THE FUTURE OF THESIS RINGS

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The future of thesis rings

For the 15th time in a row, Wageningen University won the award for best University in the Netherlands, according to Keuzegids (Wageningen University, 2019). Furthermore, Wageningen not only scores well nationally bit also internationally. For example, Wageningen ranks 59th in the Times Higher Education World University Ranking (The Economic Board, 2018). This among other things resulted in an increased influx of new students. Growing students numbers at a university results in more challenges for a university. One of those challenges is maintaining the high quality of supervision during Master and Bachelor theses. With the standard procedure, which means that every student is linked with a supervisor, becomes difficult to maintain. This could easily lead to an overload of work for the supervisors. Therefore, Wageningen University came with an innovative idea called thesis rings.

Thesis rings

According to Wageningen University *"A Thesis Ring is organised within chair groups and consists of a group of students (7-10) who share their written work (both proposals and thesis reports) and orally discuss the quality of the work together in weekly meetings."* Within the thesis ring, aspects concerning both research designs as well as scientific writing skills are discussed. A staff member is present at each meeting to chair the meeting, to supervise the process and the quality of given feedback. Often a supportive online platform on Brightspace is used for the planning of submissions, sharing of documents, exchange of good practices, instructions, and other supporting information. (Wageningen University, n.d.) Next to participating in a ring, students are supervised by another staff member on the content of their work. Advantage of thesis rings is that students will learn to review each other's texts.

With this method, it is possible to let one supervisor supervise multiple students. Moreover, it lowers the pressure on the supervisors because they share their workload with the students. So it sounds like the perfect solution. However, introducing thesis rings came with some problems.

Developing thesis rings

Before we delve deeper in these problems, we have to make clear who mentioned the problems. Interviewing several thesis ring supervisors and an education coordinator of Wageningen University, the following experiences were shared. The supervisors, who supervise the rings and are not involved in the content of the thesis mentioned that they have the freedom to arrange the thesis rings the way they want. The positive aspect of this is that the supervisors can make decisions they think fit their situation best. However, the downside of this freedom is that supervisors cannot fall back on a guide or plan of action if they face a problem. What makes this even more complicated is that the supervisors do not have a person to share their concerns or get insightful answers. It seems that all supervisors are inventing thesis rings themselves and nobody exactly knows what the best practise for thesis rings is and that makes discussing or reflecting if they work or the way they work difficult. Furthermore, the supervisors mentioned that there is sometimes little communication between the thesis rings supervisors and the supervisors, who are responsible for the content of a thesis. There is no communication on how the student performed in the ring and sometimes the student even finishes their thesis without informing the thesis rings supervisor. As last resort there are some times thesis ring lunches where all the supervisors of thesis rings are invited to lunch where they can discuss their way of work. However, these meetings have been scarce since Covid-19 according to the supervisors.

Difficulties during the ring

The first problem that popped up when talking to thesis rings supervisors was that the weekly sessions quickly turned into small talk chat groups. There was no substantive conversation between the students and/or supervisors. This was especially the case with bachelor students. According to the supervisors, bachelor students did no always notice the usefulness of a thesis ring and saw the rings more as a burden than an opportunity. This also influenced the second problem, the attendance rate. Thesis rings are mandatory for some chair groups but not for all of them. The supervisors mentioned that, even when the thesis rings are mandatory, the performance in the thesis rings does not contribute to the grading of the thesis. This resulted sometimes in a drop in the attendance rate. Especially the longer the duration of the thesis ring the lower the attendance rate became.

Furthermore, it was mentioned by the supervisors that students who did not have any problems with writing their thesis quickly saw the weekly meetings as useless. Because they did not receive any useful feedback to improve their thesis. Feedback, in general, was sometimes an issue because this was a point where students often lacked their effort. Especially when the feedback had to be given online and not face to face.

Searching for solutions

Because the communication between the thesis ring supervisors is scarce and there is no university wide guide, the solutions for these problems have to be found somewhere else. An option could be to search for literature about thesis rings. However, literature about thesis rings is almost non-existent. There are some policy papers from other universities about how a thesis ring should look like and the possible benefits of thesis ring (Romme and Nijhuis, 2002 - Larcombe, McCosker, and O'Loughlin, 2007) but there is no scientific evidence on what the best way is to implement a thesis rings. So looking for possible solutions, in theory, is also not an option.

Therefore, the BMO and ELS chairs groups have commissioned a BSc thesis to investigate how to tackle mentioned problems. The aim of this study was to search for different educational approaches with student groups as a focal point and look for attributes that could resolve mentioned problems and improve thesis rings. The research did this first by, clarifying thesis rings by establishing five characteristics of thesis rings. These five characteristics were the meetings, supervision, social factor, team learning, and peer-review. Furthermore, the research aimed to compare thesis rings with different educational theories and one concept from practice which shared the same five characteristics. The theoretical concepts consisted of peer-led team learning, problem-based learning, literature about team learning, and literature about peer-review. For a wider form of information, an educational approach from practice called; the graduation assignment from the HAN University of Applied Sciences was also included in this study.

Possible improvements

This resulted in a list of possible improvements for thesis rings at Wageningen University. The possible improvements are listed per characteristic of thesis rings with the exception of the characteristic team learning. The possible improvements for team learning could be incorporated within the other characteristics because it influences the other characteristics. These improvements should be read as suggestions to consider. Of course some of the possible improvements are impossible to implement in certain situations. However, considering the rationale behind the suggestion might lead to an improvement fitting the particular situation.

1. Group size

The first possible improvement for thesis rings concerns the group size. The optimal number is still unknown but it can be advised to keep the number of students in a group below eight. In an interview, one of the supervisors mentioned that working with a larger group is more difficult to keep everyone focused. A way of creating smaller groups could be done by splitting the initial group into two or three smaller groups and spread the meetings over a day, so the meetings times do not intervene.

2. Stable and diverse groups

Furthermore, diversity in the groups can result in more learning. Right now, all the members of the rings are usually from the same chair group. It could be an option to get students from different chair groups in the same ring. However, too much diversity can cause problems. Therefore the chair groups need some similarities (from the same department) to make a good match. Moreover, the thesis also showed that the composition of the groups should stay the same. People leaving or entering the group could disturb the dynamics and obstruct learning. Therefore, the groups should stay the same from the beginning until the end of the thesis duration.

3. Structure for the meeting

Work with more structured meetings could be helpful. For example, by making the first meeting more of an introductory meeting where the meaning, schedule, and method of the thesis ring could be discussed. Moreover, the thesis showed that implementing a presentation assignment

POSSIBLE IMPROVEMENTS THESIS RINGS

1 Four to eight students in a group

2 Stabel and diverse groups

3 More structure for meetings

4 Experienced supervisors with a gree to choose supervision style

5 No involvement in the grading process

6 Thesis rings as social environment

7 Prior peer-review experience

8 Shareable feedback

'Education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today.'
Malcom X

Figure 1: Overview possible improvements for thesis rings

during the meetings could be an option as well. Students can practice their presentation skills, get more understanding of each other's work, and make use of another feedback moment.

4. Experienced supervisors with a free to choose supervision style

For the characteristics supervision, the thesis showed that the supervisor should be a person with experience. The supervisors can be a teacher or student as long as the person is experienced with supervising. The reason for this is because the other educational approaches showed that supervising can be very difficult and is very different from teaching. Furthermore, the thesis unraveled that there is not a certain supervision style that is optimal, but the supervisors should be passive if it comes to the content of the meetings and active when it comes to the guidance of the meetings. This way, students will have to solve the problems with each other. This style had the most positive effects.

5. No involvement in the grading process

At last, it is important to note that students do not always feel free to say everything in front of the person who grades them. Therefore, the supervisor of the rings should not be responsible or involved at all with the grading process. However, supervisors of a thesis rings can still be the mentor of another thesis student. As long as the student does not participate in its mentors' thesis ring. This way there are no extra supervisors needed.

6. Thesis rings as social environment

There should be room for personal and informal conversations, this can be facilitated by the supervisor. Because the students should have the feeling that they can say everything and still feel safe. So, apart from being an educational environment, thesis rings should also be a social environment, without only talking small talk.

7. Prior peer-review experience

To give proper feedback can be a complicated task, but is crucial in thesis rings. Therefore, some proficiency in giving feedback should be conditional for thesis rings. Not every student has much experience with giving feedback so a lesson or tutorial could increase the level of feedback and the quality of the thesis rings.

8. Shareable feedback

Furthermore, it would improve the level of feedback if students could see each other's feedback. This way students can learn from their peers. If the feedback from the students is saved online, a platform like Brightspace could be ideal to share the feedback. At last, it can be useful to give students a list of possible feedback options. This can also improve the level of feedback. This can be a list that shows students how they can give feedback on for example the structure, organization, focus, argumentation, and grammar of a thesis. This way the feedback is more structured.

Opinion supervisors

Four supervisors were questioned what their thoughts were about the possible improvements. Asking the supervisors this question resulted in interesting findings. At first, it became even more clear how much different versions of thesis rings there are. One of the supervisors mentioned that she does not take part in the thesis ring meetings at all. One of her students is the chair. Therefore, she was very interested in the possible improvements for the supervision and decided to pay more attention to the meetings. She also said that she would organize more regular meetings with the chair members of the rings to see if they needed more help. This showed that the differences between the rings were are bigger than expected.

However, some responses from the supervisors on the possible improvements showed also some similarities of the thesis rings. One supervisor mentioned that their chair group recently completely changed the set-up of their thesis rings. Coincidently almost all changes came about with the possible improvements. They changed to smaller groups, made a more diverse team, made use of a presentation, and especially used the first meeting to get to know each other and the purpose of the ring. Furthermore, they now use a peer-review system online where students can access each other's feedback.

The remaining supervisors also agreed on the fact that the thesis ring groups should not be too big, six to seven students was definitely the maximum. The supervisors also mentioned that the groups for the online thesis rings should be even smaller (five students) to work well. However, because the supervisor count is limited the groups sometimes were bigger. Furthermore, the supervisors showed that stable groups could be an organizational challenge. It is inevitable that some students leave earlier than others. However, one of the supervisors mentioned that the students that have been in the ring the longest could help new group members the best because they have more experience. This is especially the case for master thesis rings because they take longer. This also links to the structure of the meeting. Where on supervisors lets a more experienced student help new students another supervisor used an introductory movie clip. So, the supervisors acknowledged the fact that it is useful to take some time to introduce new students but the supervisors all had their own ways of doing so.

As mentioned before the supervisors handled the way of supervision differently. One supervisor did not participate that much in the supervision but was interested in the findings. The two other supervisors agreed with the idea that the supervisors should have experience with supervision. One of the supervisors even conducted a questionnaire with her students. The questionnaire showed that students prefer it when supervisors have experience with supervision, writing, and publishing, because they feel that experience can help them more. One more improvement the supervisors supported was that the thesis rings should also be a social environment. Especially with COVID-19 wright now the supervisors found it really important they also focus on the social aspect. One supervisor said: "Being able to guarantee safety and comfort as a supervisor is the most important thing". So, the supervisors agreed there could be more focus on this aspect if this was not already the case in some rings.

The last possible improvements were for the peer-reviewing in thesis rings. The supervisors mentioned that there was already an ELS instruction video about peer review and that they used this for their students. Furthermore, they said that a list of possible feedback really can help the students. One supervisor already used such a list and she said: "This helps to guide the students towards different types of feedback as well, very useful". Moreover, the same supervisor also agreed that the feedback should be visible for everyone. However, for her, this had another purpose. She said that this could result in discussion among the students because they could not agree with each other and this could be very valuable.

In the end, it turned out that the supervisors were very positive about the possible improvements. Some supervisors already applied some of the possible improvement but in their own way and for now, this is the red line in thesis rings. Every supervisor uses its own way to make the best of their thesis ring. This means that not only the possible improvements could help the thesis rings and the supervisors but also the supervisors themselves can help each other. Some supervisors are unaware of the way their colleagues are running the ring due to the lack of communication. So, it can be advised that the university organizes more meetings were all the supervisors are invited and supervisors can share their way of work. Or with the current Covid-19 measures an online meeting

could also be a good alternative. This could also be an opportunity to share the possible improvements with even more supervisors and maybe even test them in practice. So some steps are already taken to resolve thesis ring issues, but additional steps could be taken and these are not as difficult as one might think.

NB: there is a full report of this BSc thesis. One can find this in the library, or send an email to renate.wesselink@wur.nl.

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