

Graduate school: *don't be too patronising*

Graduate school is coming. Better supervision and instruction must ensure that fewer PhD students drop out and that they obtain their doctorates within four years. Professors are extremely sceptical about the curtailment of their authority.

One in four PhD students at TU Delft drop out and many take longer than four years to complete their doctorates. In a 2005 survey conducted by the Delft post-graduate association, Promood, candidates stated that the most significant reasons for their delays were lack of supervision and unclear definitions of their PhD projects. The survey revealed that problems arise primarily in the final stages of research, and particularly among non-European candidates. Candidates also have difficulty making a timely start on publication, or the students have already moved on to work elsewhere before completing their dissertations. These problem areas however are not the only motivation for TU Delft to establish a graduate school. There is also a lack of

reliable management information about PhD candidates. The university also feels that the position of TU Delft as a post-graduate institution can be improved, regarding both Master's students and the business community.

The TU Delft Graduate School

The TU Delft Graduate School will comprise eight faculty graduate schools (one per faculty), each with its own graduate programmes and subject-specific doctoral instruction. PhD students will be allocated a mentor, will form a peer network, and their degree certificates will state that they have passed through the graduate school. PhD supervisors will also be assisted in their recruitment and selection activities.

Each graduate school will be supported by a faculty graduate office, where a member of staff records the progress of each candidate throughout their degree, as well as recording their PhD agreements and 'Go/No-go' moments. The graduate office also provides information about teaching programmes and support in progress interviews, while maintaining a website about the faculty's graduate school and conducting exit interviews with all departing PhD students. In addition, there will be a coordinating University Graduate Office, which will handle the central intake of candidates (on 1 September), record PhD students' progress, coordinate any general training courses that are common to each faculty, design a website, and provide information about the



PhD office at the faculty of Mechanical, Maritime and Materials Engineering (3mE).



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graduate school. The University Graduate Office will also provide a careers advisor and a psychologist for PhD candidates.

The implementation of the credits system seems clear: 15 credits for courses covering general skills, such as presentation, setting up research projects and job applications, and an additional 15 credits for subject-specific trainings in the form of lectures and workshops relating to the students' research fields.

Lastly, certain practical skills will be acquired, such as supporting undergraduates, making conference presentations and securing research project funding. These also earn 15 credits. This will be 'on the job' training.

These requirements will apply to new PhD students from September onwards, but existing PhD students will also be able to take modules that are given in the third or fourth years.

Lucas van Vliet, a professor of Image Analysis and member of the Applied Sciences Management Team, believes that the graduate school could be a great addition, but he also says it is "old wine in new wineskins", adding that "twenty years ago we set up modules for PhD students in two research groups in different faculties which were then adopted and expanded by the national Advanced School for Computing and Imaging research school."

According to Prof. Van Vliet, the Foundation for Fundamental Materials Research and the faculty of Technology, Policy and Management (TPM) already offer course content dealing with skills like presentation and communication. Project manager Stella van der Meulen agrees, although she points out that half of the PhD students at TU Delft are not associated with a research school. "I have also heard that not all modules are comparable," she says. "And TU Delft is striving to achieve a uniform quality level." According to Van der Meulen, most of the subject-specific 15 points will be taken in the research schools. "The Graduate School's generic 15 points may be taken for example in TPM, the Human Resources department, the FOCUS Centre of Expertise in Education, or externally."

In practice this will be no more than six months' training. "There is a menu of options, in which the PhD supervisor and preferably also the day-to-day supervisor consult with the candidate to identify possible courses. These could be four general courses and three subject-specific options."

The university wants to make the existing introductory course mandatory. This three-day course sets out what a PhD at TU Delft entails, and what students can expect from their PhD supervisor and from the institution. TU Delft also wants a mandatory careers orientation workshop or training course. A faculty or head of a research project will manage a teaching budget of €7,500 for each PhD candidate.

www.graduateschool.tudelft.nl

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'Eliminating bad practices'

The PhD student association Promood has been involved in the preparations for the graduate school and is pleased with the new initiative. "It is a means to achieve uniformity among PhD courses," says Theo van Ruiven, himself a PhD student at TPM. "It's all about eliminating bad practices."

The graduate school will also strengthen the position of the PhD students, since it will be made clear what entitlements they can expect and what is expected of PhD supervisors. This may make it easier for PhD students to approach their PhD supervisors if something is wrong.

At present PhD students are often afraid to do this, particularly those from non-European countries. "It's a fragile relationship," says Van Ruiven. "After all, the PhD supervisor is the one who is going to assess you."

Van Ruiven doesn't believe the new requirements depart much from current practice, at least not if that is good practice: "Because you're already teaching, already going to conferences, and you can already go to summer school."

In his view, the faculties will be introducing minimum requirements, and there is also space for subjects tailored to the individual. All in all, little will change if the PhD course is good to start with. Van Ruiven: "The changes will be mainly administrative: everything will be better recorded."

Scepticism

Professor Barend Thijsse has sounded out his colleagues and reports serious scepticism among the professors about possible erosions of their autonomy. Late last year the professor of Materials Science was asked to take part in discussions about the graduate school credits system. According to Prof. Thijsse, many professors now feel that they are more managers than researchers: "They feel that they can no longer make decisions about funding they have brought in themselves, and that they're working for a boss." He says this is difficult for the professors to swallow.

"And now the graduate school is going to tell them how to deal with their PhD students?" Project manager Stella van der Meulen observes that professors must also account for how they work.

"They seem to see that as a raw deal," she says, "but accounting for yourself on a regular basis is pretty normal, after all."

Prof. van Vliet points out that a PhD supervisor must retain ultimate responsibility at all times. "Don't be too patronising," he says. "At the end of the day you need to deliver researchers who can operate independently."

Van der Meulen agrees with that: "We certainly don't want to patronise, we want to offer support. If PhD supervisors deal well with their PhD students then they shouldn't notice the graduate school much at all. But if a PhD supervisor only speaks to their student once a year, then we'll certainly intervene, as once a year isn't enough." (SB, CvU, JW)