

# Doctoral Studies

## Preamble

ESIB – The National Unions of Students in Europe has existed since 1982 to promote the educational, social, economic and cultural interests of students at the European level, and towards all relevant organisations and institutions. ESIB currently has 45 member organisations from 34 countries.

## Introduction

Since Berlin 2003, doctoral studies are considered as the third cycle in the degree structure according to the Bologna Process. This entails numerous discussions about the organisation of doctoral studies and also involves impacts of other action lines on doctoral studies. In some countries the third cycle system is not implemented yet and where this is the case, doctoral studies is also pursued in other cycles in higher education. ESIB stresses that all doctoral students must be adequately represented. ESIB represents doctoral students in more than half of its member countries and therefore is also very concerned about the overall situation of doctoral studies and in particular about the conditions for doctoral students. ESIB is also concerned about the access possibilities for students from earlier cycles to the third cycle. The third cycle needs to be a real choice for students finishing a second cycle degree and deciding on their further professional life. We also view it as important that students from all cycles are involved and interested in the conditions and quality of the education in all cycles of higher education. The term 'doctoral studies' is for the purposes of this policy paper used for all doctoral degrees, including PhD degrees by research or otherwise.

People going through doctoral studies, aiming at a third cycle degree (often a doctoral degree) are referred to in various ways. Common terms are "doctoral students", "PhDs" and "early stage researchers". ESIB prefers to call them doctoral students. When referring to doctoral students ESIB aims at all the individuals included in the above-mentioned terms.

The following paper is concentrating on an implemented third cycle and does not go into difficulties with implementation of the three cycle system.

## Definitions

Doctoral studies are organised differently in different European countries and institutions. Two different approaches to the organisation of doctoral programmes can be detected around Europe. The definitions from the European University Association are:

- "1. An individual study programme based on an informal to formal working alliance between a supervisor and a doctoral candidate (an apprenticeship model, sometimes described in a less complimentary way as a "master-slave" relationship) with no structured coursework phase;
2. A structured programme organised within research groups or research/graduate/doctoral schools with two phases: a taught phase (mandatory and voluntary courses or modules) and a research phase." (1)

## Purpose of doctoral studies

Doctoral studies should cater for a variety of purposes. The creation of new knowledge and through that the development of society are important goals. The Dublin descriptors, forming the basis for the European qualification frameworks, define the third cycle through a number of other important goals. Two of these desired outcomes are that students “have demonstrated a systematic understanding of a field of study and mastery of the skills and methods of research associated with that field;” and “can be expected to be able to promote, within academic and professional contexts, technological, social or cultural advancement in a knowledge based society.” The research component is an intrinsic part of doctoral studies. It can be either basic or applied research, but it needs to be original research. Doctoral students are trained to become fully independent researchers, at the same time as they to some extent already are exactly that.

Graduates of doctoral studies should be prepared for both an academic career and to work outside HEIs. It is furthermore necessary that doctoral studies provide opportunities for interdisciplinary so that the scope of research skills is not too limited.

Doctoral students should be provided with a Diploma Supplement in the same way as first and second cycle students. This would help recognising doctoral degrees in the EHEA and ERA and it would hopefully also make it clearer to employers outside of the academia what doctoral students are capable of adding to the enterprise, be it in the private or public sector. Furthermore it is important that employers outside of academia do not discriminate against applicants with a doctoral degree out of lack of knowledge about their qualifications or out of a fear of them being overqualified.

The importance of transferable skills needs to be stressed by the HEIs and the institutions needs to provide opportunities for the doctoral students to be able to develop these skills within the scope of the doctoral programmes.

## **Status of doctoral studies**

### **Status of doctoral students**

ESIB believes that doctoral students should have the same rights to participation as students in all other cycles and the social protections that employed people usually benefit from.

Doctoral students should be considered as students but also as early stage researchers. Higher education institutions (HEIs) should ensure that early stage researchers have the possibility to undertake teaching and research activities by using the infrastructure of their universities for free. They should be employed for these purposes also in order to have social security protection and rights. Doctoral students provide a significant amount of research at HEIs. Therefore it is the duty of HEIs to ensure that doctoral students have the same rights as an employee, either within or outside the institution. This is easiest secured by employing the doctoral students. If there are no possibilities to employ all doctoral students, they have to have secure funding for their studies and living costs, social and health assurance as well as other student benefits. ESIB is strongly against the creating of two distinct groups of doctoral students, being the one that have a more favourable social situation than the other. We underline the importance of that all doctoral students, no matter of how they are financed, have a secure social situation.

Doctoral students should have the same possibilities regarding participation as students in other cycles. It is very important that the doctoral students also in practice get adequate possibilities when participating in the governance in the HEI. Ensuring doctoral students that are actively participating extra time very well does this. In this way they do not, as a cause of participation, have any disadvantages in their doctoral studies or in other duties they might have at the institution. It is also important that they are granted students' benefits in terms of accommodation, public transport, etc.

## **Supervision and training**

All doctoral students should have more than one supervisor in order to allow for more and better working contacts and more varied consultations. This would furthermore reduce possibilities of unfair treatment and exploitation. It is apart from this also crucial to have guidelines regarding what the doctoral student can expect from the supervisor(s) and clear rules and systems that protect the doctoral student against different forms of maltreatment. Having more than one supervisor can never lead to that doctoral students are denied appropriate supervision being sent from one supervisor to the other.

Doctoral students should also have the right to change supervisor(s). When changing supervisor(s) it is crucial that doctoral students can continue their work and are not required to restart or redo research. It is important that doctoral students have the possibility of having both female and male supervisor(s)s. It must be avoided that the supervision status is abused for issues not connected to the programme of the doctoral studies.

Doctoral students must be entitled to get competent supervisor(s). To achieve this many supervisors needs to be trained for this work. Academic staff that wants or must become supervisors needs to get their competence validated. When such validation shows that the supervisor is lacking this competence, training needs to be mandatory undertaken before (s)he becomes a supervisor. Since supervision is an important part of the doctoral programmes, training for supervisors needs to be properly funded and this is the responsibility of both the state and the HEIs. Furthermore opportunities for consultation with peers in order to discuss arising situations should exist. It is also very important to consider the workload of the supervisors and make sure that they have time both for supervision and their own research and work in the HEI.

## **Guidance of doctoral studies**

In order to fully inform students willing to pursue either an academic or non-academic career, HEIs should include in all doctoral studies programmes a programme of guidance providing, amongst other things:

- Information about the requisites, when pursuing an academic career, needed to teach once the degree is complete, especially if these exceed the completion of the degree itself (for example, including further exams, further recognition of the degree by national commission, a certain number of articles published, or any other criteria that may not be known to the candidate);
- A serious and concrete overview concerning the immediate future after completion of the doctoral studies both within HEIs and outside of academia.

Guidance informing students in the first and second cycle of higher education about all important aspects of doctoral studies should also be provided.

In order to ensure a constant update of information regarding these issues, the HEIs should make sure that doctoral students are integrated properly in research teams and not let in a position where they are considered neither as students nor as staff members, and thus are not familiar with the research environment they wish to join.

## **ECTS**

ECTS credits should be allocated for the taught parts of the doctoral programmes. This will facilitate the mobility of

the doctoral students. It will also ensure a possibility of properly counting and keeping track of the workload for the taught parts of the doctoral programmes. Furthermore it allows for more flexible learning paths, such as part-time doctoral studies. It is of course important that ECTS credits are allocated after careful evaluation of the workload and the learning outcomes the course is supposed to lead to.

ECTS should also be given to the thesis part of the doctoral programme. Also in the thesis work it is possible to define learning outcomes and count workload to allocate ECTS credits. It is important to allocate ECTS credits also to the thesis part of the doctoral programmes in order to avoid a general overload of the programme. By saying that it is impossible to define learning outcomes and count workload for parts of the doctoral programme the whole concept of ECTS credits becomes undermined. ESIB believes that the problems concerning proper allocation of ECTS credits to the research part of the programmes will, as is also the case in the earlier cycles, only remain for a transitional period until HEI staff has learned how to properly allocate credits.

### **Structured and unstructured doctoral programmes**

One way to tackle many of the problems outlined in this paper could be to make doctoral programmes more structured. ESIB believes that structured doctoral programmes have many advantages over unstructured programmes when it comes to issues like equal access, mobility, recognition, quality assurance and guidance. Within the framework of a structured doctoral programme it can be easier both for the doctoral students and the academic staff to tackle these issues.

ESIB also believes that structured programmes often offer better opportunities for the doctoral students to develop their transversal and generic skills compared to unstructured programmes. This is in part a consequence of the inclusion of courses in structured programmes. The participants in these programmes very often also belong to a community of doctoral students, which widens the possibilities to train transversal and generic skills. To have access to a community of doctoral students can also strengthen the doctoral student and make it easier to address problems that occur within doctoral studies.

Around Europe there are many different traditions regarding the way the third cycle has been organised up to now. We believe that the way the third cycle is structured must fit into the tradition of the specific country or research area. In those cases where there are fewer structured doctoral programmes and the students rather enrol in individual programmes it is important that there is some form of "curriculum" or plan of work agreed between the doctoral student and the supervisor(s). This to make sure that the rights of all doctoral students are protected, no matter what type of programme they are attending. ESIB reaffirms the right of all students to counselling, support and the promotion of generic skills, whether a particular structural model is in place or not. We again underline the importance of not creating two distinct groups of doctoral students, where one group has better learning and research environment than the other.

Despite the many advantages of structured doctoral programmes it is crucial to point out the importance of having a balance between coursework, teaching and other types of institutional work and the research that doctoral students must manage. In the cases of structured doctoral programmes it is also important that the doctoral students have the opportunity to choose the courses they want to attend and have the opportunity to make a choice that suits their research project.

### **"Doctoral Students' Rights"**

#### **Admission**

The general admission criteria for doctoral studies should be the successful completion of a second cycle degree although there should also be access possibilities in place for graduates of first cycle studies if they have the necessary competences. Further admission criteria than just a degree from second cycle studies must not be necessary. All second cycle studies must give access to third cycle studies as has been stated in the Berlin Communiqué. This is also true for second cycle studies from polytechnics. Adding further admission criteria is a statement that the quality of second cycle studies is insufficient. This would have to be solved by quality assurance procedures for second cycle programmes and not by penalising the student who did not receive education of sufficient quality. Second cycle studies should equip students with the necessary competences in order to undertake research activities and enrol in doctoral studies. Doctoral students should have the possibility to have specific research training and training in methodological approaches. ESIB stresses that graduates of second cycle programmes must have admission to doctoral programmes in their field of studies as well as in other disciplines to allow for sufficient flexibility between second and third cycle studies. With regards to the recognition of prior learning the principles laid out in ESIBs policy paper on recognition of prior learning shall also be applicable to doctoral studies.

Students need to have clarity about their possibilities of progression when they enrol in higher education. The exact procedures for admission have to be publicly accessible and need to have a solid legal basis. They need to be transparent and should be the same for all HEIs at least at the national level. The availability of doctoral study places has to be made known.

ESIB believes that a degree from the second cycle should be the only requisite for entering the third cycle, but in the cases when there are other admission criteria admission decision should not be taken by one person only but by the faculty board or a similar representative body. It has to be ensured that all groups within the institution as well as underrepresented groups are represented in these admission bodies to adequately counter discriminatory practices in the decision making process.

The above said also applies to graduates from polytechnics or similar non-university HEIs. Also for the taught parts of doctoral studies, mechanisms for recognition of prior learning as well as for non-formal and informal learning should be in place. It is important that also for the third cycle possibilities of vertical mobility exist. Therefore the recognition of second cycle degrees is of utmost importance.

### **Polytechnics and Doctoral programmes**

Furthermore ESIB stresses that also polytechnics should have the possibility to award doctoral degrees, as long as they fulfil quality criteria. It is not an issue of prestige and tradition what type of institution is allowed to award which kind of degrees, but rather an issue of competences, quality and infrastructure. It is crucial that enough resources like staff and facilities are available, as otherwise these basic criteria cannot be upheld.

### **Quality assurance**

Quality assurance is an important part of the Bologna Process and this needs to be recognised also in the third cycle. The general quality of doctoral theses can be used as an indicator of the quality of research and research environments of the faculty, institution or programme. It is crucial that quality assurance procedures take account of specific standards and conditions of doctoral studies and research facilities. Quality assurance has to be undertaken at programme level, taking into account the specific and more individualised nature of most doctoral programmes. This has to include amongst others issues the quality of supervision, the living, studying and working conditions, the accessibility of doctoral studies (with special attention to gender equality, minority and accessibility issues), workload, and learning and research outcomes. The courses in taught parts of doctoral programmes should undergo similar quality assurance as is done in the first and second cycle. To make it possible for the

doctoral students to evaluate their studies without prejudice to their future studies, assessment or status, HEIs needs to provide opportunities of evaluation in a way that doctoral students feel secure.

## **Assessment**

The assessment of doctoral studies should be done by a group of people that are not those who supervise the doctoral student. The thesis needs to be publicly defended and published. However, measures have to be taken that the time of publication is determined by the student and not the supervisors or institution. Doctoral students must not be forced to wait for a possibility to get their degree just because supervisors, institution or partner companies wants to avoid publication of results until, for example, a patent is released. It should not in all areas be a requirement to have published articles before the assessment. There are different ways of publishing research outcomes and this depends to a large extent on the specific nature of the doctoral programme and the research project.

## **“Equal possibilities”**

## **Financial support for students, funding of doctoral studies and duration**

Doctoral students require social security and a safe financial situation in order to be able to concentrate on their work and to successfully finish it. This applies both to their personal life situation and their research project. Special attention should also be paid to visa and permit procedures of families of doctoral students. The burden of acquiring the funding of the research project should not be left to the student, nor to the supervisors, alone, but should be acquired by the supervisors and the HEI. It is important that the financing is granted for the time it would usually take to finish the studies. Special provisions have to be foreseen for students with special needs and financing has to be prolonged for them to successfully finish their studies. As often the workload in doctoral studies is not in accordance with the official duration of studies, it needs to be changed and the financing accordingly adjusted. The duration of doctoral studies depends on the field of study, the type of programme and the research project. It seems advisable that the usual duration of doctoral studies is 180-240 ECTS credits including the research project and related courses. It is crucial that a proper introduction, good supervision and sufficient facilities are in place in order to avoid structural duration problems. It is important to indicate a certain timeframe for the duration also in order to facilitate possibilities of students with a non-traditional background - it is also important to develop the possibilities for part-time doctoral studies and possibilities to combine doctoral studies with another work.

Governments and HEI needs to be aware of the fact that doctoral programmes are long-time investments that require a stable and unconditioned funding. The commitment to fund doctoral programmes must be recognised and undertaken both by governments and HEI. HEI must also not view doctoral programmes as only the time when students are in the third cycle, but must also recognise the importance of first and second cycle students being properly prepared for doctoral studies. Research elements therefore need to be present in all cycles of higher educations. This also requires proper investment in the students from the first day of their studies. Funding of doctoral students and doctoral programmes can never be done in such a way that the academic freedom is compromised. Public funding of doctoral programmes should be allocated also to research fields that do not bring direct economic profit.

## **Gender and Doctoral Studies**

Doctoral studies are a field where the gender pyramid in higher education becomes very visible. In most cases doctorate places are predominantly held by male students; the third cycle is also highly segregated according to gender. This reproduces gender inequalities, which have traditionally been present within the higher education system. This phenomenon may negatively affect the quality of doctoral studies and higher education in general, as it largely excludes women and results in a very male perspective on and approach to education and research. The reasons for the glass ceiling effect for women at doctoral level are largely structural and related to social norms and attitudes. These effects must therefore be fought on a structural level both within the HE system and in all other parts of the society. Positive discrimination mechanisms should be used to ensure better access for women in the third cycle of higher education, as well as within other cycles. The glass ceiling effect results from power structures hindering women to develop their capacities in science autonomously from the male perspective. Nevertheless this alone is not sufficient. Social norms and attitudes resulting in the discrimination based on gender have to be addressed, tackled and ultimately resolved both within and outside the HEIs to ensure equity of access to doctoral studies for both genders.

### **Minorities and Doctoral Studies**

Another area of great importance concerns minorities and doctoral studies. Not only the gender imbalance becomes extremely visible in the third cycle, but also the imbalance when it comes to how minorities are represented and treated in the third cycle becomes even clearer. Many of the problems addressed in the chapter on gender are also valid for minorities, therefore this part will deal more with what needs to be done in HEI when it comes to minority issues.

The ministers have through the Bologna declaration and subsequent documents made a commitment to create an EHEA. To make this goal fully successful attention must be paid to minority issues when considering equality and accessibility. For many students from minority backgrounds, higher education itself is inaccessible and remote. A sustained effort is therefore required to ensure progression and retention of students from all backgrounds into doctoral studies. This does not only mean that the number of doctoral students needs to be increased, this in itself will not solve the problem. Instead effort must be put into removing social and cultural barriers to doctoral studies. Training for supervisors needs to be designed in such way that the supervisors becomes aware of their own biases and what is sometimes a lack of understanding for other perspectives, both academically and on a broader term. Training on how to deal with and become aware of bias must be obligatory for all supervisors and it should regularly be repeated.

Students with disabilities need assistive technology (scanners, screen readers, translators) but also customised scientific equipment. This assistance is for some doctoral students the difference between participation and exclusion from doctoral studies. Doctoral students must be entitled to individual assessment of needs and the HEI must show commitment to these issues. The HEI also needs to be backed up financially to be able to properly take care of the needs of disabled doctoral students.

### **Socio-economic background**

Also regarding the socio-economic background of the individuals pursuing higher education, inequalities become more apparent and serious in the third cycle. The number of doctoral students that have a working-class background is in the majority of the countries in Europe very low. Therefore it is crucial that all students, no matter of social background, are provided with the opportunities and motivation to enter and finish third cycle studies.

Special measures to diminish social inequalities should be put in place in fields of study where these inequalities are a reality.

## **Mobility**

As one of the core features of the Bologna Process mobility should also be encouraged for students in the third cycle. Assistance in finding opportunities to study abroad is needed, as well as an increase in mobility schemes. It is important that financial help is provided for the period abroad. In addition to the salary that should be portable further funding might be needed in order to guarantee good living and studying conditions. At the moment we see some severe difficulties for doctoral students that have been mobile to get their time at a foreign institution recognised. If the third cycle is supposed to be a part of the Bologna Process these hindrances to mobility must disappear. Recognition of the period abroad needs to be secured and HEIs needs to put much more effort into making sure that this is done.

## **Conclusion**

ESIB concludes that it is important that doctoral students are treated as an equal part in the research environment they are in. They must have the opportunity to make autonomous decisions and enjoy a great amount of freedom in their learning and research environment. ESIB also underlines the importance of equal access to the third cycle and continuous equal opportunities to go through the third cycle no matter of gender, social economic or cultural background or the field of research.

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*1 EUA, "Doctoral programmes for the European Knowledge Society Report on the EUA Doctoral programmes Project 2004-2005" s. 13 EUA Publications 2005*