

# AUDIT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OULU

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## 5 Benchlearning

- HEI's self-assessment

### Enhancing quality culture in doctoral schools (University of Oulu and Erasmus University Rotterdam)

#### Benchlearning partner and goals

The target for benchlearning was decided in autumn 2021. At the time, the Graduate School was in the middle of structural change and as the doctoral training was one of the strategic development areas at the University of Oulu, it was likely that UniOGS would benefit from the benchlearning process. The partner was chosen to be Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR), from the European strategic alliance UNIC of the UO. The idea was to learn from the respected university but also to foster a partnership. Where the UO has one university level graduate school, EUR has different graduate schools (Law, Erim for economics and the business school ESGH, as well as social sciences and humanities. The theme of enhancing the qualitative culture of doctoral training was central to EUR, as they were about to renew their PhD policies.

The goal of the benchlearning was to enhance the quality culture in the doctoral schools. The main objective was specified in five sub-themes, namely 1) principles and policy support, 2) support for doctoral researchers and supervisors, 3) research support, 4) educational support, and 5) support for career development, which were used as guiding themes for discussion in online meetings. The idea was to learn from the good practices of quality culture in the respective doctoral schools and to find out what was currently perceived as important actions and services supporting doctoral researchers.

## Implementation of benchlearning

The benchlearning process started in February 2022. The plan was to have several online meetings, and mutual visits to Rotterdam and Oulu. Following the plans, five online meetings were conducted in 2022. What was noteworthy already from the beginning, was that in addition to the graduate school people, also representatives of HR and STY were committed to this process. For EUR this was natural as they do not have a centralised graduate school, however, for the UO this process was already valuable, as it tightened the cooperation of different units in the context of doctoral education.

While our discussions were not limited to pre-planned topics, the conversation focused on subjects that were of mutual interest. On-site meeting visits, included a wide range of people related to doctoral education from the faculties, support staff and doctoral researchers. Our visits to both Rotterdam and Oulu were highly successful, as they provided us with the opportunity to meet with colleagues, go on campus tours, and engage in discussions about the current state and future direction of doctoral training and learn from each other's practices.

The visit to Rotterdam took place in November 2022, where meetings with the graduate school were included discussions on drivers and challenges concerning evolving doctoral education. However, particularly interesting was the PhD-policy project start-up session arranged by the HR of EUR in Rotterdam. We had the possibility to share thoughts on the following topics which were important for both partners: the services and support for PhDs in the areas of (1) career support, (2) onboarding, (3) wellbeing, (4) supervision, and (5) information providence and governance. The workshop was conducted successfully, as it provided a structured way to exchange practices and knowledge from different graduate schools but also innovate new practices together.

In March 2023 a delegation from EUR visited the University of Oulu. Several meetings were arranged for the EUR representatives to meet the representatives of the focus institute, HR, STY, Career Center, and people from academia to discuss themes related to joint programmes, RAE, Finnish education system and quality, social safety, HR policies, well-being and career support.

## Evaluation and results of benchlearning

The process was considered useful, not least because following the partner university's example, we immediately took along our HR to the benchlearning process, which had immediate effects on the practices of the UO (e.g. targeted welfare survey including doctoral researchers), but also changed the way the different doctoral researcher segments and the services are identified.

Both parties expressed satisfaction with the benchlearning process, which enabled us to compare our doctoral training environments and practices. There is a possibility to build on our shared insights and experiences and work towards creating even more effective and high-quality environments and structures for doctoral training. While the benchlearning discussions were initially focused on rather broad themes, we found that the process allowed us to explore a range of related topics in greater depth. One of the most rewarding aspects of the process was the participation of both academics and support services, who were all working towards the common goal of enhancing the quality of doctoral training. We believe that this collaborative approach is

essential for ensuring the sustainability of doctoral training programmes in the future.

In conclusion, we believe that this has been a fruitful process for both parties, it has been transparent and it has fostered collaboration. It seems likely that cooperation will continue also within other units in the future. We would not have achieved these positive results without being able to rely on the valuable staff of both universities who participated in the process. We have a valid reason to feel satisfied with the accomplished benchlearning process.

#### **Good practices of the UO**

Follow up groups

One graduate school for all fields: common processes for all doctoral researchers

Admission process same for all, with committee evaluation and student register system

#### **Good practices of the EUR**

Close relationship with HR when developing policies for doctoral training

Policies/practices are well documented

Onboarding programme for new employees/ PhD students

Focus on career development for those who are close to graduation

Inspired by the EUR, the UO has already started to further develop the following:

- Planning the different doctoral paths (e.g. a doctoral path for doctoral researchers working elsewhere than academia, including a structured programme, tailored for their needs and work life challenges)
- Onboarding activities
- Study requirements and the number of obligatory studies; doctoral degree programmes have been requested to evaluate the current requirements vs work life relevance and industry needs
- Well-being and social safety of doctoral researchers, ESR project application submitted to further develop these aspects. At EUR, the culture seems to guide doctoral researchers to choose studies that are important to them.
- HR cooperation with the graduate school
  - HR considers doctoral researchers in its operations
  - UniOGS involved in orientation for new employees

## **Audit team's comments**

The University of Oulu's partner in the benchlearning project 2022-23 was Erasmus University of Rotterdam (EUR). The process started in February 2022 and consisted of five online meetings and mutual on-site visits to Rotterdam and Oulu. The focus was to enhance the quality culture of doctoral education in both universities. In Oulu, the Graduate School was going through of structural change. The goal of the University of Oulu was to learn from the Erasmus University of Rotterdam and to create a partnership for the future. The HR unit at the UO was included in the benchlearning process.

The first results from the benchlearning are described in the self-assessment report. The delegates from the UO were impressed and inspired by the fact that EUR's partners included both people from the graduate schools, support staff and doctoral researchers. This led to changes in the composition of relevant structures at the UO. *One* concrete step taken at the UO was that doctoral researchers were included as a new group in the staff well-being survey of 2023. Another change that took place was the way that the different segments of doctoral researchers and their needs for services were identified. At the same time, there are common processes for doctoral researchers in place. Follow-up groups for doctoral education have also been created.

Overall, the benchlearning project seems to have been successful in several ways. It seems to the audit team that it was especially important to being more important and renewing discussions with a broader spectrum of relevant staff. The audit team wishes all the best for the

partnership between UO and EUR and their continuous enhancement work.