Best Practices in DOCTORAL EDUCATION
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Doctoral Education in Europe is continuously adapting to meet the needs of doctoral research, future careers and society. There is a consensus however, that doctoral education encompasses two key roles and outputs: advancement of knowledge through original research and production of independent researchers, equipped with competencies that allow them to pursue their chosen career path inside, or outside, of academia.

Quality assurance is therefore a keystone of doctoral education development. This Best Practices guide is an internationally accepted tool that institutions can use to measure the quality of their doctoral training against core and advanced quality metrics, while being flexible with respect to institutional structures and national directives. This guide recognizes that the models used for doctoral training vary within institutions, but also, that the fundamental principles of quality assurance cross international and institutional boundaries.

The ORPHEUS Best Practices were developed to support doctoral education in the fields of biomedical and health science, but are relevant in many other disciplinary areas. They were the outcome of broad consultation, with more than 100 European doctoral schools and are thus benchmarked against internationally accepted practices and procedures. They reflect and drive the original tenets of Salzburg I and Salzburg II Recommendations, while embracing today’s strategic thinking (e.g. the EUA-CDE’s 2022 Vision for the Future of Doctoral Education in Europe). The core and advanced recommendations outlined in the Best Practices, are designed to aid institutions keep quality assurance in doctoral training steadfast, in an ever changing and demanding academic environment (with enhanced digitilisation, diversity and re-evaluation of research metrics).

This approach has ensured that the Best Practices are relevant to institutions at the start of their doctoral training journey, as well as those institutions with established doctoral education programmes.

Institutional acceptance of the Best Practices also supports PhD candidate mobility and inter-institutional research collaboration (co-tutelles, joint degrees, etc). The recommendations are relevant to varying doctoral models (such as professional doctorates) and institutional structures (doctoral schools, graduate studies, research departments). Likewise, they are relevant for all stakeholders involved in ensuring the successful completion of a quality doctoral training programme (PhD candidate, supervisor, department or doctoral school, professional staff and university).

The ORPHEUS Best Practices document is composed of eight sections covering all key aspects of doctoral training, each of which contains:

- **Core Recommendations.** Describing fundamental practices which should be developed, implemented and adhered to, at a minimum.

- **Advanced Recommendations.** Describing excellence in doctoral training practice provision, which are in accordance with international consensus on best or excellent practice.

In addition, there are Annotations that are used to clarify, amplify or exemplify expressions in the recommendations. These also indicate flexibility which institutions may require, with respect to their own structures and models used, in the delivery of doctoral education in their national context.

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1 This document chose to use the designation of PhD candidate, which is synonymous with PhD student or Early Stage Researcher or Early Career Researcher.
Core Recommendations

- The success of individual PhD programmes should be ensured by being performed in a suitable research environment. *(CR1.1)*
- The facilities available to the PhD candidates should be compatible with the requirements of completing their PhD. *(CR1.2)*
- Research should be consistent with international ethical and research integrity standards and approved by appropriate ethics committees. *(CR1.3)*
- There should be arrangements to allow PhD candidates, if relevant, to perform part of their PhD programme at another institution, nationally or internationally. *(CR1.4)*

Advanced Recommendations

- Institutions / doctoral schools lacking some facilities or expertise in particular fields, could collaborate with those who have the specific resources needed. *(AR1.1)*
- The possibility for collaborative degrees could be explored to promote co-operation between doctoral schools. *(AR1.2)*

Annotations

- Suitability of the research environment would reflect availability of resources as well as the strength of the supervisor’s research team, the department, and of the doctoral school. It also includes the possibility for national and international networking with strong research institutions. *(An1.1)*
  - Measurements of the suitability of the research environment could be made using e.g. publication record, level of external funding, numbers of qualified researchers, existing collaborations, societal impact of research, record of department and doctoral school completion rates. *(An1.1a)*
  - The strength of a research environment could be assessed by comparison, or by benchmarking with other doctoral schools. *(An1.1b)*
  - A suitable research environment would have adequate resources (including, but not limited to, appropriate funding, full digital facilities, practical facilities and disciplinary expertise through experienced supervisors). *(An1.1c)*
- International ethical standards are e.g. Helsinki Declaration II (clinical), EU Directive 2010/63/EU (animal), and Oviedo Convention (bioethics). *(An1.2)*
- In this document, institutions refer to bodies responsible for awarding the PhD degree, e.g. university, faculty, research institute. Institutions will normally designate the responsibility for conducting PhD programmes, aligned with institutional regulations, to doctoral schools or similar organisations. *(An1.3)*
- Collaborative degrees range from joint degrees (by which candidates receive a single joint PhD degree conferred by two institutions on the basis of a joint PhD study programme), to dual degrees (by which candidates receive two degrees from collaborating institutions on the background of a joint PhD study programme), as well as co-tutelle agreements (typically with joint supervision). *(An1.4)*
Core Recommendations

- The PhD programme leading to the award of a PhD degree, should provide candidates with competencies that enable them to become an independent researcher, being capable of conducting responsible, original and independent research, according to principles of good research practice. *(CR2.1)*

- Completion of a PhD programme should be of benefit to those who pursue careers inside and outside of academia. Transferable skills, including but not limited to, critical thinking, problem solving, leadership, teaching, communication, and project management skills, should be supported as part of a candidate's PhD training programme. *(CR2.2)*

- The outcomes expected from a PhD candidate performing their PhD training should be concurrent with professional employment¹ and are the same as for any other PhD. *(CR2.3)*

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1 In the field of medicine this includes doctors, nurses, dentists, research scientists or academics in health sciences. In other fields, this would apply to any relevant profession.

Annotations

- Other competencies relevant for PhD programmes *(An2.1)* includes that PhD candidates:
  - have demonstrated a systematic understanding of a field of study and mastery of the skills and methods of research associated with that field; *(An2.1a)*
  - have demonstrated the ability to conceive, design, implement and adapt a substantial process of original research, with scholarly integrity, at a level that merits refereed publication or demonstrable impact, such as technological, social or cultural advancement in a knowledge-based society. *(An2.1b)*
  - can communicate with peers, the wider scholarly community and with society in general about their areas of expertise both orally and in writing. *(An2.1c)*

- PhD candidates and their supervisors should be cognisant of national strategies, policies or educational directives which may exist, specifically outlining expected skills competencies of successful PhD candidates. *(An2.2)*

- The PhD qualification corresponds to level 8 in the European Qualifications Framework². *(An2.3)*

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Core Recommendations

- To ensure the quality of PhD programmes, PhD candidates should be selected on the basis of a competitive and transparent process. (CR3.1)
- Applicants for a PhD programme should have an educational level corresponding to a master's degree, or to a medical degree. PhD programmes may be combined with master's or medical programmes (e.g. MD-PhD programme) provided that the conditions do not reduce the quality of the individual training. (CR3.2)
- Before enrolling a PhD candidate, or at a clearly defined timepoint in the programme, the institution should evaluate and approve the following:
  » the scientific quality and feasibility of the research project to be performed by the PhD candidate. (CR3.3a)
  » whether the project and timeline for completion are suitable. (CR3.3b)
  » the degree to which the project encourages innovation and creativity. (CR3.3c)
  » the qualifications and experience of the nominated supervisors (see section 5). (CR3.3d)
- All required resources, including funding, facilities and experienced supervisors, are in place for the duration of the doctoral programme. (CR3.4)

Advanced Recommendations

- In choosing PhD candidates, the potential and suitability of the applicant for research should be considered, and not just previous academic performance. (AR3.1)
- Proposed research projects should be assessed for quality and suitability, either by an external assessment of the written project description or else by presentation of the project to a panel of independent experts. (AR3.2)
- Where the candidate is obliged to obtain extra income, it should be ensured that the candidate has the necessary time to complete the programme. (AR3.3)

Annotations

- According to the Bologna process, a PhD programme follows a 1-2 year master's programme and a 3-4 year bachelor programme. Countries with only 4-year master's + bachelor programmes ought to supplement these with additional qualifications. (An3.1)
- Some countries do not strictly follow the Bologna process and other degree models, studies or work experience that brings the candidate to a master's level can be used in the admission criteria. (An3.2)
- The possibility for approving the project and supervisors after enrolment may include a model whereby candidates spend a limited time on project selection and project development, often combined with some course work, before starting the research project. This should not reduce the 3-4 years allocated to the project following registration. (An3.3)
- Criteria for admission should include documentation of proven research competence through, for example, predoctoral research programmes, published papers, and presentations. For medical candidates - clinical experience would be relevant. (An3.4)
- For many institutions, a PhD programme is seen as the continuation of a master's or medical undergraduate programme. However, equality, diversity and inclusion for all eligible candidates from other institutions should be demonstrated. (An3.5)
- The resources (internal or external) include appropriate stipends/scholarships to support PhD candidates, suitable infrastructure, adequate running costs, conference attendance costs, experienced supervisors, digital facilities etc. (An3.6)
## Core Recommendations

- PhD training programmes should be based on conducting original research, transferable skills development and disciplinary coursework as relevant. \((CR\ 4.1)\)
- PhD programmes should be performed under structured supervision. \((CR\ 4.2)\)
- PhD programmes should ensure that candidates have appropriate training in research integrity and ethics. \((CR\ 4.3)\)
- PhD programmes should be structured with a clear time limit, a length equivalent to 3-4 years full time. Extension of the time frame should be possible, but be limited and exceptional rather than typical (e.g for parental leave, bereavement or sick leave). \((CR\ 4.4)\)
- The training programme should include documented learning and professional development activities (e.g. courses, journal clubs, participation in conferences, seminars and workshops, teaching, demonstrating). A substantial part of these training activities should be transferable skills. \((CR\ 4.5)\)
- PhD programmes that are performed in parallel with professional training should have the same time allocation for research and course work as any other PhD. \((CR\ 4.6)\)
- There should be continuous, structured assessment of the progress of PhD candidates throughout their PhD programme by the school and supervisor. \((CR\ 4.7)\)

## Advanced Recommendations

- For PhDs performed by clinicians, leave-of-absence from clinical duties should be provided for the research element of such programmes unless these are coincident. \((AR\ 4.1)\)
- PhD programmes should have an element of interdisciplinarity where at all possible. \((AR\ 4.2)\)

## Annotations

- A 3-4 year full time (or equivalent) limit has several purposes \((An\ 4.1)\):
  - it guarantees that there is an upper limit to the amount of scientific work, which can be expected to be included in a PhD thesis and is an effective way to avoid the requirements for a PhD degree escalating over time. \((An\ 4.1a)\)
  - it encourages the PhD candidate to focus on their research question over a reasonable timeframe and ensures that the programme is based on original research. \((An\ 4.1b)\)
  - it allows doctoral schools to develop structures for handling a steady stream of PhD candidates. \((An\ 4.1c)\)
- The disciplinary related coursework would include courses in ethics, safety, animal experimentation (if applicable), research methodology and statistics etc. and support candidates in their scientific research. \((An\ 4.2)\)
- Courses/workshops/modules etc. in transferable skills should include training in presentation skills (oral/poster/papers) to academic and non-academic audiences, university teaching, project management, grant application, critical evaluation of scientific literature, supervision, career development and networking. These are key skills for employment inside and outside of academia. \((An\ 4.3)\)
- Studies for a medical qualification may be combined with a PhD programme, to form a structured MB/PhD or MD/PhD programme. \((An\ 4.4)\)
5 SUPERVISION

Core recommendations

- Each PhD candidate should have a principal supervisor and normally at least one co-supervisor to cover all aspects of the defined programme. (CR5.1)
- The number of PhD candidates per supervisor should be compatible with the supervisor’s cumulative workload. Many institutions limit the number of candidates per supervisor to approximately three. (CR5.2)
- Supervisors should be academically and scientifically qualified, have relevant supervisory experience and be active scholars/researchers in the field concerned. (CR5.3)
- Supervisors should be familiar with the structure of the PhD programme and associated regulations, policies and institutional procedures. (CR5.4)
- Supervisors should have regular, one-on-one consultations or supervisory meetings with their PhD candidates. (CR5.5)
- The institution/doctoral school should ensure that all supervisors, including potential supervisors, have formal training in international best practices in research supervision. (CR5.6)
- The supervisor-candidate relationship is key to a successful PhD programme. The institution should encourage mutual respect, planned and agreed responsibilities and expectation clarification (authorship, contributions etc.) for all parties. (CR5.7)
- Institutional assistance should be provided to support career development for PhD candidates. This should be continuous, starting from the time of enrolment. (CR5.8)

Advanced recommendations

- Each PhD candidate should have a supervisory team and the responsibility of each supervisor should be explicit and documented. (AR5.1)
- Supervisors should introduce their PhD candidate to their local and international scientific networks. (AR5.2)
- Supervisors should, in co-operation with the institution, assist with career development and expectations. (AR5.3)
- Institutions should consider having documented agreements, outlining agreed expectations and the progression monitoring and supervisory process should be signed by the supervisor, PhD candidate and head of the doctoral school. (AR5.4)
- Supervisors should be aware of all policies and processes relating to conflict resolution, bullying and harassment, equality, diversity and inclusion and research ethics and integrity and share this information with their PhD candidates. (AR5.5)
- Supervisors should, where possible, act as co-supervisors and PhD examiners at other doctoral schools nationally and internationally. (AR5.6)
- Doctoral schools should ensure that the candidate's academic progression on the doctoral programme, is overseen by an independent individual, or committee (not including the primary supervisor). (AR5.7)

Annotations

- For the supervisor to be academically and scientifically qualified in the field, implies that they normally have a PhD or equivalent, are active in research and have experience in supervision. (An5.1)
- The term ‘regular consultations’ will normally mean at a minimum, several times per month, but frequency will vary during the course of the programme as required by the individual PhD candidate. (An5.2)
- The consultations between PhD candidate and supervisor should cover for example – progress of the research project and progress of the candidate on the doctoral programme, skills development, dissemination of research outputs, such as presentation and publications and thesis writing. (An5.3)
- Research supervisor training and professional development should include the pedagogy of research supervision, international best practices, and national and university governance and regulations. (An5.4)
Core Recommendations

- The PhD thesis is the basis for evaluating if the PhD candidate has acquired over 3-4 years (full time or equivalent) the skills to carry out independent, original and scientifically significant research at international level and to evaluate critically work done by others. (CR6.1)

- The thesis is normally based on the equivalent of approximately three papers or manuscripts, although fewer may be accepted if published in highly rated journals and represents the output of at least 2½ years full-time research. The thesis may also be based on a monograph which reflects an equivalent research output and effort. The PhD candidate should be able to take full intellectual responsibility for all parts of the thesis. In considering these requirements, the assessment committee should take account of the provisos listed in the Annotations at the end of this section. (CR6.2)

- Any papers produced should be published (or ready for publication) in internationally recognized, peer-reviewed journals. Open access journals are preferred and so-called predatory journals should be avoided. (CR6.3)

- In addition to the papers presented, the PhD thesis should include a full review of the literature relevant to the themes in the papers or manuscript, a full account of the research aims, methodological considerations, results, discussion, conclusions, and further perspectives of the PhD project. (CR6.4)

- A PhD thesis performed in connection with professional employment should meet the same standards as other PhD theses. (CR6.5)

Advanced recommendations

- To encourage international recognition, the thesis should be written, and optimally also examined in English, unless local regulations stipulate otherwise, or where this is not possible or desirable. An abstract of the PhD thesis should be published in English. (AR6.1)

- Where the papers or manuscripts are joint publications, co-author statements should document that the PhD candidate has made a significant contribution to these. Ownership of results from PhD studies should be clearly stated. (AR6.2)

- PhD theses should be published in the institution’s repository and on the doctoral school’s homepage, preferably in extenso. If patent or copyright legislation or other reasons prevent this, at least abstracts of the theses should be publicly accessible. (AR6.3)

- Ideally, a lay summary of the thesis in the local language should accompany the thesis. (AR6.4)

Annotations

- Internationally recognised journals refers to quality journals in the field concerned that are included in PubMed, Science Citation Index, or similar biomedical and health science literature databases. (An6.1)

- It is generally understood that the PhD candidate has made a major contribution to each of the individual studies in the thesis and for publications, is the first author of at least some of the papers in the thesis. (An6.2)

- Manuscripts means documents having the same content as a published paper. (An6.3)

- Some institutions require that at least one paper is published (sometimes with the additional requirement of impact factors above a certain level). (An6.4)

- Some institutions allow that a patent be accepted instead of a paper. In such cases the scientific content should be similar to that of a published paper. (An6.5)

- The recommendation of English as best practice relates to this language being the common scientific language used in the biomedical and health sciences literature, and thus the language best suited to encouraging internationalisation. (An6.6)
Core recommendations

- Awarding the PhD degree should include acceptance of both the written thesis and a subsequent oral defence or viva voce. (CR7.1)
- PhD degrees should be awarded by the institution based on the approval from an assessment committee, that has evaluated the thesis and the oral defence, in accordance with the recommendations described in section 6. (CR7.2)
- The assessment committee should consist of independent, internal and external, established and active scientists/academics, who have no direct connection to the candidate or supervisor via the research itself, other publications, grant proposals, etc. There should be no evidence of conflict of interest. (CR7.3)
- To avoid conflict of interest the supervisor should not be a member of the assessment committee. However, some universities allow the supervisor to act as a member of the assessment committee, but they should have no vote in the final decision. (CR7.4)
- In the case of a negative assessment, but not outright rejection of the PhD, the PhD candidate should be given the opportunity to rewrite relevant sections of the thesis and/or be allowed an additional possibility for oral defence. In exceptional cases the assessment committee can reject a thesis without offer to reconsider. (CR7.5)
- The oral examination should include a presentation by the candidate of the research that has been conducted for the award of PhD. The examination itself should be detailed enough to ensure that the thesis is the candidate's own work, that the research carried out is original, that the candidate has an expertise in the specific area of work and also a broad understanding of the discipline and that elements of the work have been published, or are publishable, in whole or in part. (CR7.6)

Advanced recommendations

- The oral defence or viva voce should normally be open to the public, or at least to the faculty. Where national norms preclude this, PhD candidates should present to faculty prior to the oral defence taking place. (AR7.1)
- To promote internationalisation, the institution should, where economically and practically possible, ensure that the assessment committee includes at least one international member. (AR7.2)
- The institution should ensure, where national norms dictate, that sufficient transferable skills have been acquired during the PhD programme. (AR7.3)
- The competencies developed during the PhD programme could be documented in a portfolio or equivalent. The principal supervisor (and advisory or thesis committee) should have oversight of the development and record of transferable skills throughout the doctoral programme. (AR7.4)

Annotations

- The form of assessment committee varies between institutions. Here, it is used to describe the independent persons who assess and recommend the award of doctorate to the university after the oral defence. (An7.1)
- The assessment committee is not to be confused with an advisory or thesis committee which supports the ongoing progress of the doctorate. (An7.2)
- The time between submission and defence of a thesis must be as short as possible to assist the candidate in completing and gaining employment in a timely manner. (An7.3)
- Institutions should, where necessary, allow some members of the assessment committee to participate in the thesis evaluation and defence at a distance, in order to ensure the inclusion of an appropriate expert in the assessment panel who cannot otherwise travel. This will also support an independent, more affordable international examination. (An7.4)
Relevant stakeholders in doctoral education include, the PhD candidate, supervisor, head of school, professional staff, institution and funders. The manner in which PhD programmes are organised, managed and delivered will therefore depend on the structure of each institution and also on national guidelines. This section highlights important aspects in PhD management in a doctoral school structure, while recognising that other models of organisation also exist.

### Core recommendations

- The doctoral school should have sufficient resources for proper conduct of PhD programmes. This includes the resources appropriate to support the admission of PhD candidates, implementation of the PhD programmes, stipends for the PhD candidates, assessment of PhD theses, and awarding of PhD degrees. *(CR8.1)*
- The doctoral school should have a website, in the national language and in English *(CR8.2)*, which includes transparent information about policies concerning:
  - the responsibilities of the head of doctoral schools and the administration or professional staff. *(CR8.2a)*
  - quality assurance and regular review processes to achieve quality improvement. *(CR8.2b)*
  - admission policy, including a clear statement on the process of selection of candidates. *(CR8.2c)*
  - An induction/orientation to the doctoral school should be provided for all new PhD students. *(CR8.2d)*
  - the structure, duration and content of the PhD programme. *(CR8.2e)*
  - the methods used for monitoring of progress and of assessment for PhD candidates. *(CR8.2f)*
  - supervisor appointment policy outlining the experience, responsibilities and qualifications of supervisors. *(CR8.2g)*
  - effective use of information and communication technology. *(CR8.2h)*
- Merit should be given for relevant coursework taken elsewhere or other relevant experience obtained. *(CR8.3)*

### Advanced recommendations

- There should be procedures for regular review of the structure, function and quality of PhD programmes. This will normally include both supervisor and candidate feedback. *(AR8.1)*
- Representatives of the PhD candidate community should interact with the leadership of the doctoral school regarding the design, management and evaluation of PhD programmes. This should be supported by membership or representation on relevant committees and working groups. *(AR8.2)*
- The rights, roles, responsibilities and duties of PhD candidates should be made apparent to all PhD candidates and supervisors. *(AR8.3)*
- PhD candidates should be made familiar with all policies and processes pertaining to the successful execution of their doctorate (including conflict resolution, bullying and harassment, equality diversity and inclusion). *(AR 8.4)*
- There should be an appeal mechanism allowing candidates to dispute decisions concerning their programmes and assessment of their theses. *(AR8.5)*
- Confidential candidate counselling concerning issues pertaining to the PhD programme, supervision, as well as personal matters should be made available through the doctoral school or university (perhaps an 'ombudsman'). *(AR8.6)*
- Doctoral schools should consider having a thesis committee/panel for each PhD candidate that monitors the progress of the PhD candidate, transferable skills training etc. through meetings with the PhD candidate and the supervisors. *(AR8.7)*


12. The Making of Doctoral Supervisors - International Case Studies of Practice 2021 - Taylor, Kiley and Holley


HISTORY OF THE ORPHEUS BEST PRACTICES

The basis for this document was conceived at the ORPHEUS conference in Aarhus 2009, where the 250 participants (supervisors, heads of doctoral schools, PhD candidates, representatives for EUA-CDE and EU Commission) proposed recommendations for quality assurance and enhancements in PhD training. These proposals were further developed by a joint ORPHEUS, AMSE, WFME Task Force (see below) and the result was published in 2012.

Additional discussions have taken place at annual meetings of the Association of Medical Schools in Europe, Association for Medical Education in Europe, Federation of European Biochemical Societies, and International Union of Basic and Clinical Pharmacology. The document is thus a synthesis of what biomedical and health science institutions, supervisors and PhD candidates recommend as being the goals of PhD programmes as regards outcome and content. In 2022/23, the Best Practices underwent a review, reflecting current best practices in doctoral education internationally.

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ORPHEUS (Organisation for PhD Education in Biomedicine and Health Sciences in the European System) was established in 2004. Currently there are over 130 institutional members from across Europe and beyond. In 2023, the Executive Committee voted to incorporate the tagline *Quality in Doctoral Education*, which is now part of the ORPHEUS logo. Through annual conferences, workshops, and training courses, the organisation seeks to develop a consensus for the aims and content of structured PhD training. The ORPHEUS labelling process gives recognition to institutions that comply with the Best Practice recommendations.

Further details on [www.orpheus-med.org](http://www.orpheus-med.org). Contact Orpheus at [secretary@orpheus-med.org](mailto:secretary@orpheus-med.org)

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