

Position of the Wageningen University Executive Board on the 2009 peer review reports of its Graduate Schools

Introduction

All research of Wageningen University is embedded in a graduate school and reviewed at least once every six years. In June 2009 nearly all graduate schools, partly or totally positioned within Wageningen University (WU), have been submitted to a peer review. By name these graduate schools are:

- Experimental Plant Sciences (EPS), a national graduate school with a substantial part of its research positioned within Wageningen University;
- C.T. de Wit Graduate School on Production Ecology & Resource Conservation (PE&RC), a graduate school completely embedded within Wageningen University;
- Mansholt Graduate School of Social Sciences (MG3S), a graduate school completely embedded within Wageningen University; however a few chair groups also participate in small national graduate schools as well;
- VLAG Graduate School on Food Technology, Agro-Biotechnology, Nutrition & Health Sciences; a national graduate school with a substantial part of its research positioned within Wageningen University;
- Wageningen Institute of Animal Sciences (WIAS), a graduate school completely embedded within Wageningen University;

The graduate school WIMEK (Wageningen Institute for Environment and Climate Research), that participates in the national graduate school SENSE, has been reviewed in 2007.

General position on the review reports

The Executive Board is pleased with the fine performances of the graduate schools. It is the board's opinion that the assessments of the peer review committees were very conscientious and the committee's findings and conclusions illustrate a good understanding of the mission and research domain. In a few cases the Board's view differs from the peer committee's vision. This is clearly explained in the Board's reaction on the review reports.

All review reports have been discussed intensively and the committee's recommendations are ordered according to the level where the recommendation was addressed to. We have discerned three levels: the level of the Executive Board / Sciences Group management, the level of the Graduate School's management, and the level of the chair group. The latter two categories of committee's suggestions are addressed at the corresponding levels and not included in this short position paper.

Recommendations for the Executive Board and management of the Sciences Group

Research strategy / -themes

Social sciences are a key ingredient for Wageningen UR with regard to its mission 'to explore the potential of nature, to improve the quality of life', and should play an equally important role in the research agenda setting of the university.

- o [The executive Board will anticipate to this recommendation by examining which of the Wageningen strategic research themes is suitable for Social Sciences to take the lead. As to the suggestion to support the social sciences with extra seed money for strengthening its graduate school social sciences' research agenda, the Executive Board](#)

abides by its general policy for its graduate schools and will make no exception. It is a general impression of the interuniversity graduate schools that WU already supports its groups very well in comparison to other universities.

Critical mass

- The system of chair groups with more-or-less permanent leaders exposes the smaller groups to the danger of disruption when leaders leave. *Larger groupings (clustering into subject areas) with a rotating leadership (4-6 year cycle)* would introduce stability and encourage the uptake of new ideas and approaches. Advantages may materialize by increasing flexibility within clustered chair groups such as better utilizing synergies, developing more effective programmes, easier coordination, avoiding unnecessary overlap and saving in administrative costs. The small size of a number of the chair groups within WIAS produces a number of major challenges for management including overall management and strategic planning, succession planning, career development of individual staff, collaboration between areas and critical mass, vulnerability and vitality of the groups. The Committee felt that these challenges would be best met by combining the chair groups into a single department whilst retaining the chairs and some clustering into subject areas.

CvB is positive towards this suggestion and will discuss this with WGS and the Managing Directors of the Sciences Groups.

Postdoc policy

- It would be helpful to develop a clear post doc policy in which WU deals with:
 - o the career development of young scientists and science quality (are funding incentives for PhD students in contrast to the disincentives for post-docs hampering science quality?).
 - o the importance of post doc researchers in enhancing research quality and institutional vitality. WU depends considerably on (sandwich) PhD work as 'main research output', whereas elsewhere in the world there is more dependency on post docs.

WGS is developing an explicit post doc policy which will be implemented after full agreement by all participants. This will also refer to the forthcoming tenure track plan, that is launched within Wageningen University and is partly addressing these issues.

Succession planning / staff diversity

- Succession planning of Chair leaders (EPS, WIAS, MG3S, VLAG)
 - o CvB will give this attention in the current development of a new Chair plan for WU
- no clearly visible unit for gender studies in Wageningen University (MG3S).
 - o CvB recognizes this recommendation and will encourage women to apply for key posts.

Monitoring research quality

- With regard to the implementation of a tenure track system, the Review committee advises to use broad but comprehensive criteria that pay attention to academic and scholarly quality and societal relevance: the PRC recommends that the university develops a reward system in which social relevance is explicitly accounted for, in addition to scientific quality. Both for institutional and personal assessments criteria are needed that reflect the full scope of academic work: research, teaching and service to society.
 - o CvB will try to develop a system that is more balanced in respect to output and outcome.