

Follow-up on EUA Evaluation of the Wageningen University PhD Programme 2015

1. Introduction

On request of the Executive Board of Wageningen University (WU), the WU PhD programme was evaluated by a team of four European experts. The evaluation was led by EUA Solutions, a service of the European University Association. It is for the first time that the WU PhD programme was evaluated as a whole, 'from admission to Aula'. Also for the Netherlands, this kind of review is unique.

In December 2014, WU submitted a self-evaluation report. The site-visit took place on 13-16 January 2015. The evaluation team met with the management of the PhD programme and with its stakeholders: PhD candidates, alumni and supervisors.

The evaluation had as aim to determine whether:

- 1) The learning targets of the Wageningen PhD programme meet international standards.
- 2) The Wageningen PhD programme has the structure and processes in place for PhD candidates to attain these learning targets.

2. Outcomes of the evaluation

On 1 April 2015, EUA published the evaluation report. The two main questions posed to the EUA evaluation team, were answered affirmative. A quote from page 6 of the report:

"The evaluation team recognises the excellence of the institution, and was impressed by the university's capacity and professionalism on all levels. The comments and recommendations in this report should therefore be read as further improvements to an already very well-functioning programme."

The 22 pages evaluation report also contains recommendations (printed in blue) to further improve the WU PhD programme. This note summarises how the WU Executive Board wants to follow-up on the EUA recommendations. Wageningen Graduate Schools (WGS) will take the lead in this follow-up and will involve, among others, the Wageningen PhD Council.

We treat the recommendations on page 20 of the EUA report in a specific sequence, starting with the last, overarching recommendation.

3. Follow-up on the recommendation about a future vision and related issues

5) **"Articulate a future vision for doctoral education at Wageningen University.** While the current provision of doctoral education is at a high level, it would be useful and timely to engage all stakeholder groups within the institution in a discussion about a vision for the future of the university. This would not only address current shortcomings, but also enable the university to meet future challenges."

We agree with this recommendation and have asked WGS to develop, with all stakeholders, a vision on the Wageningen PhD programme that fits in and complements the strategic plan of Wageningen UR.

c) **"Wageningen University might reconsider the balance of incentives away from large financial bonuses and formalised tenure requirements.** The university should ensure that the allocation of supervisors is based on research relevance rather than the financial advantage for the chair group or the requirements of tenure-track staff to fulfil a certain quota of supervisees."

Are the present incentives for quantity (more PhD candidates) in balance with incentives for quality (better PhD theses and publications, optimum supervision, optimum completion)? Do the present incentives fit for all chair groups, in different scientific fields? These are important issues raised by stakeholders and the EUA evaluation team. A discussion on the balance of incentives will be part of the vision on the Wageningen PhD programme.

2) **"Improve spreading of good practices.** The university could use the existing good communication between the graduate schools to enhance the sharing of good practices across the institution, particularly concerning supervision.

We agree with this recommendation and have asked WGS to include further enhancing the sharing of good practices in the vision on the Wageningen PhD programme.

4) **“Consolidate the quality system.** In order to move towards a more responsive and enhancement-oriented quality system, the current disparate initiatives should be consolidated into a system with clear purposes, timelines and responsibilities.”

We agree with this recommendation and have asked WGS to include this recommendation in the vision on the Wageningen PhD programme and its support structures such as Promis.

4. Follow-up on the recommendation about recruitment and selection

1) **“Develop a recruitment strategy and standardise the selection procedure.** This would enable Wageningen University to act more coherently and be more competitive in the recruitment of high potential doctoral candidates as well as complying with the international standards of transparent, fair and merit-based recruitment.”

We agree with this recommendation, in particular with regard to recruitment and selection through fellowship programmes. We have asked WGS to start a working group with representatives from the Wageningen PhD Council and Corporate Human Resources (HR). Also involved will be Education, Research & Innovation (ER&I) and Wageningen International (WI) who coordinate the selection of PhD candidates for the Sandwich and INREF programmes respectively.

5. Follow-up on the recommendation about a support framework for supervisors

3) **“Develop a support framework for supervisors.** In order to address this key area for doctoral education, the university could envisage several solutions to meet the needs of professional development of supervisors throughout their career, from providing a ‘starting kit’ through to peer learning for and by senior research staff. A commonly discussed institutional set of rules and guidelines for supervision would also be recommendable.”

WGS had already started with a working group on further strengthening the quality of supervision. We have asked WGS that this working group will take this EUA recommendation along and involve the Wageningen PhD Council.

6. Follow-up on the recommendation about the grading system

d) **“The present system of grading for the PhD thesis should be abolished.** The evaluation team found no added value in the system and registered widespread dissatisfaction with it among all stakeholders within the institution.”

We have asked the Academic Board to discuss this recommendation. Two aspects need attention: a) whether the grades have added value for supervisor and/or candidate, b) if and when supervisors and/or candidates should be informed about the grade and the motivation behind it.

The *cum laude* designation as such was not criticised in the EUA review, only its low percentage compared to other Dutch universities. We have asked the Academic Board also to look into that, among others in view of its consequences for PhD alumni applying for competitive grants.

7. Dissemination of the review results

Dissemination of the EUA review report should always be done together with the WU self-evaluation report and this follow-up note. Dissemination serves three purposes:

- Background input for the peer reviews of individual graduate schools in 2015.
- Internally: to inform and inspire management and stakeholders of the WU PhD programme with the aim to further improve the WU PhD programme.
- Externally: to show the quality and transparency of the WU PhD programme and to serve as an example of how the PhD programme at other universities could be evaluated.

The Executive Board of Wageningen University
1 June 2015