

The art of selecting PhD candidates

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Hans Sonneveld

Netherlands Centre for Graduate and Research Schools
Expertisecentrum Graduate Schools Universiteit Utrecht

Outline of the presentation

- Why is selecting the right candidate so important and difficult?
- We know which candidates we want to avoid.
- Doctoral qualities making the difference.
- Possible selection techniques.
- No good selection without a pool of candidates.
- A Dutch revolution: a new Master-PhD nexus.
- Preparing a PhD Proposal in the new structure.
- The proposal course at Master level – a report from a practitioner.
- Tools for selecting Research Master & PhD candidates.

Why is selecting the right candidate so important? And so difficult?

- Financial consequences of wrong admission decisions are enormous
- Not admitting is much easier than finishing our supervision in case of candidate's stagnation
- Premature termination of the project is a miserable thing

We have a good feeling for essential qualities and warning signs

Three sources

1. In the selection kitchen of a Research Master program
2. Warning signs, as perceived by supervisors from Zagreb, Zürich, Utrecht
 - not having a thesis
 - handing in written work that is just in a stage of a first draft
 - not following advices
 - losing contact with the supervisor
 - lack of independence
 - complicated working context
3. Lovitts: : Who makes it, who doesn't, and Why (2008)

What to expect from PhD candidates. Cf Delamont

Expectations	Ways to test
Skills & Abilities	Testing during interview. Specific references
Motivation (not just drifting into PhD)	CV not showing false starts
Ability to work independently	Exploring biography of former research / project
Creativity & ideas of their own	Inviting to display ideas about new project
Writing ability	Studying examples
Critical of previous work	Testing ability to provide critical commentary on key work in discipline
Good degree results in undergraduate studies	

The ability to appropriate a prefab project

Expectation	Ways to test
<p>The ability to bend a pre-fab rough detailed project outline to a project really owned by the candidate. In other words: the ability of appropriation.</p>	<p>Writing assignment: formulating comments on a project outline</p>

Possible selection techniques

- Carry out an experiment
- Asking referees
- Studying CV
- Scrutinize CV for evidence of working autonomously (dissertation project)
- Inviting applicants to display their ideas
- Asking candidate about experiences with writing
- Asking referees about student's writing abilities
- Studying examples of written work
- Asking for a research proposal
- Exploring with candidate if they can provide commentary on key work

No good selection without a pool of candidates

- Dale Bolton:

Not working on the reservoir of talents will lead to a deterioration of the selection process

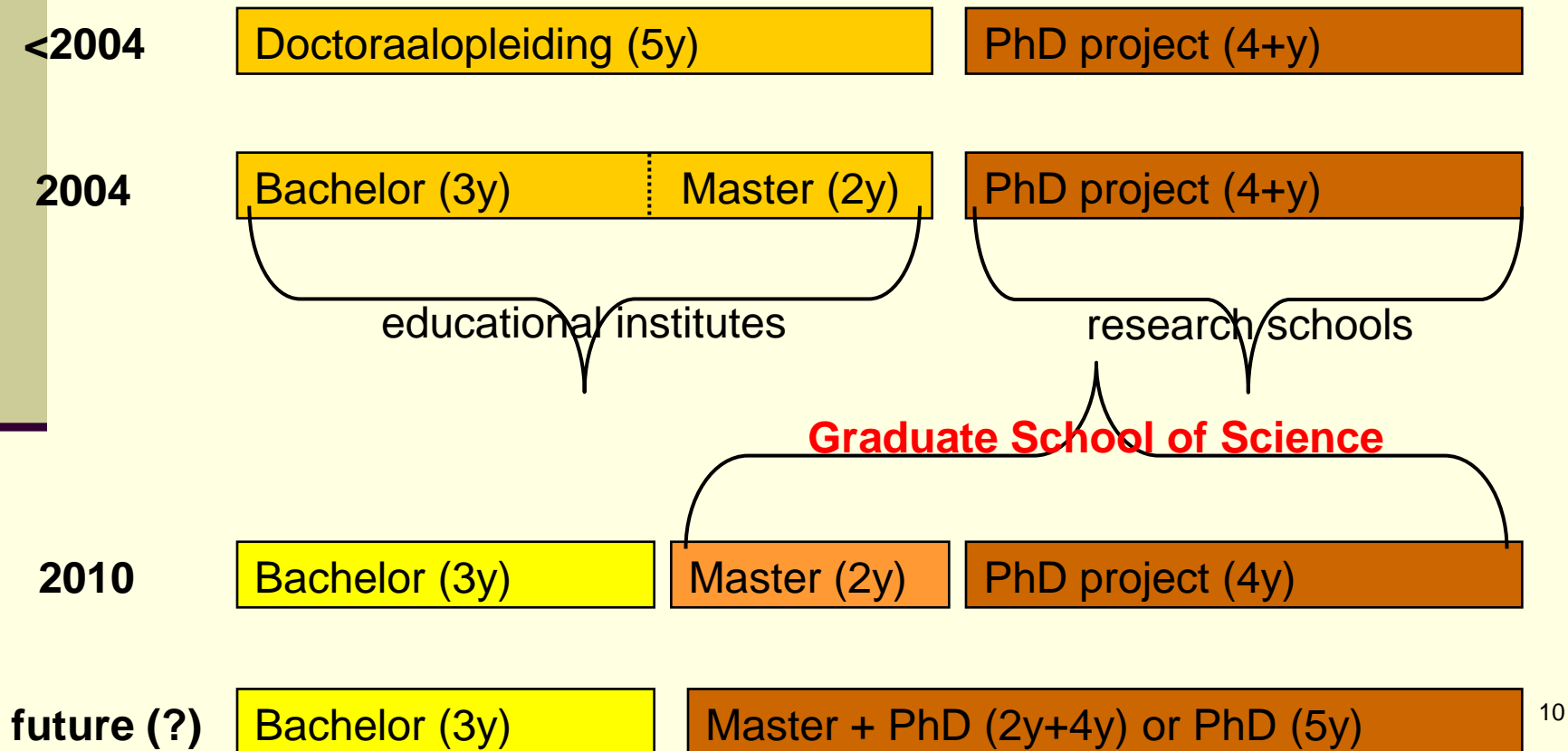
A Dutch Silent Revolution and its consequences for selection practices

- Hallmark: the sliding of the first phase of the Ph.D. trajectory into the final stage of the Master program
- Cornerstones of the new policy
 1. Creating talent pool and scouting
 2. The Bachelor / Master / PhD nexus
 3. Expansion and segmentation of the selection process
 4. Collectivization of selection responsibilities
 5. Testing (assumed qualities, potential working relationships).

The Graduate School of Science

(From: Prof. Franjo Weissing, presentation on behalf of grant application NWO, June 2011)

Research-oriented science education in NL



Selection criteria for admission to Research Master program or Research Track

- Grades: 7.5 and higher or Top 20% of students (003) or Top 5-10% (049)
- Satisfactory GRE score and/or GMAT score 005
- CV
- Motivation.
- Potential to become a PhD candidate
- Background in specific field, 003.
- Prior training in clinical and research skills.
- Prior training in methods and statistics 021
- Scientific originality
- Proficiency in English
- Creativity and perseverance 005
- Ability to reason logically and express their thoughts on paper in a clear, concise and logical way 038

The characteristics of the new PhD culture

- Scouting of talent starts in Bachelor program
- Selective admission to Master program
- Freedom of topic choice on the candidate's side
- Avoiding a tunnel vision on research possibilities: rotations
- The heart of the program: developing a research proposal

Two ways to support the preparation of a research proposal at Master level

- Delegation of support to individual supervisors
- Collectivized support of proposal development in combination with individual supervisors

PhD Proposal Course – report from a practitioner

- Information about the technicalities
- The real issue: the topic exploration
- Two stages: topic exploration & proposal composition
- Exploration:
 - Literature search
 - Critical appraisal
 - Literature review
 - Interviewing experts
- Product: A Well Reasoned Topic Choice

Students' experiences

- experience a different style of studying
- don't start with one well focused topical interest
- pondering leads to feelings of uneasiness and uncertainty, sometimes to experiencing a crisis

What we know about the students' qualities at the end of the Research Master programme

- **The Certain Winners 5x**
- **The Conditional Candidates 6x**
 - *Passive Talents*
 - *The Talented Topic Hopper*
 - *Talented Rule Breaker*
 - *The Fragile Talent*
- **The (provisional?) non-candidates 7x**
 - *Feeble Minimalists*
 - *Talented Disappointers 5x!*

Dominant features in Dutch selection practice (see Handout)

■ Material

- Grades
- CV
- Motivation letter (admission to Master)
- Reference letters
- Research proposal (admission to PhD)

■ Procedural techniques

- Weighing grades; NB: learning curve
- Studying written material
- Studying proposal qualities
- Interviewing

■ Collectivized procedures

Annexes

Why is selecting candidates so difficult?

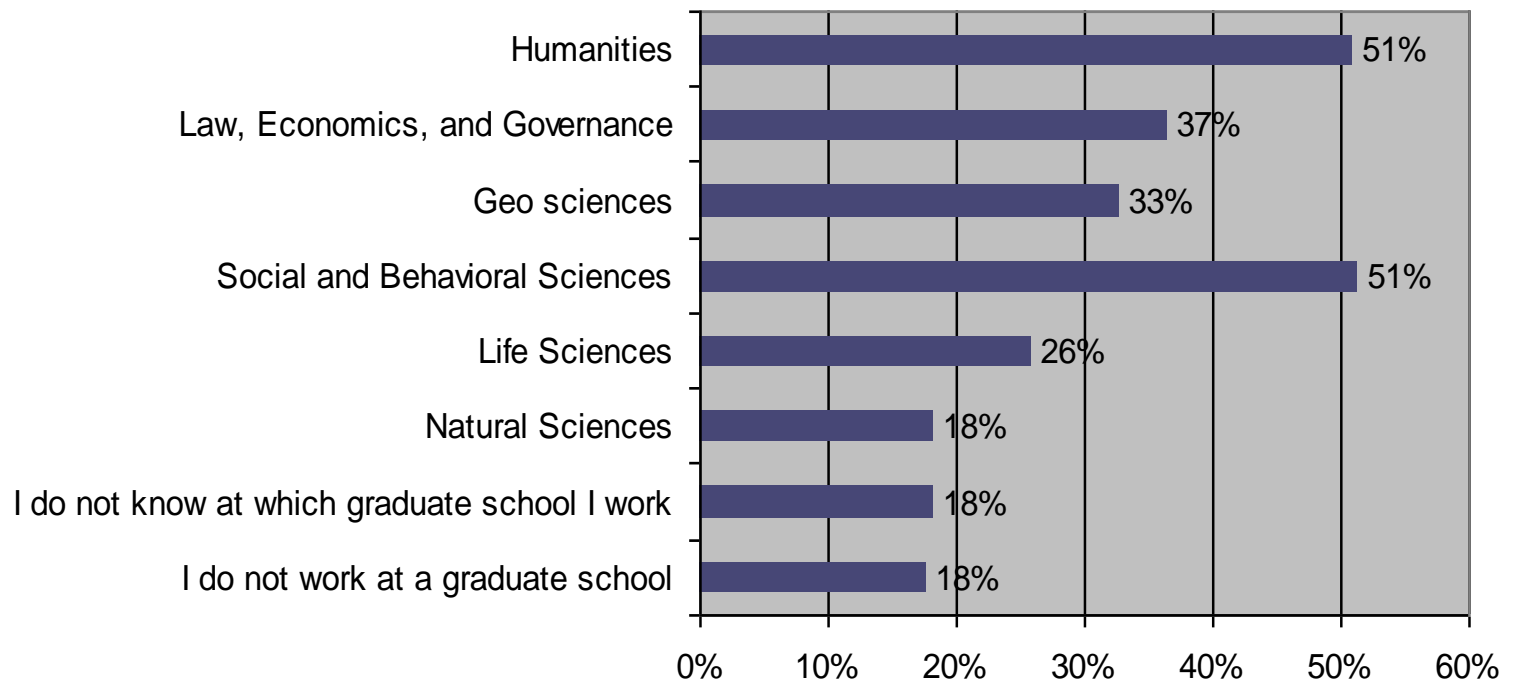
- reasons of macro-context
- reasons of inflexible project requirements
- reasons of professional autonomy
- reasons of micro-politics and patronage
- reasons of missing breeding grounds, the missing pool of talents
- reasons of problems of predicting success or failure
- reasons of insufficient selection techniques

The candidate's voice

	My supervisor designed the entire project	My supervisor designed most of the project, my contributions were minimal	My supervisor and I co-designed the project	I designed most of the project, my supervisor's contributions were minimal	I designed the entire project
Humanities	18%	11%	16%	25%	24%
Law, Economics, and Governance	27%	11%	19%	23%	20%
Geo Sciences	49%	16%	19%	10%	6%
Social and Behavioral Sciences	32%	14%	27%	16%	8%
Life Sciences	31%	31%	27%	8%	1%
Natural Sciences	47%	19%	19%	7%	3%
Total	34%	23%	24%	11%	6%

PhD candidates with Research Master background

From: Sonneveld/Hello/vdSchoot 2011



The selection for the PhD position in the new system

The selection procedures are dominated by:

- a) minimal bureaucratic steering at the micro level
- b) collectivization of the selection responsibility
- c) dominant role by highly ranked researchers
- d) minimal professionalization of the selection process
- e) minimal role for external experts in the selection process
- e) dominant types of information:
 - written information
 - oral information (interview)
 - grades
 - research proposal (vis à vis PhD)
 - reference letters
 - CV
 - [motivation letter (vis à vis Master)]