

Report of the EUA Workshop

Doctoral Programmes in Europe: Access, Recruitment and Admission

Brussels, 11-12 October 2007

Introduction

The workshop held on 11 - 12 October 2007 in Brussels was another EUA activity related to the development of doctoral education in Europe. The topic of the workshop focused on the questions of access, recruitment and admission to doctoral programmes.

Sixty participants from twenty-one countries took part in the workshop. Most of them were from universities. Several participants represented research councils, ministries and the European Commission.

The workshop followed a model with a clear thematic focus, case study presentations and in-depth discussions in working groups. The debates brought a lively and useful exchange of experience and examples of good practice.

Case studies were presented by Jean Marie Boisson from University of Montpellier, France; Karen Vandeveldel from University of Ghent, Belgium; Christine Humfrey from University of Nottingham, UK; Gry Kibsgaard from University of Bergen, Norway; and Ulrike Senger and Christian Vollmer from Technical University of Kaiserslautern, Germany. Sessions were chaired by Ian Haines from London Metropolitan University, UK and Günther Gell from Medical University of Graz, Austria.

In addition to the case studies and working group discussions, workshop participants kindly contributed to the final report with a written overview of the issues of access, recruitment and admission in their institution or country. The report brings together results of workshop discussions and highlights good practices from participating institutions.

Issues and questions addressed at the workshop:

Legal / institutional regulations

In most countries, national law defines doctoral education and provides general regulations, but it usually respects institutional autonomy and allows universities to create their own internal regulations regarding access, recruitment and admission procedures.

Access to doctoral studies

Access to doctoral studies is regulated in several countries by law and requires a Master degree as an entry point to doctoral education (e.g. Hungary, France, and Lithuania). In most countries, however, access is more open. Many universities do not identify a Master degree explicitly as the main requirement for access although it still remains the most common road to doctoral education. The majority define “Master or relevant equivalent education” as the requirement for access to doctoral education. In Spain (Universitat Autònoma, Barcelona), any student with 300 ECTS can enrol on a doctoral programme even if s/he does not hold a Master degree. In Portugal (University of Aveiro), holders of the 1st degree can enrol on a doctoral programme if they show a relevant academic or scientific curriculum, approved by the University Scientific Council. Universities in the UK also may accept holders of the Bachelor degree to doctoral education if the students show scientific excellence. Under the German programme “Promotion an Hochschulen in Deutschland”, DAAD (German Research Foundation) also supports highly qualified 1st degree holders, but they have to pass a preparation year of special qualification. At the University of Würzburg, Germany, candidates with the 1st degree diploma have to go through a qualification period and pass a qualification exam.

Discussions were held also on how to get the best candidates. It seems that it is common to identify and examine potential doctoral candidates at the Bachelor or Master levels, however, this implies only internal students and excludes students from other institutions and countries. Preparatory workshops for potential doctoral candidates at the end of Master studies are a good practice at the University in Frankfurt, Germany.

Conditions of access are the same for **part-time and full-time** students.

The biggest differences appear in considering **social dimension of access** to doctoral studies (diversity of candidates, gender equality, ethnicity, disability, social background, etc.). Most universities do not take these aspects into account, stressing that excellence is the only criterion for access, and taking anything else into consideration would be regarded as discrimination. Some universities argue that they have “more female candidates anyway” not realising that social dimension of access covers broader issues than just numbers of male and female candidates. This area shows a considerable lack of awareness and understanding of these issues. Most of participants, however, recognised the problem of gender inequality at later stages of research careers.

Universities where social and other dimensions of access are considered very important have been institutions from the Nordic countries, UK, Switzerland, Germany, Austria and partly Lithuania and Belgium (out of participating countries). For instance, at Lund University in Sweden, the institutional regulations state: *“For high quality in education and research the admission process to doctoral level shall be characterised by the maximum clarity and openness. On recruitment diversity shall be striven for, as well as a balanced gender distribution amongst the students. Gender equality and cultural diversity shall always be taken into account in the education at doctoral level in accordance with the gender equality policy, equal treatment policy and the diversity plan of Lund University. Under-represented gender shall be given preference in the event of otherwise equivalent preconditions for the education in question at graduate level, unless special reasons speak against this.”*

In Switzerland and, partly, in Germany every university has an office dedicated to equal opportunities. At the Medical University in Graz, Austria, the Committee for equal opportunities has to approve the text of the call for applications and is present in the selection process.

Entry requirements – application for admission

Application for admission is, in most institutions, made on a special application form. In addition to the written application, the further formal requirements include or may include:

- certificate of qualification (some institutions require it with the diploma supplement) – notarised translation may be required
- CV
- credits (certificate on ECTS credits)
- outline of the research project (e.g. at Mykolas Romeris University, Vilnius, Lithuania, an outline of 15 – 20 pages thesis is required for PhD)
- work plan and time schedule
- proof of funding support (e.g. in France this proof has to be associated with a contract providing social insurance rights to the candidate) or plan for funding (e.g. University of Bergen, Norway); on the contrary, in most universities in the UK the candidate has to be offered a place first and then s/he applies for a scholarship
- proof of the acceptance of the candidate in a research team (in France only research team recognised by the Doctoral School accredited through the national accreditation process)
- entry exam in the relevant field (e.g. Lithuania) – this practice can discourage some applicants who may choose a university with no entry exams
- foreign language test or certificate that proves knowledge of foreign language (either at national level or with an international test such as TOEFL, Cambridge etc.)
- presentation of scientific publication, reviewed article, paper or book (e.g. Mykolas Romeris University, Vilnius, Lithuania)
- motivation letter
- 2 recommendations (Mykolas Romeris University, Vilnius, Lithuania)
- personal interview (e.g. at Medical University of Graz, Austria, all pre-selected candidates – both from Austria and abroad - are invited to an interview and their travel costs are reimbursed)
- some universities require the agreement or name of the proposed supervisor (e.g. University of Debrecen, Hungary; Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain).

All universities publish the information about the application on their websites. Application forms are often electronically submitted. Some institutions require the application form only in English, others in the national language and/ or in English.

International access, recruitment and admission

In all participating universities the conditions of access, recruitment and admission are the same for domestic and foreign students.

EU qualifications are usually accepted without problems. Qualifications from non-EU countries have to be verified either at the university level (formally or informally – based on the recognition of the institution where the candidate comes from; checking university website, etc.) or via national quality assurance agencies, ENIC-NARIC agencies or other organisations.

Some institutions, especially in the countries with no or small tuition fees, increasingly experience problems with applications with false certificates, especially from developing countries. This requires a lot of extra human and financial resources and time needed for checking the documents.

Workshop discussions underlined another challenge raised by internationalisation. In some institutions and countries the majority of foreign doctoral candidates comes from one single country (e.g. either from China or India in German universities; from Sudan in Norway) – the doctoral community then consists only of native and one other foreign country candidates – can this really be called internationalisation?

Language courses for international doctoral candidates are offered by many universities, but as the number of candidates from abroad is increasing, this is fast becoming a very costly service.

Language remains a barrier in the recruitment of foreign candidates in social sciences and humanities which usually operate in the native language.

It seems that international recruitment and admission is still not a part of institutional strategies at many universities. It is often based on individual contacts, and not on a systematic, inter-institutional and international cooperation. International recruitment is highly discipline-based. It is more common in the exact and life sciences than in social sciences and humanities.

Despite every effort, transparency remains a challenge, mainly because sometimes institutions or professors prefer applicants from better-known institutions and do not take “a risk” if the applicant comes from an unknown place or university.

One of the recommendations that can lead to internationalisation of doctoral studies is to establish more joint doctoral programmes. In the case of the European PhD on Social Representations and Communication (coordinator University of La Sapienza, Rome, Italy), all participating institutions have agreed on joint quality criteria and jointly established admission procedures that means that the whole process of application, admission, selection and registration is done, not by individual universities, but at an international network level. The process is highly centralised and guarantees consistency and transparency.

Admission and selection procedures

Admission committees have different numbers of members at each institution – from two to twelve. Usually they include the director of the doctorate school or programme, full professors (supervisors), heads of research teams, principal researchers and in some cases also student representatives (e.g. University of Lund, Sweden; London Metropolitan University, UK). In Austria everybody who meets qualification criteria has to be admitted, therefore, usually no admission committee is necessary. In some German universities the professor, the potential supervisor, is still the main decision-maker in the process (the professor identifies and invites the candidate to join the research team).

The evaluation of the applications and personal interviews (if they are required) are done by the admission committee. Although scientific excellence is the main criterion, often the individual assessment of the candidate is also taken into account (e.g. other transferable skills, personal characteristics, interests and passions).

At the University of Bergen in Norway, the first step before the admission is an informal pre-application process in which the candidate identifies a potential research group and meets its members, exchanges ideas with potential supervisors, prepares the outline of the research project together with the research group matching the themes of the team. Based on the evaluation of the pre-application process the research group decides whether to write an application with the candidate. Only after this process can the candidate submit the application and enter the admission process.

The length of the admission process may be a problem in institutions and countries where the number of applicants is very high.

The role of the supervisor in the admission process

The moment when the supervisor enters the process differs from one university to another.

In some universities the candidate is obliged to identify and meet his/ her supervisor before admission. Often the agreement of the supervisor is required as a part of the application. In most cases the procedure is flexible: the candidate can choose the supervisor, but if s/he for some reason cannot do it, the doctoral school (or department, scientific committee etc.) assigns the supervisor.

In other universities personal contacts between the candidate and the supervisor before recruitment and admission are discouraged in order to ensure maximum transparency of the admission process (e.g. University of Montpellier, France; Mykolas Romeris University of Vilnius, Lithuania; Lund University, Sweden). London Metropolitan University provides a 10-page “Handbook for Supervisor of MPhil/ PhD Students: Procedures for Student Application to Enrolment” that is a formal mechanism requiring the use of specific forms to ensure that each stage of admission is carried out correctly and in a transparent way.

In France, doctoral schools based on research teams play an increasingly bigger role in the admission process than the supervisor. While in the past personal contacts between the

supervisor and the potential candidates were common practice, it is now the doctoral school that takes the main responsibility.

Transparency of access, admission and selection process

All universities state that comprehensive information about access, entry requirements, admission and selection and clear guidance on what is expected of a doctoral candidate is available on the university website. Some universities also provide legal documents related to access and admission. Information about funding, which is a very important precondition for doctoral studies, is often limited.

Most universities provide information on their websites both in the national language and in English.

Pro-active approach to recruitment – open call for applications and advertising is common practice in some institutions and countries. It depends on the “supply-demand” question. In some countries and/ or in some disciplines the problem is not selecting doctoral candidates but finding them (low numbers of doctoral candidates, especially in sciences and engineering). Pro-active recruitment then becomes a necessity. Positions in doctoral programmes are usually published on the university home page. They are often announced internationally (this should be, but is not, common practice). E.g. at the Medical University of Graz, Austria, the call for applications is published in English in numerous newspapers, scientific journals, scientific societies, relevant web databases, and via personal communication with researchers, universities, etc. Pro-active recruitment is well organised at institutions in the UK, the Nordic countries, Germany and is more and more encouraged in France.

Acceptance of doctoral candidates

Successful candidates are informed about the result of admission and selection in a formal letter and/ or an email. Some institutions have deadlines within which this must be done (e.g. seven days at the University of Lund, Sweden).

Most institutions inform unsuccessful candidates in the same way. They usually are given the right to appeal against the decision. At the University of Lund, Sweden, prior to a decision being taken on admission, guidance data for a decision including a proposal for admission and reasons for this are drawn up and are notified to the applicants. This should normally occur at least two weeks before a decision is taken on admission. Applicants that desire to lodge an objection to the proposal should do this to the Faculty Board or to the body to which the Board has delegated the decision on admission, at the latest within the period that the Faculty Board notifies. The applicants will be informed about the possibility of making an objection against admission proposals.

In some institutions, however, unsuccessful candidates are not informed about the result.

After the final decision is made, some institutions require **a contract signed between the candidate, the supervisor and the institution**. For example, in France, the Ministry of

Education has proposed a “Thesis Charter” defining conditions of PhD studies that has to be signed by the candidate, the head of the doctoral school and the head of the research team. A similar contract is in operation at the University of Würzburg, Germany, Mykolas Romeris University of Vilnius, Lithuania; University of Aveiro, Portugal; and University of Innsbruck, Austria.

Induction procedures

In some universities successful candidates receive a handbook or a start-up package (University of Würzburg, Germany) before the start of their studies.

International students receive a package with the information about the university, place, culture, student life etc. In many institutions an induction day is organised for international students of all cycles. This usually includes a university tour and/or a city tour.

At the University of Aveiro, Portugal, individual departments organise an induction to doctoral studies for newcomers in which the professor/supervisor and other doctoral candidates are involved.

At the Mykolas Romeris University of Vilnius, Lithuania, all new doctoral candidates are invited to a formal meeting with the Rector, Vice-Rectors, Deans and senior members of administration. The candidates are informed about the further procedures, doctoral programmes, formal and informal duties and rights, expectations, etc.

At the University of Würzburg, Germany, personal meetings with the Dean and the Members of the Graduate School Office are organised for new doctoral candidates. Foreign candidates receive the support of an individual tutor funded by the Graduate School. This tutor will guide the candidate through all the necessary initial steps and help with procedures related to moving to a foreign country, ranging from legal registration at the city council and the university to getting a mobile phone and negotiations with landlords.

In France, doctoral schools usually organise a one-day presentation of each school. The Thesis Charter is presented here. Doctoral candidates are also informed about the courses and teaching units that are mandatory, and are encouraged to take part in research seminars and graduate conferences (“doctoriales”) which are run by doctoral schools with the aim to build and strengthen the community of doctoral candidates.

Registration of accepted candidates

Registration procedures are very diverse in each country. Regular registration of doctoral candidates is important mainly for statistics on the number of doctoral candidates, TTD (time to degree), completion rate and drop out. However, statistical data in this area are very poor in most European countries.

It is obvious that not enough attention is given to registration procedures in all institutions. In most universities, doctoral candidates have to register at the beginning of their studies – either

through the central university office (e.g. Barcelona, Lille, Ghent, Bergen, Vilnius) or through the doctoral school. Some institutions require renewal of the registration at the beginning of each year or each semester. In some universities, candidates need register only before the defence of their thesis although universities are trying to change this (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain and some institutions in Belgium). At the Mykolas Romeris University of Vilnius, this practice is common for part-time candidates who register only after presenting the first draft of their thesis.

In France, registration is the responsibility of the university. In addition to the registration of each doctoral candidate, after completing the second and third years a progress report is customary in doctoral schools. At the University of Lille, the head of the doctoral school has to fill in a statistical database each year (how many candidates are registered, how many candidates completed their studies, how each candidate was funded, kind of diploma, etc.). These data go to the national database. This university has also developed a good follow-up system for tracking doctoral holders (via supervisors, phone calls, Internet).

At the London Metropolitan University, UK, after the candidate is offered the opportunity to enrol as a student, s/he prepares, with support from the supervisory team, the registration of her/his topic which is considered by a Research Student Progress Group (whose membership consists of a range of experienced research degree supervisors). This is supported by a separate Handbook that describes the remaining steps for completion of the doctoral requirements. Almost all students allowed to register, in common with most other UK universities, are required to register first for an MPhil with the right to be considered for upgrading to PhD.

In Norway, a national information system for administration of studies developed for universities and colleges is in place. All doctoral candidates are obliged to register on the web. This system guarantees a good statistical database that is used not only for administration purposes, but also as a basis for improving policies and management. All Norwegian universities have a common tool for reporting to educational authorities.

In Germany, some universities have limited statistics on doctoral candidates. For instance, at the Technical University of Kaiserslautern there are many databases from university to department levels and no institutional policy in this area which means that candidates may register in different databases. According to the survey of the “Pilotzentrum Internationales Doktorandenforum”, the real number of doctoral candidates at the university is almost twice the number that appears in the official statistics.

Conclusions

Recruitment and admission are becoming an increasingly difficult challenge for universities that want to recruit the best, high quality candidates into doctoral programmes. There is a broad diversity of approaches to recruitment, admission and selection across European universities. Several factors seem to have an impact on how recruitment and admission is organised:

1. Organisation and management of doctoral education

2. Funding
3. Disciplinary differences
4. Internationalisation
5. Transparency

The development of structured doctoral programmes and doctoral/ graduate/research schools has brought differences in the recruitment and admission processes. The trend shows movement from a liberal and often individually-based intake towards a more selective, competitive and restrictive selection, organised in a transparent way by doctoral schools or other organisational structures.

Adequate funding for the whole period of full-time doctoral studies (usually 3 – 4 years) remains a problem and is becoming a very important requirement for admission in many countries. In addition, scholarships themselves are not enough to support doctoral studies. Extra funding is needed for transferable skills training, conference attendance and career services.

Disciplinary differences play a role in recruitment and admission procedures. There are differences mainly between sciences and engineering on the one hand, and social sciences and humanities on the other (different requirements concerning funding, selecting a supervisor, differences in recruitment, etc.).

Internationalisation of doctoral education brings new challenges. In the past, recruitment was nationally or locally based, now it has changed to a more diversified recruitment at national and international levels. International recruitment should become an integral part of institutional strategies. The numbers of applicants in most countries are growing. Candidates now come from all over the world and often from unknown institutions. Assessing authenticity and/or equivalence of foreign diplomas requires a lot of extra resources. Transparency of the process of international admission and selection remains a big challenge. Despite the increasing use of English as a lingua franca, the language barrier still exists and cannot be ignored.

Transparency of the whole process is increasingly important. All information, including detailed information about scholarships, should be available on university websites both in the national language and in English, and all positions should be internationally advertised.

In order to improve recruitment, admission and selection processes, more surveys among doctoral candidates and supervisors should be carried out to understand the needs and problems of the doctoral community.