

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF DOCTORAL STUDIES IN THE FIELD OF LAW: ROMANIA, BELGIUM AND LUXEMBOURG

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Abstract

This study conducts a comparative analysis of doctoral education in the field of law across Romania, Belgium, and Luxembourg, exploring the structural, procedural, and institutional specificities that shape legal research training in these three EU Member States. Despite being part of the European Higher Education Area and adhering to the Bologna Process, the three countries display notable differences in the organization, funding, supervision, and evaluation of doctoral studies. The research adopts a qualitative, document-based methodology, focusing on national legislation, university regulations, and comparative literature to identify similarities and divergences across systems.

The study examines critical areas including admission procedures, programme duration, supervisory frameworks, publication requirements, and thesis defence protocols. It underscores Romania's more prescriptive regulatory approach, Belgium's emphasis on academic autonomy and structured evaluation, and Luxembourg's flexibility and strong international orientation. Particular attention is paid to the specific challenges facing Romanian institutions in aligning with Western European standards, especially regarding funding, research infrastructure, and academic visibility.

Based on the comparative analysis, the paper outlines concrete measures to enhance quality assurance, promote internationalization, and ensure the integration of interdisciplinary and transferable skills in legal doctoral education. This comparative analysis contributes to the refinement of doctoral education policies in the EU, striking a balance between harmonisation and national academic traditions.

Keywords: *doctoral education, Bologna Process, legal research, comparative analysis, academic standards.*

1. Introduction

As the highest level of university education, doctoral programmes play a fundamental role in advancing knowledge and developing academic and professional skills. Within the EU, the harmonization and standardization of higher education systems, including doctoral studies, has been driven by the Bologna Process, which established a common framework for the mobility and recognition of academic qualifications. Thus, doctoral studies assume a dual mission: the advancement of academic research and the training of an elite of specialists capable of addressing the societal-legal challenges of a Europe in continuous transformation.

This process has had a significant impact on the way doctoral programmes are structured and organized, promoting transparency, international collaboration and improving the quality of education and research. Doctoral studies provide students with opportunities not only to contribute to the development of knowledge through original research, but also to develop transferable skills essential for their future careers, whether in academia or other professional fields.

A comparative study of the registration, development, and defense of doctoral theses in Romania, Belgium, and Luxembourg is therefore essential. Although Romania, Belgium, and Luxembourg are EU Member States and adhere to the general principles of the Bologna Process, they have significant differences in terms of the structure and organization of doctoral programs. For example, Belgium and Luxembourg benefit from advanced academic infrastructure, supported by substantial investment in research, while Romania continues to face challenges related to funding and modernization. Thus, comparative analysis can highlight both the structural parallels and the country-specific reforms or limitations that shape doctoral education.

The main objective of this study is to analyse comparatively the doctoral studies in the field of law in Romania, Belgium and Luxembourg. The study explores the legal and institutional framework governing doctoral studies, admission procedures, program conduct and monitoring of doctoral progress, as well as the organization of the doctoral thesis defense process. By identifying the similarities and differences between the three

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countries, the paper presents recommendations for improving doctoral studies in accordance with European standards. It also focuses on good practices that can be transferred between systems, as well as ways to encourage international and interdisciplinary collaboration.

The methodology employed involves qualitative analysis of legal documents, institutional regulations and relevant literature. The main sources include legislative documents such as the Romanian National Education Law (2011, updated 2018), the regulations of the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) and the University of Luxembourg (UL), as well as international reports on doctoral education. The analysis of the documents is complemented by a comparison of the structural and procedural aspects of doctoral studies, using a conceptual framework based on the principles of the Bologna Process. This approach allows not only to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each system, but also to formulate well-founded conclusions and recommendations.

This study offers a structured comparative analysis of how doctoral studies are organized in Romania, Belgium, and Luxembourg, with a focus on institutional frameworks, supervisory structures, and academic practices.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. The Bologna Process and doctoral studies in the EU

The Bologna Process has had a significant impact on the organization and structuring of doctoral programs in the EU, aiming at harmonizing higher education systems and facilitating academic mobility. This process established the framework for the development of a coherent and compatible European Higher Education Area, in which doctoral studies were recognized as the third cycle of university studies, representing the highest level of academic education. In the context of the implementation of the Bologna Process, doctoral programmes in the European Union have adopted a structure based on transferable credits, being typically valued at 180 ECTS credits, of which 60 credits are dedicated to doctoral training through the accumulation of research experience and the development of scientific and transversal skills¹. This standardization has allowed for better compatibility between programmes offered by different institutions and member countries.

The standard duration of doctoral studies in the European Union varies between 3 and 4 years for full-time programs, with country-specific particularities. Thus, in Belgium, the program is structured for a minimum of three years², in Luxembourg the duration is between 36 and 48 months³, and in Romania the standard duration is four years⁴. This flexibility in setting the duration allows adaptation to the specifics of the research field and national requirements, while maintaining a reasonable time frame for the completion of doctoral research.

An essential element of the European doctoral system, implemented in the wake of the Bologna Process, is the supervision and monitoring of academic progress. All three countries analyzed have adopted a dual supervision system, which includes a senior doctoral supervisor and a committee or steering committee that monitors the progress of the doctoral student⁵. This approach ensures comprehensive guidance and quality control throughout the entire doctoral process.

The Bologna Process also introduced common quality standards for doctoral programmes, including periodic progress assessments, research reports and public defense of the thesis before a committee of specialists. These standards have helped to create a more uniform framework for doctoral studies in the EU, facilitating the mutual recognition of qualifications, the mobility of doctoral students and researchers, as well as international research collaborations⁶.

An important aspect of the harmonization of European doctoral systems is the development of co-supervised doctoral programs, which allow collaboration between institutions from different member countries and offer doctoral students the opportunity to benefit from the expertise and resources of several research

¹ ULB, *PhD Regulations*, 2021, p. 7, available at: <https://www.ulb.be/en/starting-a-phd-programme/regulation-on-doctoral-studies>.

² *Idem*, p. 1.

³ UL, *Third-cycle (PhD) programs*, 2022, p. 1, available at: <https://www.uni.lu/research-en/doctoral-education/>.

⁴ The Higher Education Law no. 199/2023, available at: <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliuDocument/271898>.

⁵ ULB, *PhD Regulations*, 2021, p. 3, available at: <https://www.ulb.be/en/starting-a-phd-programme/regulation-on-doctoral-studies>.

⁶ European Commission, *The Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area*, 2021, available at: <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems>.

centres⁷. This international dimension of doctoral studies contributes significantly to the achievement of the major objective of the Bologna Process: the creation of a globally competitive and attractive European Higher Education Area.

The impact of the Bologna Process on doctoral studies is thus reflected not only in the standardization of quality requirements and in the facilitation of international cooperation, but also in maintaining a balance between harmonization at European level and respect for institutional specificity and autonomy in the organization of doctoral programs. This approach allows programmes to be adapted to specific national and institutional contexts, while maintaining a common framework that facilitates mobility and collaboration at EU level.

2.2. Specifics of doctoral studies in the field of law

Doctoral studies in the field of law have specific particularities that differentiate them from other academic fields, given the distinct nature of legal research and the methodology specific to this field. In all three countries analyzed, doctoral programs in law are organized within specialized law schools, with a long tradition in legal research.

In the case of Romania, the Higher Education Law⁸ establishes that doctoral studies in the field of law are carried out within specialized doctoral schools, which promote interdisciplinary between the subfields of Private Law, Public Law and Criminal Law. This approach is reflected in institutional regulations, as is the case of „Nicolae Titulescu” University, where the doctoral school has the rank of a Department of the Faculty of Law⁹.

In Belgium, law faculties enjoy significant autonomy in the organization of doctoral studies, in accordance with the constitutionally guaranteed principle of academic freedom. According to the ULB Regulations¹⁰, doctoral studies in law are supervised by specialized doctoral committees, which ensure both the scientific quality of the research and the observance of the methodological standards specific to the legal field.

In the case of the University of Luxembourg, the doctoral programme in law is integrated into the Doctoral School of Law (DSL), which is part of the university's specialized structure for advanced studies¹¹. This organization allows an approach focused on the specifics of legal research, combined with the development of the transversal skills necessary in the academic and professional career.

An important particularity of doctoral studies in law, highlighted in the analyzed documents, is the requirement for originality and scientific contribution. In the case of the Faculty of Law and Criminology in Belgium, it is specified that a thesis in legal sciences cannot exceed 450 pages, unless the guidance committee considers that the nature of the subject requires it¹². This limitation is intended to ensure that research is focused on the essential and innovative aspects of the topic addressed.

The research methodology in the legal field also has specific peculiarities. According to the institutional regulations, doctoral students must demonstrate the ability to carry out an in-depth legal analysis, to interpret legislation and jurisprudence, as well as to contribute to the development of legal doctrine. In this regard, the discipline „Deontology and methodology of scientific research activity in the legal field” is mandatory in the advanced training program¹³.

A distinct aspect of doctoral studies in law is the requirements for the publication of research results. In Romania, for example, doctoral students must publish at least 4 authored articles or 8 co-authored articles in specialized journals indexed in international databases or in collective volumes published by prestigious publishing houses in the legal field¹⁴.

The evaluation and monitoring of progress in legal doctoral research involves periodic presentations of the intermediate results in front of the guidance committee, with emphasis on the methodological aspects specific to legal research and on the ability of the doctoral student to contribute to the development of the science of

⁷ UL, Third-cycle (PhD) programs, 2022, p. 1, available at: <https://www.uni.lu/research-en/doctoral-education/>.

⁸ The Higher Education Law no. 199/2023, available at: <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliuDocument/271898>.

⁹ „Nicolae Titulescu” University of Bucharest, *Regulations of the Doctoral School*, 2024, p. 1, available at: https://www.univnt.ro/wp-content/uploads/asigurarea_calitatii/regulamente/RG-31_Regulament_IOSUD.pdf.

¹⁰ ULB, *PhD Regulations*, 2021, p. 1, available at: <https://www.ulb.be/en/starting-a-phd-programme/regulation-on-doctoral-studies>.

¹¹ UL, Third-cycle (PhD) programs, 2022, p. 1, available at: <https://www.uni.lu/research-en/doctoral-education/>.

¹² ULB, *PhD Regulations*, 2021, p. 2, available at: <https://www.ulb.be/en/starting-a-phd-programme/regulation-on-doctoral-studies>.

¹³ „Nicolae Titulescu” University of Bucharest, *Regulations of the Doctoral School*, 2024, loc. cit., p. 16.

¹⁴ *Idem*, p. 10.

law. This process ensures not only the scientific quality of research, but also the training of future researchers in the legal field according to international academic standards.

3. Comparative analysis by country (Romania, Belgium, Luxembourg)

3.1. Legal and institutional framework

A. Romania

In Romania, the legal framework for doctoral studies in the field of law is mainly regulated by the Law on Higher Education¹⁵, which establishes the fundamental principles for the organization and functioning of doctoral studies. This is complemented by the specific regulations issued by the Ministry of Education and the institutional regulations of the universities. Doctoral studies are carried out within IOSUD (Organizing Institution for Doctoral University Studies), which is responsible for organizing doctoral programs. Within each IOSUD there are doctoral schools, which have the rank of a department and benefit from autonomy in the organization and conduct of the doctoral study program¹⁶. The institutional structure includes the Doctoral School Council (DSC), which has the role of ensuring the operational management of the doctoral school and developing specific regulations.

B. Belgium

In Belgium, the organization of doctoral studies reflects the federal structure of the state, with linguistic communities having extensive competences in the field of education. According to the documents analysed, the Communities are responsible for education, except for three competences that remained at the federal level: determining the beginning and end of compulsory education, minimum requirements for the issuance of diplomas, and regulating the retirement of employees in the education system. ULB has a complex system of regulating doctoral studies, based on specific regulations approved by the Academic Council. The ULB Doctoral Regulation¹⁷ establishes the conditions and procedure for obtaining the title of doctor, accompanied by the Doctoral Charter, which defines the relationship between the doctoral student, the supervisor and the president of the supervisory committee.

C. Luxembourg

In Luxembourg, the legal framework for doctoral studies is established by national legislation and is implemented by specific university regulations. UL organises doctoral studies in law through the Doctoral School of Law (DSL), which is part of the university's wider system of doctoral schools.

Doctoral programs are designed as the first step toward a research career in industry or academia, allowing students to acquire advanced academic knowledge and skills. The institutional framework includes specific structures for the supervision of doctoral students, such as steering committees and evaluation commissions¹⁸. A distinctive element of the Luxembourg system is the emphasis on internationalisation and collaborations with other institutions. The University offers the possibility of joint supervision of theses (co-supervision) through specific agreements between institutions, thus contributing to the creation of a more diverse and richer research environment¹⁹.

In all three countries, higher education institutions that organize doctoral studies must first obtain authorization or accreditation according to the legislation in force. This process ensures that high quality standards are maintained in doctoral education and research. Also, in all three systems, emphasis is placed on

¹⁵ The Higher Education Law no. 199/2023, available at: <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliuDocument/271898>.

¹⁶ „Nicolae Titulescu” University of Bucharest, *Regulations of the Doctoral School*, 2024, p. 1-2, available at: https://www.univnt.ro/wp-content/uploads/asigurarea_calitatii/regulamente/RG-31_Regulament_IOSUD.pdf.

¹⁷ ULB, *PhD Regulations*, 2021, p. 1-2, available at: <https://www.ulb.be/en/starting-a-phd-programme/regulation-on-doctoral-studies>.

¹⁸ UL, *Third-cycle (PhD) programs*, 2022, p. 1, available at: <https://www.uni.lu/research-en/doctoral-education/>.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

institutional autonomy in the organization of doctoral studies, within the limits of the national and European legal framework, as well as on quality assurance through specific evaluation and monitoring mechanisms.

3.2. Application process

A. Romania

The eligibility criteria for admission to doctoral studies in Romania are clearly defined by the Higher Education Law²⁰. Candidates must be graduates with a master's degree or its equivalent, and the total number of transferable study credits accumulated through bachelor's and master's studies must be at least 300. In order to register for the admission competition, the necessary documents include: the registration form, bachelor's and master's degree (or the promotion certificate for recent graduates), birth and marriage certificates (as the case may be), CV in Europass format, a scientific activity memorandum and the justification of the proposed research topic²¹. A specific element is the proof of payment of the registration fee. The admission procedure in Romania involves the selection of candidates for each vacant doctoral student position by a committee consisting of the doctoral supervisor and two specialized professors. The evaluation can be done through written and/or oral tests, interview or file-based evaluation.

B. Belgium

In the Belgian system, the eligibility criteria stipulate that applicants must hold a master's degree or equivalent, obtained in a university of the French Community of Belgium or a recognized equivalent degree. A specific aspect for the legal field is that applicants must demonstrate outstanding academic results and research capacity. The necessary documentation includes: the application for admission, diplomas and transcripts, a research project highlighting originality in relation to the current state of knowledge, as well as the agreement of a doctoral supervisor who agrees to supervise the research²². For the Faculty of Law and Criminology, it is also necessary to submit a substantial list of publications in the case of theses in the form of essays. The admission procedure in Belgium involves evaluation by the Faculty Doctoral Committee, which analyses both the candidate's eligibility and the quality of the proposed research project. A specific element is the need to obtain the agreement of the director of the research unit that will host the doctoral student²³.

C. Luxembourg

UL establishes as the main eligibility criterion the possession of a master's degree or equivalent. Depending on the choice of funding method (self-funding, third-party funding, research grant or funding from the university), candidates either apply for a doctoral offer at the university or seek supervision for their chosen topic. The documents required for application include the master's degree, the candidate's CV, a research project proposal, and evidence of aptitude for individual work and scientific research. The supervisor verifies the candidate's eligibility and assesses the admissibility of the proposed doctoral thesis. The admission procedure in Luxembourg is decided by the rector on the proposal of the thesis supervisor and after admission to the doctoral programme by the programme coordinator. A specific aspect is that once the admission process is completed, students can register throughout the year²⁴.

In all three countries, the application and admission process emphasize the evaluation of the candidate's research potential and the quality of the doctoral project proposal. Also, all systems require the existence of a prior agreement from a PhD supervisor to supervise the research. The main differences arise in terms of the specific documentation required and the structure of the evaluation process, which are adapted to the specifics of the national higher education system and to the local academic traditions.

²⁰ Law no. 199/2023, *precited*.

²¹ „Nicolae Titulescu” University of Bucharest, *Regulations of the Doctoral School*, 2024, p. 11-12, available at: https://www.univnt.ro/wp-content/uploads/asigurarea_calitatii/regulamente/RG-31_Regulament_IOSUD.pdf.

²² ULB, *PhD Regulations*, 2021, p. 5, available at: <https://www.ulb.be/en/starting-a-phd-programme/regulation-on-doctoral-studies>.

²³ *Idem*, p. 5-6.

²⁴ UL, *Third-cycle (PhD) programs*, 2022, p. 2, available at: <https://www.uni.lu/research-en/doctoral-education/>.

3.3. Conduct of studies

A. Romania

In the Romanian system, the standard duration of the doctoral program is 4 years, according to the Higher Education Law²⁵. In special situations, the duration can be extended by 1-2 years, with the approval of the university senate, but only after fulfilling all the obligations of the individual scientific research program²⁶. In justified situations, by decision of the DSC and with the approval of the University Senate, the duration of doctoral studies may be reduced to three years, provided that all the requirements for completing the doctoral program are met and that the thesis is validated by the supervisory committee²⁷. The doctoral study program in Romania includes two main components: the training program based on advanced university studies and the individual scientific research program. The advanced training program involves the choice of 4 study disciplines, of which the mandatory one is „Deontology and methodology of scientific research activity in the legal field”, for which 6 credits are awarded, and three other specialized disciplines, each with 8 credits²⁸. Doctoral students must take exams in the four disciplines of the advanced training program and prepare 4 scientific reports within the research program. It is mandatory to publish at least 4 author's articles or 8 co-authored articles in journals indexed in international databases or collective volumes at prestigious publishers²⁹.

B. Belgium

In Belgium, doctoral studies are structured over a minimum of three years. For full-time academic assistants, the duration can reach up to 6 years. The doctoral program requires the accumulation of 180 ECTS credits, of which 60 are dedicated to doctoral training³⁰. The Belgian doctoral programme combines research activity with specific doctoral training. The doctoral school organizes courses and seminars for the development of scientific and transversal skills. For the Faculty of Law and Criminology, there are specific requirements regarding the mid-term assessment, which includes a written dissertation and its defense on a topic related to the thesis topic. PhD students must participate in doctoral training activities, regularly present the progress of the research to the supervisory committee and demonstrate the capacity for independent research. Validation of research and training activities by the supervisory committee is also required³¹.

C. Luxembourg

Doctoral studies at the UL last between 36 and 48 months. The program includes both the writing of a research paper in the field chosen by the candidate, as well as the participation in courses for the acquisition of methodological and transversal skills. The Luxembourg doctoral program is organized within the DSL, which offers a curricular structure focused on the development of advanced research skills. This includes methodological courses, specialized seminars and research activities under the guidance of a coordinating professor. PhD students must meet at least once a year with the steering committee for the evaluation of research progress. They must participate in the activities of the doctoral school and demonstrate the ability to conduct independent research. Particular emphasis is placed on participation in international conferences and the publication of research results³².

In all three systems, a similar structure is observed that blends advanced theoretical training with independent scientific research. The main differences arise in the standard duration of the program and in the specific requirements regarding publications and academic activities. All systems also focus on regular monitoring of progress and the development of transversal skills necessary in academic and research careers.

²⁵ The Higher Education Law no. 199/2023, *precited*.

²⁶ „Nicolae Titulescu” University of Bucharest, *Regulations of the Doctoral School*, 2024, p. 1, available at: https://www.univnt.ro/wp-content/uploads/asigurarea_calitatii/regulamente/RG-31_Regulament_IOSUD.pdf.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ *Idem*, p. 16.

²⁹ *Idem*, p. 10.

³⁰ ULB, *PhD Regulations*, 2021, p. 1, 7, available at: <https://www.ulb.be/en/starting-a-phd-programme/regulation-on-doctoral-studies>.

³¹ *Idem*, p. 7-8.

³² UL, *Third-cycle (PhD) programs*, 2022, p. 1-3, available at: <https://www.uni.lu/research-en/doctoral-education/>.

3.4. Participation and monitoring

A. Romania

In the Romanian system, progress monitoring is done through annual research reports. In the first year, the doctoral student presents the scientific research project, and in the second and fourth years he presents an annual report on the progress made. These reports are evaluated with the „Admitted”/„Rejected” grades, and failure to obtain the „Admitted” rating after the report has been redone entails expulsion³³. As mandatory activities, the doctoral students must participate in the courses and seminars organized within the advanced university studies program, take exams in the four disciplines of the program and prepare the four scientific reports provided. Annual participation with at least one scientific communication at the CKS International Conference organized by the University is also mandatory³⁴. The doctoral supervisor has the obligation to ensure the scientific, professional and deontological guidance of the doctoral student, to propose research topics and to objectively monitor and evaluate his/her activity. Regular meetings are mandatory and the coordinator must support the mobility of doctoral students and avoid conflicts of interest³⁵.

B. Belgium

At ULB, doctoral students undergo an interim evaluation by the supervisory committee to assess whether the thesis can be completed according to the program. This assessment takes place in the first or second year and includes a written dissertation and its defense. The Committee gives the qualification „successful” or „unsuccessful”.³⁶ PhD students must participate in the activities organized by the doctoral school, periodically present the progress of the research and take a mid-term evaluation. For the legal field, it is also necessary to participate in specific seminars and to present the results of the research at academic conferences. The relationship between the doctoral student and the coordinator is regulated by the Doctoral Charter. The coordinator must provide regular guidance, provide constructive feedback and support the academic development of the PhD student. In the event of a conflict, there are specific mediation procedures³⁷.

C. Luxembourg

UL requires annual meetings of the doctoral student with the steering committee for the evaluation of research progress. The members of the committee must hold the title of doctor and meet with the candidate at least once a year to evaluate the progress of the research. PhD students must participate in the courses offered by the doctoral school, get involved in research activities and periodically present the results of their work. Participation in international conferences and publication of research results is encouraged. The coordinator is a professor-researcher qualified to lead research. The relationship with the doctoral student is one of continuous guidance, with regular meetings to discuss progress and focus on research. The University emphasizes the development of a constructive professional relationship between the coordinator and the doctoral student³⁸.

In all three systems, a similar monitoring structure is observed, based on regular reporting and mid-term evaluations. Differences arise in the frequency and format of these assessments, as well as in the specific requirements for mandatory activities. An important common element is the existence of clear mediation mechanisms in case of conflicts between the doctoral student and the coordinator, as well as procedures for changing the coordinator in justified situations.

³³ „Nicolae Titulescu” University of Bucharest, *Regulations of the Doctoral School*, 2024, p. 16-17, available at: https://www.univnt.ro/wp-content/uploads/asigurarea_calitatii/regulamente/RG-31_Regulament_IOSUD.pdf.

³⁴ *Idem*, p. 9-10.

³⁵ *Idem*, p. 6-7.

³⁶ ULB, *PhD Regulations*, 2021, p. 8, available at: <https://www.ulb.be/en/starting-a-phd-programme/regulation-on-doctoral-studies>.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ UL, *Third-cycle (PhD) programs*, 2022, p. 1-3, available at: <https://www.uni.lu/research-en/doctoral-education/>.

3.5. Thesis defense

A. Romania

According to the regulations, the doctoral student must submit the thesis in final form to the doctoral supervisor at least 6 months before the start of the public defense procedure. The doctoral school verifies the thesis through a computer program for detecting similarities, according to CNATDCU standards. The results of the analysis are made available to the doctoral student, the doctoral supervisor and the doctoral committee. For the official submission, the following are required: the doctoral thesis in printed and electronic format, the thesis abstract in Romanian and English, the affidavit regarding the originality, the doctoral student's CV, as well as the list of publications resulting from the research activity. It is also necessary to obtain the favorable opinion of the academic guidance and integrity committee. The defense of the thesis takes place in two stages: a preliminary defense in front of the supervisory committee and the public defense in front of the doctoral committee. The doctoral committee consists of at least 5 members, including the president, the doctoral supervisor and at least three official reviewers. After the defense, the committee deliberates and proposes the award of the doctoral degree or the rejection of the thesis³⁹.

B. Belgium

At ULB, when the doctoral student considers that the manuscript of the thesis is almost ready for submission, he informs the supervisor who has one month to give his consent. If the supervisor does not give his consent, the PhD student may request a second opinion from the supervisory committee. The thesis must respect the institutional format and be accompanied by a report on the originality of the research. For the Faculty of Law, there is a specific limitation to 450 pages, except in cases justified by the nature of the subject. The thesis must be uploaded to the institutional repository before the public defense. The defense is carried out in two stages: a private defense and a public defense. In the context of private defense, the jury may request changes to the thesis or authorize the public defense. The public defense includes the presentation of the paper and a Q&A session with the jury members and the public⁴⁰.

C. Luxembourg

At UL, the thesis is first evaluated by the thesis supervisor and the supervisory committee. PhD students must obtain approval for defense from the jury, which evaluates both the scientific content and the form of the thesis. The thesis must represent an original work in the chosen interdisciplinary discipline or field. It must be accompanied by an abstract, the candidate's CV and evidence of publications or conference presentations resulting from the doctoral research. The public defense takes place in front of a jury of at least five members, all holders of the title of doctor, including at least one professor or assistant professor of the university and at least two external members. The jury deliberates behind closed doors, and a report of the session is communicated to the rector and the candidate⁴¹.

In all three systems, the thesis defense process is rigorously regulated and includes multiple levels of verification and evaluation. The main differences arise in the specific structure of the process (e.g. the presence or absence of a preliminary private defence) and in the composition of the evaluation boards. An important common element is the emphasis placed on the originality of the research and its verification through anti-plagiarism systems and multiple evaluations.

³⁹ „Nicolae Titulescu” University of Bucharest, *Regulations of the Doctoral School*, 2024, p. 18-21, available at: https://www.univnt.ro/wp-content/uploads/asigurarea_calitatii/regulamente/RG-31_Regulament_IOSUD.pdf.

⁴⁰ ULB, *PhD Regulations*, 2021, p. 10-13, available at: <https://www.ulb.be/en/starting-a-phd-programme/regulation-on-doctoral-studies>.

⁴¹ UL, *Third-cycle (PhD) programs*, 2022, p. 3-4, available at: <https://www.uni.lu/research-en/doctoral-education/>.

4. Conclusions

4.1. Major similarities and differences

The comparative analysis of the doctoral systems in Romania, Belgium and Luxembourg in the field of law highlights a diverse framework of organization and functioning, influenced both by the common principles of the Bologna Process and by the specificity of national academic traditions. As for the major similarities, the institutional organization based on specialized doctoral schools stands out in the first place. All three systems have adopted administrative and management structures that aim to ensure quality and standardize academic processes. Another important common element is the dual supervision system, which provides for both a senior doctoral supervisor and a committee or steering committee, thus ensuring comprehensive monitoring of doctoral progress. A third point of convergence is represented by the mechanisms for periodic evaluation of doctoral progress. Although the specific modalities differ, all three systems provide for regular reporting and presentations before the guidance committees, considered essential for maintaining academic standards and ensuring the successful completion of the doctoral program.

As for the major differences, they manifest themselves primarily in the standard duration of the doctoral program. Thus, while Romania provides for a standard duration of four years, the Belgian system allows completion in a minimum of three years, and the Luxembourg system offers flexibility between 36 and 48 months. Requirements for scientific publications are another significant area of differentiation. The Romanian system is more prescriptive, with precise quantitative requirements, while the systems in Belgium and Luxembourg emphasize the qualitative aspects of publications and their impact on the academic community.

A notable difference also appears in the organization of the thesis defense process. While Romania and Belgium adopted a two-stage system (pre-support/private support followed by public support), Luxembourg opted for a single public support, but preceded by a rigorous preliminary assessment. The degree of internationalization and funding opportunities are also areas where there are significant differences. The systems in Luxembourg and Belgium demonstrate a stronger orientation towards internationalization and offer more options for funding and professional integration of PhD students, including through full-time research positions.

These similarities and differences reflect a continuous process of harmonization of European higher education, in which national particularities and specific academic traditions still retain their relevance. Moreover, the differences identified do not necessarily represent systemic deficiencies, but rather adaptations of doctoral programs to specific national contexts and the distinct needs of local academic communities.

4.2. Challenges and opportunities

As for the challenges, one of the most important is to ensure the quality of doctoral research in the context of the increase in the number of doctoral students. This challenge is highlighted especially in the Romanian system, where the ratio between the number of doctoral supervisors and the number of doctoral students is strictly regulated by national legislation. The situation is similar in Belgium and Luxembourg, where the emphasis is on maintaining a balance between the accessibility of doctoral programmes and maintaining high academic standards. Another significant challenge is the funding of doctoral research and securing necessary resources to carry out the programs. The systems in Belgium and Luxembourg have developed more diversified funding mechanisms, including partnerships with the private sector and substantial research grants. In Romania, this challenge is still present, the system being largely based on funding from the budget or on the fees paid by doctoral students. The internationalization of doctoral research is both a challenge and an opportunity. Although all three systems encourage international collaborations and mobility of doctoral students, there are significant differences in terms of available resources and existing collaboration networks. In this regard, the Université Libre de Bruxelles offers an interesting model through its co-tutelage programmes and extensive international partnerships.

As opportunities, digitalization and new technologies offer extensive possibilities for improving the doctoral process. The use of online platforms to monitor progress, access international databases and facilitate remote collaborations are important opportunities for all three systems. Another significant opportunity is represented by the development potential of interdisciplinary programs. Especially in the legal field, the interdisciplinary approach is becoming increasingly relevant for contemporary research. The Luxembourg

system sets a positive example in this direction by explicitly encouraging interdisciplinary research in doctoral schools. The development of partnerships with the professional environment and the private sector is another important opportunity. This is particularly important for doctoral research in the legal field, where the link with practice and the applicability of research results are essential. The Belgian system offers an interesting model in this direction, through the closer integration of doctoral research with legal practice.

For quality assurance, the analyzed systems offer opportunities for mutual learning and exchange of best practices. The evaluation and monitoring mechanisms implemented in each country can serve as models for the continuous improvement of doctoral programs, a very relevant aspect in the current European context, where quality assurance in higher education is a priority. The analyzed doctoral systems also face the challenge of continuous adaptation to the demands of the labour market and the changing academic environment. This involves the development of transversal skills in addition to those specific to legal research, which represents both a challenge and an opportunity for innovation in doctoral programs.

4.3. Good practices identified

Following the comparative analysis, a number of good practices can be identified that contribute to improving the quality of these programmes. These practices are relevant both for the admission process and for the conduct of studies and thesis defense.

A first valuable practice is the transparency and standardization of the admission process. In Belgium, the Université Libre de Bruxelles places the research project at the heart of the selection procedure, thus ensuring its quality and relevance to the legal field. This approach can be a useful model for other education systems. Also, the flexibility of admission to the UL, which allows enrolment according to the availability of topics and supervisors, provides an example of adaptability that could be replicated in other systems. Rigorous monitoring of doctoral progress is another defining element. In Romania, the mandatory annual reports ensure a continuous evaluation of the doctoral student's activity, offering the possibility to correct any deficiencies. Belgium, through detailed mid-term evaluations, which include written dissertations and private defenses, provides an additional mechanism for quality control and research improvement. The internationalisation of doctoral programmes is a particularly important practice, particularly highlighted in the Belgian and Luxembourg systems. They promote co-supervision and international collaborations, facilitating doctoral students' access to global research networks and thus increasing the visibility and quality of studies. In Romania, initiatives such as mandatory participation in international conferences, such as the CKS event organized by „Nicolae Titulescu” University, contribute to increasing the exposure of doctoral students to international academic standards.

Another good practice identified is to strengthen the relationship between the PhD student and the coordinator. Belgium and Luxembourg distinguish themselves through the use of a Doctoral Charter, which clearly sets out the rights and obligations of the parties involved, thus preventing possible conflicts and ensuring a proper professional relationship.

In terms of research originality, the systems analysed present different but complementary approaches that contribute to maintaining high academic standards and promoting scientific integrity. The Romanian system, for example, stands out for its rigorous implementation of anti-plagiarism checks. According to national legislation, each doctoral thesis must be verified with the help of specialized computer programs before public defense. This measure aims to identify possible similarities with other existing works and to ensure the originality of the research. The process includes the issuance of a detailed report of the analyses, which is made available to the doctoral student, the doctoral supervisor and the evaluation committee⁴². This practice not only protects academic integrity, but also contributes to strengthening public confidence in the quality and value of doctoral programs. In parallel, the Belgian system applies another practice designed to encourage a clear and concise presentation of research. At ULB, doctoral theses in the legal field are limited to a maximum of 450 pages, including annexes. This restriction aims to ensure that doctoral students focus their research on the essential and innovative aspects of the topic addressed. However, this rule is flexible, and in cases where the nature of the subject justifies exceeding this threshold, the steering committee may grant the necessary approval. This

⁴² National Education Law no. 1/2011, art. 162, available at: https://www.edu.ro/sites/default/files/legea-educatiei_actualizata%20august%202018.pdf.

measure promotes a structured and efficient approach to thesis writing, reducing the risk of documents being loaded with redundant or irrelevant information. The two practices, although different in applicability, share the common objective of ensuring the quality of doctoral research.

The integration of transversal skills into the curriculum is another important development direction. In Luxembourg, courses are organized that develop skills such as project management and academic writing, reflecting an approach oriented towards the complete training of the doctoral student. In Romania, the introduction of disciplines such as „Deontology and methodology of scientific research activity in the legal field” supports compliance with ethical and methodological standards („Nicolae Titulescu” University, 2024).⁴³

The participation of doctoral students in academic activities and the publication of research results constitute a common point of the analysed systems. Belgium and Luxembourg encourage publication in international journals and presentation of results at conferences, which contributes to the dissemination of knowledge and increased international visibility. Romania requires the publication of a minimum number of articles in indexed journals, thus providing a clear method of assessing the impact of research.

The implementation of these measures reflects the continuous efforts of higher education institutions to adapt to current requirements and prepare doctoral students for various careers, both in academia and in other sectors. However, the diversity of approaches and institutional structures raises questions about the degree of harmonisation needed between the different doctoral education systems in the EU. A key challenge emerges: how can institutional diversity and autonomy be aligned with the pursuit of coherence and quality in doctoral education across the EU? Resolving this challenge will help secure consistency, fairness, and excellence across doctoral education in the EU.

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⁴³ „Nicolae Titulescu” University of Bucharest, *Regulations of the Doctoral School*, 2024, p. 18-21, available at: https://www.univnt.ro/wp-content/uploads/asigurarea_calitatii/regulamente/RG-31_Regulament_IOSUD.pdf.