

The place of Doctoral Candidates between the EHEA and the ERA

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Dear Authorities, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I first wish to thank the Austrian Ministry, the German Ministry and the European University Association for the organisation of this fundamental Conference.

The European Higher Education Area was a reality many years ago, before we rediscovered this concept in Bologna in 1999. And the role and the spirit of the former scholars travelling around Europe, the *clerici vagantes*, were probably closer to those of the current doctoral candidates than to those of the undergraduate students. The sense of enterprise where the learning process is linked to the creation of new knowledge, and where the possibility of a dialogue among the involved parties is a concrete reality, is now taking place mostly at the doctoral level.

Getting the best out of our brains: this is what Europe has shown to be capable to do in its history and what we underline when we say that we are now committed to build the knowledge society. And we certainly need to investigate which are the conditions to be put in place in order to achieve this objective in the contemporary setting. There is a need for the European society to valorise the role of truly creative thought especially now that we are subject to an overwhelming mass of messages and information. And the knowledge producers should be given the appropriate place and recognition, even if people don't pay the ticket to watch them working, contrarily to football players and actors.

The complexity of the higher education system in Europe is nowadays much greater, and to manage a framework of continental breadth it was set up the Bologna Process.

But what did the Ministers mean when they wrote those few lines on the insertion of the doctoral level in the Bologna Process? It is likely that they hadn't any particular proposal to put forward yet, but they wanted to open a discussion, that is, the target was in the dialogic process itself. And in fact if we are here today and if other events, studies and research are being held on this subject, this is due to that paragraph in the Berlin Communiqué.

We know that the situation of doctorates is involved because differences among countries and inside countries are evident. It is certainly common that the degree is awarded by a committee after the successful dissertation of a thesis containing original pieces of research, and prepared under the guidance of an academic. The cohort of around 500,000 doctoral candidates in Europe that are currently engaged in this kind of project constitutes therefore a recognizable community.

But we must consider that the regulations vary in many respects, from the admission procedures to the training provisions, from the entry qualifications to the average age of graduation, from the level of responsibility of the institution to the funding available, the duties and the rights of the candidate. It is therefore difficult also for us to come to an inventory of the situation, and give a learned opinion on the purposes and on the range of validity of the method and of the instruments of the Bologna Process.

Should a doctoral programme provide a structured training or should it rely only on the traditional “master-pupil relationship” rooted in the Humboldtian tradition? Just to make a couple of examples, we know that Germany may be named as the champion of the second

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way (although things are changing), whilst in Sweden (and in other countries as well) there is already a wide use of the credit system, and the admission procedures are extensively regulated.

In general, there is a tendency to consider that a greater engagement of the institution may come as beneficial for the candidate, and therefore an appropriate organisation has to be put in place.

This calls for a closer review of the Supervision and Training provisions during the Doctorate.

The supervisor has a role to provide guidance and advice on progress of the young researcher as an expert in the field. An agreed project plan should be laid down at an early stage of the research programme, and in the following period the supervisor should give a critical review and clear goals for improvement or reorganisation to rectify any matters that arise. Training and evaluating supervisors on a regular basis could be specific means to maintain standards and ensure that the role is fulfilled. The workload of supervisors should be monitored and an appropriate contact time with the early stage researchers guaranteed.

The institution is important in acting as a “third party”, avoiding an excessive dependence of the young researcher from his or her supervisor, and managing complaints and appeals.

There should be formal induction training at the beginning of the programme, to provide the doctoral candidate with the terms and conditions relating to their research, the initial training they require to begin and the facilities they need to be aware of. Specialist courses relevant to the subject, and how to begin the research process and develop a methodology should be a part of the structured training. Further to this, in order to provide the entire bundle of professional competencies needed for the future career, additional generic abilities and transferable skills must be developed, including management, communication, use of resources, and so on. Also, internships in industries may be provided, and a greater linkage with the non-academic world fostered.

All of this should be part of the institutional arrangements in order to set up a successful doctoral programme. Issues related to Supervision and Training are of concern among doctoral candidates because of the great pressure in delivering experienced currently and of the consequences on the dropout rate and on the time-to-degree.

Eurodoc has developed a Charter for Supervision and Training taking on board the points mentioned above, and that has already been spread widely, including to the EC as an input document for the European Researchers' Charter. The Charter for Supervision and Training has been set up looking at the existing good practice, especially in the UK and in France, although other systems or mechanisms may exist or can fit better in the different specific national or local environments.

The importance and the value of an international experience are of extreme relevance for new researchers. A doctoral programme that is not going to foresee a mobility experience will become less and less appreciated by prospective candidates and by future employers of Ph.D. graduates. And the added value of mobility will be important in the realization of the “open market of researchers”, one of the main goals of the strategy underpinning the European Research Area.

In many cases, it is possible to perform a period of stay abroad for studies and research collaboration, while doing a doctorate at home. An improved version is the “joint doctorate”. In one or another legal form, this is a programme managed by a network of Universities and leading to a “joint degree”, encompassing a curriculum of research training specifically designed with the purpose of providing a manifold experience of mobility and changing environment for the candidates. Also co-tutelle arrangements are instruments that may fit the desire for high-level collaborative research.

The ultimate goal could be the definition of an “European doctorate label”, a standardized joint European doctorate in accordance with established rules of internationalisation and quality. Of course, it is not easy to identify these rules and, most of all, who is entitled to release them – since this involves a higher level of political and legal commitment.

A mobility experience is of course possible also when one chooses to earn a degree abroad from the very beginning.

It is understood that the Bologna Process, together with the Lisbon Convention for the recognition of degrees, should be facilitating or promoting all these practices.

We have listed a number of problems related to mobility and which the doctoral candidates are confronted with. Some of them are of legal nature, some of practical origin. Some require additional financial means, but the solution to some others of them requires typically that current prerogatives of the States are discussed. We know that the European Commission has been and is working on removing obstacles to mobility of researchers, and that this integrated strategy with the Bologna Process is on its way to produce results.

But we should not forget that in Europe there is a gradient of mobility, “south-north” and “east-west”. The different conditions for research and for all the professional prospects in Europe affect the possibility to develop a harmonic and equilibrated system.

And now let us come to an intriguing issue: the “status” of those who are inside the pathway towards a doctoral degree: student or researcher? Or somehow both? I want to introduce this point by taking the definition of the problem as stated in the final article of the book on Doctorates issued by the UNESCO-CEPES last year so that I can take the opportunity to acknowledge this study which is a comprehensive and updated overview of the situation in many countries. If one had the time to read only one article on the situation of doctoral programmes, the final review by Prof. Barbara Kehm is recommended.

Of course, we know well that this is not a matter on which the Bologna Process can say something conclusive, but since it is a feature of doctoral programmes, it enters heavily into the discussion.

Let me make a couple of archetypical examples also here. In the UK, Ph.D. candidates are students, and are enrolled as such at a University. They may be funded through grants and scholarships, typically by one of a wealth of bodies that provide money for this purpose. There is a fair satisfaction with this condition, to my best knowledge, and this because a PhD student enjoys the prerogatives of every student, which are not few, in terms of a consumer. The marketplace in the UK works well, and the students can have a loud voice also from a legal standpoint, to protect their rights – to have services, and in particular training. They may also argue that somewhere else the supervision relationship is not informed to a correct style, and that’s why there’s a need to change the “status” in those countries. On the contrary, the labour rights in the UK have less weight, and are not seen as a solution in the specific case.

In Norway, on the contrary, PhD candidates are employees. I chose this example not only because it’s kind to give a tribute to Bergen, but also because I believe that many others in continental Europe see the situation in Norway for doctoral candidates as desirable at least. I was even told that in Norway they could save money, begin to buy a house, and so on, which is not the case in many countries and even in the US. That’s why they are afraid of a possible student-oriented Bologna Process. Actually, the employment relationship is distinct with respect to that defining the Ph.D. candidate status, which is another kind of contract itself, and very interesting also from the standpoint of those provisions regarding supervisor, institution and young researcher we were speaking earlier. As what regards labour duties and rights, they enjoy exactly all those of any employee, and they can even bargain individually the salary according to their experience. The recognition of the social rights – health

insurance, pension scheme, maternity leave, unemployment benefit, etc, is seen as due by most of the doctoral candidates in Europe.

And now let us end with the future: what will be the professional future of doctors? This is a matter of concern for almost everybody, and it is not easy to stay independent, because many of those doing a Ph.D. are doing this for the sake of culture and science, and we are doing this with great personal commitment of our lives. There is a lot who wish to continue doing their research, although it is evident that the need for highly skilled people will be increasing also in the non-research sector. Furthermore, there is a need to improve the entrepreneurial spirit of researchers, otherwise the expectations from the society in terms of transfer of knowledge and productivity will not be met.

We are welcoming the next publication from the EC of the European Researcher's Charter and of the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers. These are two instruments on which we have been directly contributing and that can help in recognizing the role of researchers, including those at the early stages of their careers, in society.

And, to finish, I wish to recall that Eurodoc will have its Annual Conference in Strasbourg next March. I would like to thank our association, and the country representatives, many of which are present here, in this Conference.

We are volunteers, and we are doing this for our future, but also for the future of Europe.

Thank you very much.