

Assessment: Experience and comments on organization and subject matter.

1) Introduction

The following text is made for Danish organizers of seminars, and is meant as an inspiration and suggestions for how to develop Danish PhD-seminars. The seminar in Leiden was well organized and executed, and there is much to learn from it.

2) Preparations

The texts consisted of roughly 200 pages, spread on four lectures (each between 1½ and 2 hours). They were distributed as PDF files and followed by a reading manual (which text to read to which lecture).¹ It was also required that one should acquire an exemplar of Thomas Kuhn “Scientific Revolutions”. To put it another way there was easy access to the material and it was easy to begin your preparations.

Apart from reading the material, one should also make four assignments. The purpose was to relate ones research to each topic of the lectures.

This altogether issued a very good opportunity to get the maximum outcome from participating in the seminar. Especially the carefully chosen texts and the precise assignments are exemplars to be followed. Often organizers behind seminars send out too many (or too long) texts, that are never used or even referred to in the lectures and discussions.

3) Execution

The seminar started with a short presentation of the purpose and program of the seminar followed by a presentation of each participant. The organizers issued a “survival kit/bag” for everyone, containing information about the seminar, the university, Leiden and an umbrella. It was a nice way of being welcomed to the seminar and the university. The presentation of each participant was made by the person sitting next to him/her after a

¹ Some of the texts are attached to this document.

brief interview. This very informal way of doing presentations insured that everyone had to say something within the first hour and the presentations were funny and interesting to listen to.

The program was divided into lectures and group work. Four lectures were held, by one speaker, this insured a good connection between the three different topics and it allowed time to understand many aspects of the speaker's research and results. Future organizers should consider this model.

The lectures had a length of half an hour to one hour and were followed by group work. The 16 participants were divided into four groups and were to discuss the theme of the lecture and relate to their own research, by giving examples from their own field of research. E.g.:

*“Assignment 4:
Give an example of the weighing and balancing of principles, interests or reasons in your research. How did you justify your decision that one principle or interest outweighs the other one?”*

Afterwards the group had to choose a representative to present the result of the discussion (which was the best example the group could come up with). The result was then discussed by all the participants and the speaker. This often took longer than expected, but the idea of holding the group responsible for their work insured serious and productive group discussions.

Future organizers/hosts of seminars should consider this model, and keep in mind the fine balance between group work and lectures, that is – we believe – the key to a successful academic discussion.

4) International seminars – did it work?

One could fear that it would be impossible to create good academic discussions among legal scientist from very different legal systems.² It proved to be surprisingly easy to have academic discussions, because the topics were universal themes for any legal scholar.³

Future themes do not necessary have to be of such philosophical nature but could for instance be Comparative Law in a specific field, e.g. “Access to justice – rules and principles of self representation”.

² Bear in mind that even though it was only PhD-students from European universities, some were from countries outside Europe.

³ Lecture 1: “Theoretical framework: science and the use of paradigms”, Lecture 2: “Linguistic interpretation”, Lecture 3: “Weighing and balancing” and Lecture 4: “Legal scholarship: art or science?”

5) Other parts of the program

As a part of the official program there was a tour to the The Hortus(the botanic garden) and the old parts of the University. This combined with the fact that the seminar was held at the Faculty of Law, gave a good impression of the nature of Leiden University. Such guided tours to the university, would be a welcome addition to every seminar.

The program also included a visit to the Leiden National Museum of the History of Science “Boerhaave”. The visit consisted of a guided tour, and the general theme was “the nature of scientific development and communication of scientific results”. This meant that the visit created a broad perspective on the topic of the seminar.

This is not necessarily an option for future seminars, since the topic will be of another kind, but it can serve as an inspiration on how to create a perspective with use of other means than lectures and group discussions.