Doctoral Programmes for the European Knowledge Society
An EUA Report

Executive Summary

Objectives
Doctoral studies are in a process of change today in Europe reflecting the need to adapt research training to meet the challenges of the global labour market, technological advances, new profiles and demands of doctoral candidates, and not least, the policy objectives of European governments. To achieve the ambitious “Lisbon Objectives”, Europe both seeks and needs to increase the number of researchers and research related careers, and doctoral training programmes can seen as a cornerstone in reaching such a goal. In the context of the “Bologna Process”, doctoral training has gained recently greater importance on the European Higher Education Agenda. In the Berlin Communiqué in 2003, Ministers responsible for Higher Education added a new action line on higher education and research as two pillars of the knowledge society and emphasised the importance of doctoral programmes as the ‘third cycle’ in the “Bologna Process”.

The European University Association (EUA), as the main representative of higher education institutions awarding doctoral degrees in Europe, proposed and launched with the European Commission’s support the present project as a timely initiative to provide some analysis of key issues facing doctoral training. In doing so, EUA set itself two main objectives: to identify essential conditions for successful doctoral programmes in Europe; and to promote and encourage cooperation in the development of doctoral programmes at the European level. 48 universities from across 22 European countries were selected as project participants from an “open call” issued by the EUA to its university membership.

Findings
The main findings of the project address three issues: the Structure and Organization of doctoral programmes; Supervision, Monitoring and Assessment; and Mobility, European collaboration and joint doctoral degrees. The analysis focuses on connecting these issues with innovations and good practices in university experience across Europe.

On the structure and organization of doctoral programmes the study shows a considerable diversity not only across different countries in Europe, but also across universities within the same country and across faculties within the same university. The following issues are examined: disciplinary differences in the organisation of doctoral training; various types of doctoral degrees; training in core and transferable skills;
doctoral training and teaching; duration and funding of doctoral training; recruitment practices; and the profile and status of doctoral candidates. Present “good practices” identified in the project demonstrate that establishing common institutional guidelines, codes and regulations, defined clearly at the highest institutional level and providing rules on recruitment, supervision, exams, evaluation and defence of the thesis, can prove to be a highly beneficial approach for universities in Europe. Individual study programmes (“apprenticeship model”) are questioned as being appropriate to meet the new multiple challenges of research training for careers in a competitive labour market, with an increasing tendency in many European countries towards structured programmes with doctoral candidates grouped in research / graduate / doctoral schools.

Supervision, monitoring and assessment procedures are critically important for the quality of the experience and training of doctoral candidates. The project focuses on qualification requirements, responsibilities and duties of supervisors; training of supervisors; workloads of supervisors; supervision models; doctoral candidates’ progress assessment; requirements for the doctoral thesis and its defence; and finally, the follow-up “tracking” of doctoral candidates’ career outcomes. The project shows that universities are aware of the constant need to sustain and improve the quality of their supervision, monitoring and assessment procedures; innovative practices in such areas as multiple supervision models, personal development plans for doctoral candidates are being developed and adapted to differing institutional traditions.

Mobility and European collaboration are an integral part of doctoral training at many universities. Many doctoral programmes seek to provide appropriate mobility mechanisms to enhance the relevant research experience of their doctoral candidates, but there are still numerous obstacles of a legal, administrative, financial, personal and cultural character that limit mobility throughout Europe. Issues focussed upon in the project include international mobility and inter-institutional collaboration; inter-sectorial mobility; joint doctoral degrees and the debate on a “European Doctorate”. Good practices show that mobility can be an important strategic tool of doctoral training, leading to the wider research experience and career development opportunities of doctoral candidates in his/her chosen field, and better research co-operation and networking between institutions.

Policy Context

A key innovative feature of the Doctoral Programmes project was the open working dialogue that was established from the outset between its university partners and higher education policy makers and practitioners. Project partners took the initiative to link its activities to the policy debate through their active engagement in a series of major conferences, for example, the Salzburg Conference (February 2005) that was part of the Bologna Process Work Programme 2003 – 2005 and which identified “ten basic principles” for the future development of doctoral programmes, that fed into the formulation of recommendations for
the “Bologna Process” Ministerial meeting held in Bergen in May 2005. In this way the project, in spite of its small scale and duration, had an impact on the wider research and policy-making communities across Europe. The project sought to achieve, therefore, an “evidence-based” dialogue reflecting upon the present landscape of doctoral training, current practices and innovations, and issues for reform.

Conclusions

Doctoral programmes are considered to be a crucial source of a new generation of researchers and to serve as the main bridge between the European Higher Education and Research Areas. As such, they have become an official and important part of the political agenda in the Bologna process. However, doctoral training is markedly different from the first and second cycles of higher education. Its main characteristic, which makes it specific, is that the most predominant and essential component of the doctorate is research. Doctoral candidates have to prove their ability to perform original and independent research within a scientific discipline or interdisciplinary collaboration. Individuality, originality and a certain autonomy are important features of the doctorate.

Universities fully recognise that they have responsibility to offer doctoral candidates more than core research disciplinary skills based on individual training by doing research. They are increasingly introducing courses and modules offering transferable skills training and preparing candidates for the careers in various sectors. Crucially, the re-organisation of doctoral training towards structured programmes and training in a wide range of transferable skills in courses or modules requires adequate financing. It should be emphasised that reforms of doctoral education are proceeding at varied paces and, in some countries, the debate on reform is only at the beginning. While the reform of the first two cycles is well underway across Europe, the transformation of doctoral education presents a different order of challenge.

The present project, in common with the experience of other studies, points to the need for more systematic collection of data on doctorate completion rates and career outcomes. For the future implementation of reforms in doctoral programmes to be carried out effectively, the collection and analysis of such “key indicator” data will be essential in measuring the success of structured doctoral programmes in achieving policy objectives.

As a final remark, it is hoped that the present project has worked to increase awareness of the importance of “joined-up” governmental thinking at the level of improving doctoral programmes and career perspectives and the need for coordinated action involving higher education institutions, government ministries for education and research, innovation and technology, national research councils, and the European Commission.
EUA received the mandate of the Bologna Ministers meeting in Bergen in May 2005 to follow up its work on doctoral programmes over the next two years. Thus doctoral programmes and research careers remain at the heart of the Association’s work and the present project will be followed up: through targeted action within the Bologna process resulting in a report to be presented to the next Bologna Ministers meeting in London in 2007; through a project focusing on doctoral careers; and through ‘hands on’ workshops for universities on important issues, for example the organisation of doctoral/graduate schools in a European context.

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