs of the students and doctoral students with disabilities
  - 7.3. The unit shall support the activities of the students and doctoral students' self-governments and other organizations; the unit authorities shall actively engage students and doctoral students into the works of the unit bodies, especially relevant for educational, students and doctoral students' matters

The set of the criteria for the assessment of the doctoral studies are based on the European standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance within higher education institutions<sup>3</sup>. Most of the ESG could have been easily adopted for the assessment of the doctoral studies. Nevertheless the full assessment of the doctoral studies required including the broader spectrum of analysis, i.e. research issues.

### **Assessment procedure**

The doctoral studies evaluation process has been integrated into the institutional assessment procedure, as its natural supplement. Inclusion of the doctoral studies evaluation into the institutional assessment enabled to broad its spectrum. It allows to include the assessment aspects and criteria which otherwise would be hard to use. The assessment of the doctoral programme and its realization aims to determine the potential for achievement of the intended learning outcomes relevant to the related research area:

- preparation for the research or research and development activities by provision of the advanced knowledge regarding the newest scientific achievements within the research area
- skills related to the scientific research methods and methodology
- social skills related with the research activities and social role of the researcher or artist

Moreover, assessment concerns:

- correct selection of the optional modules to achievement of the intended learning outcomes, including achievement by the doctoral students skills in modern methods and techniques of teaching.
- Provision of opportunities for inclusion of doctoral students in research teams, including international ones, participation in research related to the subject of doctoral studies in other institutions, including foreign ones
- the effectiveness of actions taken by the unit in order to enable / facilitate the preparation of scientific publications by the doctoral students
- Consistency of qualifications of the academic teaching staff with the programme aims and intended learning and research outcomes of the doctoral students

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<sup>3</sup> Part 1 of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)

- ECTS system - correct determination of workload required to achieve the intended learning outcomes and usage of the opportunities created by this system in individualization of the education process within the doctoral studies through the national and international exchange programmes
- accountability and transparency of the system of assessment of the achievement of the programme objectives and intended learning outcomes

Because of the extension of institutional evaluation, Polish Accreditation Committee has enlarged the number of the experts types with representatives of the doctoral students. Recruitment and training processes of those experts are carried out in cooperation with the National Representation of PhD Candidates of Poland, a national organization officially representing the doctoral students. Representatives of the doctoral students are involved in every institutional assessment procedure to the unit that offers doctoral programmes. The doctoral students experts prepare their interim report, which are included into the final assessment report.

### **Added value**

Although the Polish Accreditation Committee has conducted so far approximately 40 institutional assessment procedures including the doctoral studies evaluation there are already several value added effects visible. Such combination enables to broad the spectrum of evaluation of the factors which can directly or indirectly affect the quality of education.

First of all, identification and assessment the relationship between the units research and educational activities is much easier and broader. Institutional assessment becomes thus more complex, allowing for the observation of an institution in a broader perspective. This makes it easier to diagnose any problems arising from imbalances between those two spheres of activity.

Another important issue is the extended evaluation of institution infrastructure, which must correspond to specific doctoral studies, is obviously different from that of first or second degree.

The institutional assessment include, among others, also the issue of relations of the institution with external stakeholders, including employers. The assessment of this aspect is made by the professional expert. Therefore it is also possible to evaluate the doctoral studies from the point of view from the non-academic perspective.

The last but not least significant added value of the institutional assessment model introduced by Polish Accreditation Committee is putting more pressure on the internal quality assurance systems and their efficiency and adequacy for the specificity of the doctoral studies.

### **Difficulties in evaluation of doctoral programmes**

The introduction of the new, extended model assessment of traditional higher education institutions, is of course not without problems. The main obstacle in the evaluation of the doctoral programmes, is formed over the years, various models of doctoral education.

This is mainly due to the fact that doctoral programs have been for the past few years the subject of very few regulations, reforms or modifications. Thus in various higher education institutions, the doctoral studies evolved very different, sometimes even extreme models of the perception of doctoral education and the role of doctoral student in the institution.

Relatively the easiest for evaluation are the doctoral programmes that have been established quite recently. They are run in line with the Bologna process. Their organization and functioning is relatively most similar to the first- and second-degree programmes. For these studies, a doctoral student is usually treated as a "privileged student" rather than a person closely related to the higher education institution. In this case, the program of study is generally similar for all, with minor individualization possibilities due to the scientific interests of doctoral students.

However, significant number of doctoral programmes are provided for many years. In this group, the differences in approach to the third cycle education is very different. Usually prevails a model of a doctoral student, which is more akin to the university staff, rather than to the student. In extreme cases, classes for doctoral studies are carried out under individual consultations with different research staff members, and the program of study is a very highly individualized.

Both models have their advantages and disadvantages, as well as confront the PKA to different challenges in their evaluation. The first model much more strongly highlights the aspect of education, rather than science. The second one emphasises more the research progress of a doctoral student. An element of education, is understood more as a complement to the research activities. In extreme cases, the first model can lead to a strong commercialization of doctoral studies. In the second case, the achievement of qualifications other than the scientific ones by the doctoral students is sometimes neglected.

## **Conclusions**

The extended model of the institutional assessment including the doctoral programme evaluation brings a lot of opportunities for enhancement of the assessment procedure. It enables the experts panel and the accreditation agency to broaden the spectrum of assessment. It is important especially for the higher education institutions that offer the doctoral programmes since it emphasizes the scientific activities even more than in the traditional institutional assessment procedure.

However, close connection of the evaluation of the doctoral programmes with the institutional assessment also limits the possibilities of the internationalization of the assessment process.

## **Questions:**

1. Should doctoral studies undergo a separate assessment procedure or be part of institutional assessment?
2. Are there other potential criteria which should be considered when evaluating doctoral programmes?

3. What is the opinion of the participants on the model of evaluation of doctoral programmes within the institutional assessment implemented by PKA?

**References:**

1. Act of 18 March 2011 amending the Act 27 July 2005 Law on Higher Education
2. Resolution of 29 September 2011 of the Minister of Science and Higher Education on the conditions of the programme and institutional assessment
3. Annex to the Statute of the Polish Accreditation Committee