



Including scientific writing training as a criteria for quality in PhD education

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Defining quality in PhD education is not straightforward. Common parameters in evaluations of PhD programs are efficiency, number of dropouts, average age, and international cooperation. Generally, more detailed studies of reasons behind dropouts and quality of supervision are important aspects that are rarely measured or measurable, and often reduced to the “human factor” and psychology. Additional proxies may include progress monitoring systems and evaluation of the program structure, subsequent employability, the scientific curriculum vitae of the successful candidates, and thus also the number of publications. While these parameters describe important aspects about the PhD education, the overall quality of research training is much less easy to measure.

It is difficult to find facts that document quality in PhD education. Supervisors, administrators and each department have their scales, which are mostly based on individual experiences. In contrast, pedagogic methods in BSc and MSc education are more often standardized, measurable and documented. For PhD education, little documented research and no guidelines from the Norwegian ministry of Education and Research or the Universities exist. The ministry is aiming to increase efficiency and international cooperation and lower the average age and number of dropouts. To manage this, universities and research schools get incentives to start up a number of different soft-skill activities. At the same time, supervisors often argue that time is too valuable to focus on anything but research activities, because they focus on employability in academia. The result is a number of non-coordinated extra-curriculum offers for PhD students and little documentation exists on their effectivity.

A PhD student (in the Norwegian system) must master a diverse number of obligations and skills. Good communication through writing is pivotal to succeed in academia and other venues such as industry and governmental services. Those who master scientific writing will not only be quicker to get published but also convey their results better and probably achieve higher impact and recognition through their papers. Instead of leaving writing and communication skills in academic education up to chance, it is time to include it as standard education as early as possible and as often as possible. Three years offer no room for little effective or spread efforts, and the skill of reporting scientific results is crucial for the future career anywhere. Therefore we should identify better what defines quality in PhD education, and which additional tools will get us there.