

Key points for the implementation of a fast-track doctorate at the University of Oldenburg

The fast-track option is intended to give outstanding, highly motivated students the opportunity to prepare for their doctoral project at an early stage and to shorten their study time in the Master's and/or doctoral phase with the aim of completing their doctorate more quickly. This option is also expected to enhance the attractiveness of Oldenburg as a location and to make Oldenburg more accessible to external, especially international, students. The quality of academic education must, of course, also be assured in the fast-track procedure. Specific fast-track options ensure excellent disciplinary and interdisciplinary support for doctoral research and provide doctoral candidates with qualification options for both academic and non-academic careers. In some disciplines, integration into structured doctoral programmes is another way of ensuring the quality of doctoral procedures.

It should, in principle, be possible at the University of Oldenburg to establish fast-track options in various forms – whether as a regulation within the framework of specific Master's regulations, as an element of doctoral regulations or as separate regulations for participation in a fast-track programme. The choice of an appropriate legal framework depends, among other things, on whether the acceleration or shortening is applied to fast-track students and doctoral candidates in the Master's or in the doctoral phase. All regulations should comply with the following key points:

➤ **The option of a fast-track doctorate should *only be offered with an integrated Master's degree programme.***

The fast-track doctorate should *only be offered with an integrated Master's degree programme* (cf. HRK (German Rectors' Conference) recommendations¹). This ensures that the academic and methodological competences required to successfully complete a doctorate are acquired during the study. It also ensures that all students seeking a fast-track doctorate receive at least one qualifying Master's degree, even if they abandon the doctoral project. Finally, the integrated Master's degree programme guarantees the possibility of pursuing a non-academic career in a national context.

➤ **A *Master's thesis worth 30 credit points is a compulsory part of the Master's programme.***

A Master's thesis should also be written in the case of the establishment of intensive courses and early provisional admission to doctoral studies. A performance equivalent to this thesis can be recognised on request, in which case the different requirements of the subjects must be taken into account.

➤ **Access to the fast-track doctorate is only granted to students who have shown outstanding academic achievement.**

¹Quality assurance in doctoral procedures (23/04/2012): HRK recommendation to universities entitled to award doctorates.

http://www.hrk.de/uploads/tx_szconvention/Empfehlung_Qualitaetssicherung_Promotion_23042012.pdf (Link accessed on 21.12.13) (in German).

Admission criteria for fast-track doctorates should be defined in the doctoral regulations or a separate regulation for fast-track promotion. At the very least, specific rules must be established concerning what final grade in the Bachelor's degree is to be considered an "outstanding" achievement.² If appropriate, further subject-specific criteria, language certificates, minimum attendance of modules for the Bachelor's degree, minimum grade for the Bachelor's thesis, etc. may also be defined.

➤ **Admission to the fast-track doctorate is initially granted provisionally after enrolment in a Master's programme.**

Students aspiring to a fast-track doctorate may not *apply for a doctoral project before* they have enrolled in a Master's programme. Admission to the doctorate is provisional, with the proviso that the student successfully completes the Master's programme and meets the other requirements defined in the relevant doctoral regulations by the end of the doctoral process.

➤ **Ultimately, admission to the doctorate is the responsibility of the doctorate committee.**

The faculties adopt workable regulations internally, governing the provisional and ultimately final admission of fast-track students/doctoral candidates to the doctorate. Each school's doctorate committee should therefore already be involved at the conception stage of the respective fast-track regulations and, if appropriate, also in the selection of fast-track candidates.

➤ **The subject range of the school must be adequately reflected in the selection procedures.**

The staffing of the committees/selection boards concerned with the selection of fast-track students/doctoral candidates must allow for the whole range of subjects to be represented by appropriate subject representatives. This can also be achieved by calling in appropriately qualified advisory members.

The following two models are tried and tested examples of the introduction of fast-track options that can be adapted to circumstances at the University of Oldenburg. They meet international standards as well as the aforementioned key points:

Model 1: Fast-track doctorate *with shortening/flexibilisation of the Master's stage*

²It is recommended to follow the European ECTS system insofar as possible and that an "excellent" degree should be considered equivalent to the relatively determined ECTS grade of A, which is awarded to the top 10% of students in a cohort. If no ECTS grades are available, a final grade of 1.3 or higher, or a comparable grade in other grading systems, would be required, for instance.

In this model, an intensive course of study (90 credit points) allows the Master's stage to be completed within a year³. As 90 credit points need to be acquired within a single year, the curriculum must be suitable for the intensive study programme. This option is therefore only feasible in areas with sufficient resources (particularly regarding available teaching capacity, infrastructure and financial resources), because the streamlined form of the curriculum means that students in the intensive courses can only attend modules from existing Master's courses to a limited extent, if at all. This model also requires the preparation of a Master's thesis (30 credit points). This format for Master's/PhD programmes is usually accompanied by a grants programme and involves a very strict selection procedure. It makes sense to link the intensive Master's programme to a structured doctoral programme.

Establishment/substantial modification of Master's degree programmes and intensive courses

For the establishment or substantial modification of the Master's degree programmes, the legal bases (in particular, NHG (Lower Saxony Higher Education Act), §6, §37 (1) clause 3, point 5), constitute the relevant ordinances (e.g. capacity requirement decree), the deadlines set by the Ministry of Economics and Culture (MWK) for coordination with state higher education planning and the internal and external framework requirements for the establishment and accreditation of degree programmes. Furthermore, the corresponding amendments/revisions must be made to the examination regulations as well as to the admissions regulations.

Model 2: Fast-track doctorate *with shortening of doctoral phase*

Via this model, the total duration of the Master's and doctoral studies is shortened by early preparation for the doctoral project during the Master's degree programme. Provisional admission to the doctorate is granted during the Master's programme, at the earliest when enrolling for it. This gives future doctoral students the opportunity to apply themselves intensively to their doctoral topic during their Master's programme and to delve more deeply into the methodology of academic work. Depending on the different requirements of the individual subjects, for example, the Master's phase can be used to write an exposé, the Master's thesis can be directly related to the doctoral topic, or a module can be attended in preparation for the doctorate. The Master's curriculum need not necessarily be restructured.⁴ If necessary, special modules and courses can be integrated into the existing curriculum to prepare for the doctorate.

³For example: LMU Munich (Neurosciences), Frankfurt University (Social Sciences; here, only 60 credit points in the preparatory year), University of Göttingen International Master's/PhD programme (Göttingen Graduate School for Neurosciences, Biophysics, and Molecular Biosciences)

⁴For example: Computational Engineering Science at the Graduate School: Aachen Institute for Advanced Study in Computational Engineering Science, Humboldt initiative for structured doctoral programmes, Leuphana Graduate School, HPI Potsdam