

'The Future of EU PhD Studies'

Background Paper for the EXACT-INCOOP-PEGASUS Roundtable

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OBJECTIVE/S

Which goals does a PhD student have to obtain to advance her or his career prospects? Which achievements does a PhD training network have to produce to be considered successful? There might be different priorities when it comes to answer these questions, but broad agreement could be expected for the following elements:

- A. On the one hand, the outcome should be a researcher with a PhD title, relevant work experience, improved academic, professional, social and soft skills, a strong CV, an international network of contacts and a rich research and publication record that has advanced the understanding in the field of research.
- B. On the other hand, the outcome should be a well-integrated consortium of academic and public/private sector partners with sustainable cooperation structures and improved public image, having benefitted in academic, social and financial terms from the presence, studies and work of the researchers.

The good news is that these goals are compatible in principle. They are, however, ambitious and not easy to achieve under circumstances that are characterised by competing interests, wide-ranging ideas and different academic cultures of students and institutions involved. There are many ways to achieve these objectives, but if they are to be combined in a short period of time, a structured programme is one of the most promising options.

Against this background and based on the experiences gained during the implementation of the Marie Curie Initial Training Network (ITN) EXACT (www.exact-training.net) from 2010 to 2013 the following text sets out five interconnected topics as the key priorities to be considered in the development of similar PhD training endeavours in the future: 'transsectoriality', 'internationality', 'mobility', 'rigidity and flexibility', and 'supervision'. Following the assumption that the achievement of the objectives listed under 'B' are contingent upon the 'A' objectives, the focus will be on conditions facilitating the latter.

PRIORITIES

i) Transsectoriality

Future PhD studies must go beyond academic borders and include a training phase in the working world. The combination of academic and professional training – i.e. the integration of work experience in the relevant public or private sectors (e.g. think tanks, civil services, or NGOs) as well as in the academic field into a fully-fledged PhD study programme – does prepare PhD students better for the job market than conventional concepts. This combination is anything but artificial since a lot of the work done in the public and private sectors is of academic nature. Similarly, academic careers require professional skills associated with the non-academic working world.

The combination of these training elements has to take place in a structured and integrated manner to make the most of the limited time and to facilitate constant progress of the PhD research. As a natural linchpin that ties together the academic and the professional training, the student's PhD project should be at the heart of the training activities: PhD courses can be tailored to have direct relevance for the individual PhD project and advance every individual thesis; Professional skills can be trained by in-house training with a direct focus on the PhD project; Teaching experiences can be acquired in the field of PhD research. Even with this narrower focus the work experience can sufficiently broaden the spectrum of activities and the perspective of the student. Vice versa, institutional partners can benefit more from the researcher's presence if using his or her special knowledge in the area of the individual PhD project, for instance regarding publications or teaching activities.

ii) Internationality

Future EU PhD studies must be international with regard to (1) the field of research; (2) the composition of the institutions and external scientists; (3) the composition of the group of PhD students; (4) the training activities in general; and (5) the PhD studies in particular. The internationalisation of these five dimensions reflects the demands arising from today's job market in a globalised research and working environment; it contributes to better research and training capacities, improved social competences and a wider network of contacts than conventional concepts.

Although the study of the European Union can be approached from various perspectives and disciplines, the study area of a PhD programme with EU focus is hardly thinkable to be not 'international' in one sense or the other. But true internationality means more than an international topic, regardless of the exact field of research. On a structural level it means that both training institutions and participants do not come from single member states or different EU countries, but from all over the world. It also means that challenges linked to mobility for researcher and training, for instance visa issues and housing solutions, are considered in the setup of the programme. The diverse backgrounds of the participants necessitate a common training phase for all students in the beginning of the programme to provide a common ground for studies and specific training elements targeted towards work and research in an international environment.

Finally, true internationality means that the training programme offered by international partners is internationally concerted. That means, for instance, that scope and quality of the training and the 'work load' are comparable at all institutions.

Furthermore, a double PhD degree – a study programme jointly offered by two universities and completed with a degree awarded by both institutions – adds particular value if coursework, supervision and research environment of the involved universities complement each other and avoid duplications.

iii) Mobility

Following the demand for transsectoriality and internationality future PhD studies must facilitate mobility of researchers. The research and work experience in different institutions and countries better prepares employees and researchers for the future work environment in the European Union, which is characterised by mobility.

Still, in a PhD programme mobility is not a value in itself. It is a means to achieve training objectives, many of which necessitate travelling (e.g. for study and interview trips) or moving (e.g. following the secondment to a private sector training stage) to other places. Therefore, a financial regime that allows for active travelling is certainly to the benefit of research in principle.

But mobility comes with transaction costs that can also prevent rather than facilitate the achievement of goals, adding distractions rather than value. Mobility must therefore be adequately regulated and integrated into the programme. This is also true for travelling related to the completion of compulsory training elements or double PhD course work.

However, not only should decisions with mobility implications be assessed by researchers and supervisors in view of their impact on the achievement of goals. At the same time, the costs of mobility must be kept to a minimum. Most importantly, good preparation and solutions are needed for technical questions such as employment contracts and social security issues. Shortcomings in the administration of mobility can mean considerable burden or even obstacles to the researchers and should be avoided by all means.

Finally, the opportunity structures for mobility need to follow clear rules. Considerable travel budgets offer great chances, but can lead to busy travel agendas with limited value for PhD project or training if they are combined with loose monitoring or supervision systems.

iv) Rigidity and Flexibility

Future EU PhD studies must find the right balance between duties, deadlines and compulsory training elements for all students on the one hand, and flexible, tailor-made solutions and specific opportunities for the individual on the other. Since working styles, research projects and characters differ there is no ideal mix of obligations and freedoms, of rights and responsibilities that could perfectly fit every researcher's needs. In order to achieve the best academic and professional training results a fundamental flexibility must be inherent to the PhD programme to provide an adequate framework for different students at the same time. However, not only in view of the manageability of the project, flexibility has its limits:

Rigidity

First, there are elements in a successful PhD programme that are not negotiable. Diverging interpretations concerning the quality of research, the commitment to the project, the time investment, and the professional administration on the end of both PhD researchers and the consortium unavoidably lead to sub-optimal results.

Second, a training consortium must follow its plan built on expertise and experience, regardless of the fact that some elements might be less appreciated by the students. A comprehensive training programme and the goal to integrate the researchers into the work life of an institution inevitably include tasks that are not directly linked to individual PhD projects or that some participants are already familiar with.

Furthermore, the value of specific measures is sometimes not immediately acknowledged by the students; but their assessment can change afterwards or over time.

Flexibility

At the same time, the PhD programme should make any effort to turn general obligations into flexible, individualised opportunities. This can be done by several means:

First, generally speaking, students should engage in the planning and organisation of training elements. Their participation in the preparatory phases optimises the setup of the training and increases ownership.

Second, a flexible list of tasks and duties, from which the PhD researcher can choose at the beginning of a training phase, can form the basis of the training and work agreement.

Third, the programme structure could offer, whenever possible, flexible timing, for instance for the scheduling of the professional training or the training of specific skills in an external framework.

Fourth, fellows should be given the opportunity to find a place for a secondment or internship outside the training network (e.g. in one of the European institutions) if this complements their research project and improves their career prospects.

v) Supervision

Future EU PhD studies must entail forms of supervision that meet the demands arising from a truly international programme which combines academic and professional training. In the light of a comprehensive set of training activities with duties and deadlines, and constant mobility in a limited period of time, supervision is of particular importance.

There are different types of supervision depending on academic cultures and personal convictions. Supervision can range from purely monitoring functions during few yearly meetings to close and weekly exchange; it can take the form of feedback on the grand design of a research project or comprise detailed interventions on a micro-level. Depending on the researcher and the phase of research, almost all kinds of supervision can be valuable for the progress of a PhD thesis and the achievement of training objectives, but a combination of them appears particularly promising if scheduled well.

For instance, feedback on conceptual questions is particularly important in the early beginning of the programme, whereas methodological advice or encouragement can become more relevant at later stages.

Feedback and guidance should come from different scholars – be it in the framework of a double PhD, be it in the form of seminars and summer schools with the participation of external trainers. The right mix or pool of supervisors across institutions and training phases contributes to a successful PhD project by adding expertise and supervision time. Incompatibility of the supervisors' assistance is unlikely if based on joint understanding of scientific standards and the *acquis académique*. Still, the researcher needs a primary academic supervisor who is available in all phases of the programme, including the training phase focusing on professional skills.

Supervision links the dimensions of rigidity and flexibility with the question how to balance guidance and independence. Regular opportunity for contact throughout the programme is most important, but an additional pre-defined meeting schedule that enforces the joint review of progress between the main supervisor and the students is necessary too. However, there is no such logic guaranteeing that more supervision automatically leads to faster progress or better results. In fact, deadlines and meetings can lose their effects if scheduled too tightly. Many students may still prefer a close and regular supervision structure, even at the risk that too close or too detailed guidance can prevent them from developing own approaches and relying on own ideas. Provided that supervision should aim primarily at the achievement of the best possible training results, it depends on the goals of the PhD programme which supervision style is applied best. For instance, if independence or self-dependence of researchers is among the priorities, the supervisory framework needs to take this into account.

Finally, supervision structures must not only respond to the objectives of the PhD programme, they must also reflect the environment and reality of the higher education institutions involved. Consequently, the programme and financial regimes should not ignore the time and work related to supervision. This can be done by both providing adequate resources to bring in additional supervision capacities and by including the supervisors' investments as part of the overall calculation.

CONCLUSIONS

The attempt to improve future EU PhD programmes cannot be seriously undertaken without an assessment of the experiences of the past. The priorities for future programmes set out in this paper illustrate this approach. A critical evaluation, however, does not necessarily mean that a certain setup or certain decisions were wrong altogether. In fact, scholars familiar with EXACT – the PhD programme that inspired this paper in particular – will find out that many of the elements recommended to be considered in the future were built into the EXACT training network already.

Yet, the most fundamental conclusion is that the planning and implementation of a PhD study programme PhD in the field of EU studies is – unsurprisingly – full of challenges. Luckily, two rather simple decisions can be considered relatively effective to master a lot of these challenges:

First, a practical insight is that a detailed work plan agreed on by fellows and institutions can be the key to a balanced combination of compulsory duties and flexible opportunities – and therefore the key to ease many tensions. If jointly developed and monitored it should trigger the necessary commitment of both sides. It can also help to avoid the unfortunate situation that the researcher's status alternates between that of a PhD student and that of an employee, rather than endorsing the comprehensive concept of training activities. However, a PhD programme provides a framework for training, commits resources, establishes incentives structures and opportunities, but at the end of the day it remains the responsibility of the student to make the best use of it.

Second, a smoothly operating PhD programme should be 'initial' in terms of the sort of training it provides. Students at an initial stage of their career should benefit from initial training and initial work experience to initiate a successful development of their professions. However, in order to avoid initial problems, the PhD programme should not be 'initial' in its setup, its composition of the consortium, its training programme and management structures. In fact, a great share of challenges can be mastered if training and management can build on previous experiences.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the objectives outlined in the introductory part of this paper meet – or at least have met in 2009 – the criteria set out by the European Commission to receive funding for an endeavour like EXACT. Emphasis is put on the development of career prospects and on qualified personnel, which the job market wants a study programme to 'produce'. Future EU PhD programmes should reflect the demand for professional skills and qualifications, but the programmes should never lose track of the original goal of a *PhD* training programme: the education of academic scholars. After all, the best what a successful PhD programme can 'produce' is an independent researcher.