

The European Landscape of Doctoral Education: The Future of Research Collaboration

Report on the joint meeting with the EUA-CDE on 3rd May 2019 at The British Academy

In response to the uncertainties created by the Brexit negotiations, members of the European Universities Association Council for Doctoral Education and the UK Council for Graduate Education met in London to affirm the strengths of doctoral education across Europe and to develop a consensus for continuing pan-European co-operation in doctoral education and research.

This short report highlights some of the themes of the discussions

Doctoral Education Across Europe

The meeting affirmed that doctoral education matters for Europe more than ever before. Enrolments at doctoral level have increased year-on-year across Europe for the last five years. The EUA-CDE estimates that there are now 750,000 people studying for a doctorate across Europe (“Doctoral education matters for Europe more than ever before”, June 2018).

This expansion of doctoral education is an indication both of the success of doctoral education in Europe, but also, given that on average 40% of doctoral researchers are international (i.e. studying outside their home country), it is an indication of the fundamental importance of doctoral education in fostering international research collaborations, and in contributing to ‘knowledge diplomacy’ more broadly. Delegates also noted the positive contribution to society and sustainable development goals that are enabled by doctoral graduates.

It was felt that the significance of doctoral education across Europe was not well reflected at the policy level, both in relation to Brexit negotiations, and more broadly in relation to national industrial strategies across Europe. In particular, concerns were raised that not enough is being done to safeguard the mobility of early career researchers, and that this posed a significant challenge for research collaboration between the UK and other parts of Europe.

Strengths of Doctoral Education in Europe

Across the nationalities and institutions represented, there was a sense of pride in the European tradition of excellence in doctoral education – as one participant put it: “as a continent, we ‘invented’ it”. Among the particular strengths of doctoral education across Europe were the following:

Recruitment and selection of Doctoral candidates

- Early engagement with research supervisors and the research group is an advantage in recruitment of candidates likely to succeed in their studies. (In the UK, it was felt that the supervisor is part of the recruitment process in the majority of cases.)
- The flexibility in the available modes of study across Europe was considered to be advantageous in the recruitment of doctoral candidates. Among the advantages outlined were: opportunities for cross-European collaborative awards; the growing number of professional doctorates and industrial partners in doctoral research; the availability of part-time provision.
- The Bologna process suggests a Masters degree as a pre-enrolment requirement, which may be a mechanism for maintaining the standards of doctoral education. However, some delegates suggested that there was increasing respect for work experience as a foundation for doctoral study. And there was a strong ‘caution’ on the use of a Masters as a requirement if it leads to a less flexible system. In addition, there was discussion of the recognition of Masters degrees from institutions outside Europe. Delegates were given an example from Spain, that there had been a difficulty because a Masters degree from a non-European HEI had not been ‘recognised’.

Research Cultures, Examination and Completion rates of Doctoral candidates

- There is recognition of the growing importance of the wider research environment as an important dimension in supporting the development of researchers (e.g. in the UK the PRES survey particularly highlights this aspect of the doctoral experience).
- It was widely agreed that postgraduate researchers in Europe are considered to be ‘PhD candidates’ rather than ‘PhD students’, and that this better reflected the importance of doctoral study to the research infrastructure in European HEIs.
- The EUA-CDE Survey Report *Doctoral education in Europe today: approaches and institutional structures*, shows that 48% of doctoral candidates complete within 4 – 4 ½ years (p.22). 43% of respondents felt that the time to completion had decreased over the last ten years (with only

15% feeling that time to completion had increased). The report also shows that 66% of doctoral candidates enrolled in 2009 graduated within 6 years (p.28). It was reported that US colleagues who presented at the 4th UKCGE International Conference on Doctoral Education and Training suggested that the US average completion rate is 50%.

- The absence of a mandatory taught component in some European PhD programmes means that progress through a European PhD may be quicker, as compared to the US model. However, this was thought to be a 'double edged sword'. Across Europe progressing through multiple post-doctoral positions is now increasingly expected in order to secure a permanent academic role.
- It was recognised that European countries have different cultures of oral defence. Nevertheless, doctoral education across Europe has the same aims and objectives, and the same rigorous standards. As one participant put it, this consistency in the expectations and standards for doctoral education is present in Europe and 'few other places in the world'.
- PhD graduates are increasingly seen by their institution as boosting their reputations outside academia, for example when they engage in grand challenges / sustainable development goals.

Professional development

- Distinctive of European doctoral education (as against the US model) is the increasing expectation that PhD graduates will enter non-academic careers. Estimates of the number of PhD graduates across Europe who end up in permanent academic careers vary, but delegates accepted that it could be as low as 4% (Cf. Royal Society 2010: *The Scientific Century* p.16). In addition, it is increasingly recognised that academic careers themselves involve an array of different kinds of skills. This has been reflected in the growing opportunities for professional development during PhD programmes.
- It was acknowledged and celebrated that there is already effective activity embedded in the training of doctoral candidates across Europe that allows them to develop their research work faster, progress more effectively in their careers, and to enjoy greater resilience to recession and greater job satisfaction than other types of graduate. It was noted that the British Academy is developing a series of case studies specifically to exemplify the rich and diverse career paths of AHSS doctoral graduates.
- Across Europe, there are increasing opportunities for doctoral candidates to go through a 'structured' programme which encourages training and collaborative exercises within cohorts

- In the UK, it is becoming the norm to provide opportunities for doctoral candidates to gain experience in research management by, for example, encouraging them to make small grant applications during their programme. An example was given from Germany in which current doctoral candidates are encouraged to write bids to support research projects for the next generation of PhD candidates.
- There was, however, an acknowledgement that professional development is not universally accepted as a core part of doctoral education. Delegates were given an example from Spain in which there was resistance to professional development training from both established professors and PGRs themselves, saying: 'this is a waste of my time'.

Challenges to Doctoral Education in Europe

A variety of challenges were raised in relation to doctoral education across Europe, not only in relation to the future relationship between UK and the European Union, but also in the context of broader developments in doctoral education, such as mental health and wellbeing, complexity of supervisory relationships, open science, and funding.

Mobility of Doctoral Researchers

- Doctoral researchers are on the front line for issues connected with mobility. For example, it is often the case that wider inter-institutional research collaborations are initiated through the provision of joint doctoral awards. Any restriction of the movement of doctoral researchers would therefore impoverish both inter-institutional research and the richness of the doctoral experience.
- National statistics from the UK appear to show that it has more incoming Erasmus students than outgoing Erasmus students. Concerns were raised, particularly from representatives from Spain and Norway, that Brexit will mean that there will be less money to send PGRs to the UK.
- It was recognised that the costs involved in supporting mobility will increase irrespective of Brexit: climate change and air travel will become even more significant considerations. This may drive creative responses using new technologies. It was hoped, for example, that it will soon be possible to innovate with pan-European partnerships which do not require physical relocation.
- Delegates also noted that the trend for European Research Area reported in February 2019 that across the EU-28, there had been an average growth of 3.9% in the share of doctoral

students with citizenship of another EU member state. However, the technical supplement on this ERA progress report for 2018 indicates that although the UK is 8th out of EU-28 in its share of doctoral candidates with citizenship of another EU Member State, its growth rate has fallen to 1.3%, as against the EU-28 average of 3.9% (p.68).

Regulatory environment

- The UK visa system was singled out as being a challenge without a corresponding opportunity. It was strongly felt that “you couldn’t do a doctorate or a full degree under the current proposals for EU student visas ‘post-Brexit’”.
- It was acknowledged that ‘Cotutelle’ arrangements for joint doctoral awards are already difficult due to negotiations involved in harmonising regulatory differences. It was acknowledged that even the term ‘Cotutelle’ can mean different outcomes – including single and double awards, for example (this had also been a theme of the 2019 EUA-CDE Thematic Workshop). However, the value of international, inter-institutional, co-supervision and other forms of collaborations were re-affirmed, and recognised particularly to the richness of the doctoral candidates experience.

Global Market in Doctoral Education

- Doctoral education in China was particularly singled out as a growth sector. A representative from Germany shared a trend that many students now prefer to conduct exchanges with China, as opposed to the US.
- There was a recognition that political uncertainty in the UK may mean that there is an opportunity for non-UK European colleagues to capitalise on the recruitment of international PGRs if the UK is perceived to become increasingly unwelcoming, particularly in relation to post-study work visas. Concerns were expressed that some UK institutions may be tempted to increase recruitment of doctoral candidates at the cost of ‘diluting’ quality.
- It was noted that, particularly in the UK context, the temptation to draw distinctions between the ‘quality’ of doctorates from different kinds of UK university has put added pressure on web presence in marketing and recruitment of doctoral candidates, and tracking of career trajectories of doctoral graduates.

Money and Funding

- In the UK, there has been a growing number of requests to develop split-site awards, as opposed to a full joint awards - this may be a 'cheaper' option than a cotutelle, for example. However there are challenges here around how much time the candidate spends in 'host' campuses, particularly if they are serving as the validating body.
- There was concern that Brexit creates a 'double jeopardy' situation in which, for example, a German institution wishing to collaborate with a UK institution each have to apply for 'internal' funding, thus increasing the risk of the funding being turned down.
- Recruiting increasing numbers of PhD candidates is sometimes unreflectively thought to be a good thing – but this assumption was questioned: growth of doctoral education may not be 'cost-effective' for individual HEIs. This is not the approach taken in Switzerland, for example, whose HEIs are not universally seeking growth in PhD numbers.

The Future Of Doctoral Education In Europe

Participants at this meeting celebrated the strength and versatility of European doctoral education, particularly as an instrument to foster research collaborations between institutions and across national borders. It was recognised, though, that the reputation of the European doctorate may diminish unless higher education institutions redouble their efforts to articulate the value of the doctorate outside academia, not only in terms of employability and economic productivity, but also in relation to social and scientific progress.

The meeting concluded with a declaration that developing and maintaining a common European discourse about the value of doctoral education should transcend current geopolitical uncertainties.