

Informal policy discussion - quality assurance of doctoral education

Online, March 13, 2025, 10:00 – 11:30pm CET (11:00 – 12:30 EET)

Information note

The OECD Higher Education Policy team provides comparative analysis and country-specific support on a range of higher education policy issues. One issue of increasing policy concern across member countries is the development of a strong talent pipeline for research and innovation ecosystems. High quality doctoral education is a critical part of this effort, with many governments boosting public investment in recent decades. Yet, despite increased investment, many higher education and public research systems continue to face difficulties in ensuring good working conditions and attractive career prospects for doctoral researchers. Considering increasing public concern about the proper management, efficiency, and transparency of doctoral programmes, there is a growing realisation of the need to develop tailored external QA procedures that address the specific characteristics of doctoral education.

In this context, several OECD countries are in the process of reforming national frameworks for doctoral education and are reconsidering approaches to its quality assurance. These reforms are raising debate about:

- 1) **the extent to which national authorities define uniform standards and criteria for doctoral education versus allowing institutions to shape them independently or through collective initiatives**
- 2) **the optimal approach to external quality assurance, since doctoral education provision operates at the intersection of research assessment and accreditation, and policymakers must integrate these two processes effectively**

Gathering comparative information to inform these policy debates is challenging, given the varied approaches to quality assurance of doctoral education across countries. To support reform efforts in member countries, the OECD Higher Education Policy team is comparing national standards and quality assurance frameworks for doctoral education and working to facilitate dialogue among policymakers involved in recent regulatory reforms or policy updates. To date, the following countries have been included in the team's initial comparative analysis:

- **Latvia:** where the OECD team is currently supporting policymakers, stakeholders and higher education providers to institutionalise a new framework for doctoral education and academic careers.
- **Lithuania:** where the team is currently developing a roadmap to reform evaluation and external quality assurance for higher education and vocational education and training (VET) ¹.
- **Estonia:** with which the team frequently interacts on higher education policy issues and given that Estonia is an active member of the Bureau of the OECD's Group of National Experts in Higher Education (GNE-HE)

¹ Latvia and Lithuania projects are funded by the Technical Support Instrument (TSI) of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support (DG-REFORM)

- **Hungary:** with which the team has recently worked on quality assurance and doctoral education issues
- **Finland:** with which the team has worked on various resourcing issues, and considering the recent policy developments within the country on doctoral education
- **Ireland:** with which the team has worked on resourcing and academic staff issues, and which has a more institution-led approach to quality assurance of doctoral education
- **Portugal:** with which the OECD has worked on various policy issues in recent years and which is also in the process of reforming its academic career framework
- **Slovak Republic:** where reforms to academic careers and an update of quality assurance of doctoral education are currently under initial consideration
- **Poland:** which has recently implemented a comprehensive national reform to doctoral education

The OECD team is organising an **informal discussion for policymakers** from these countries on external quality assurance of doctoral education, focusing particularly on the two questions mentioned above. The discussion will provide a space for policymakers to share experiences and challenges informally, and without the administrative burden of organising and preparing for a formal event. The discussion will provide the OECD team with valuable input, helping to shape and tailor its analysis on this topic to better support its member countries.

The OECD team will circulate a **short paper in advance** of the discussion, providing an overview of the approach to quality assurance of doctoral education in each of the countries mentioned above. We will also animate the discussion between the different colleagues during the session. Participants from the invited countries are welcome to join and listen to and/or contribute to the discussion.

We look forward to speaking with you!