

Outcomes from the Global Strategic Forum on Doctoral Education

Aarhus University, Denmark, 11-12 April 2011

On the 11 and 12 April 2011, a group of university leaders and experts on doctoral education met at Aarhus University, Denmark, to discuss the global aspects of doctoral education. The participants, representing 31 countries from 6 continents and 5 regional university associations, shared a number of fundamental ideas and challenges concerning doctoral education, emphasising the point of departure for the meeting, that doctoral education is embedded in a global research community.

Doctoral education can be found at the heart of a wide variety of important topics today, whether the challenge is to diversify economies, develop knowledge societies, expand the higher education sector or stimulate innovation to meet societal challenges, it has a key role to play. Despite the diverse societal contexts of the participants in the meeting, all recognise that these issues pose major challenges for universities in their region. The points below illustrate the concrete issues and indicate ways in which it may be possible to meet the challenges of developing doctoral education globally.

The Global Research Community

Research finds itself in a situation of extraordinary possibility. Due to unprecedented ease of communication and travel, we have the ability to appreciate and utilise fully the various sources of human knowledge springing from cultures and societies around the globe. At the same time, the different regions of the world are facing a number of similar challenges in the fields of energy, climate and economic sustainability, as well as crises in terms of social cohesion and identity.

Universities, which have always been places of international interaction, have a key role to play in producing research that can address the challenges faced globally and in each region of the world. They form an increasingly integrated global research community which has the power to help society, in its broadest context, reach its goals. Doctoral education nurtures the roots of this global research community; doctoral candidates comprise the most mobile element of the community, they produce considerable knowledge, and – crucially – doctoral education is central to the sustainability of universities' research and teaching missions.

The global research community thrives by recognising diversity. **It is necessary to emphasise and promote the multi-polar nature of the community by securing broad access to knowledge globally as well as disseminating local knowledge and local paradigms of thinking**, which could challenge academic hegemonies.

Critical Mass and Capacity Building

Doctoral education must be based on original research and is dependent on vibrant research environments. Across the continents, the issue of attaining a critical mass of research to sustain these environments is central to developing doctoral education. Strong institutional leadership is essential for developing research capacity for doctoral education, and instruments such as doctoral schools have proven an effective vehicle for implementing institutional strategies. Both locally and globally, however, there are significant asymmetries in the distribution of research capacity.

Development and circulation of talent is paramount in terms of cultivating research capacity. The exchange of knowledge through global circulation of talent has greatly contributed to building research capacity in many places. Sending scholars abroad, even with moderate rates of return to the home country, can assist in developing local institutions and creating critical mass of research in the long term. Those who do not return are not always considered an unequivocal 'loss' since they can provide valuable connections and collaborations. However, asymmetric circulation of talent – brain-drain – is a concrete and urgent problem in some regions, while receiving countries risk being over-dependent on foreign talent and neglecting their local talent development.

Collaboration between universities should take into account the sharing and common development of research capacity. Differences in research infrastructures and supervisory capacity should be taken into account, and it is central to aim for reaching a critical mass of research by sharing resources and complementing each other's strengths and particularities.

It is important that career opportunities for doctorate holders are available within universities in order to sustain capacity building.

Mobility schemes and collaborations between institutions should explicitly take capacity building into account in order to mutually increase the excellence of all partners; they should include mechanisms that facilitate the return of scholars to their home country.

Stakeholder Dialogue

Universities supply society at large with doctorate holders who possess a research mindset and the ability to enrich any sector in which they might become involved. For this reason, engagement with society at large is central to fulfilling the mission of providing doctoral education. This engagement can take many forms, from intensive dialogue with political stakeholders, to involvement of the private and non-profit sector in specific collaborative programmes. Dialogue with stakeholders raises the awareness of the value of doctoral education as well as highlighting the diverse range of career paths for doctorate holders.

Successful development of doctoral education requires strong support. In particular, public investment in doctoral education has made a significant and positive contribution in many parts of the world. Such investments must take into account the capacity of institutions to provide a quality research environment and to build the research capacity that serves as the basis for doctoral education.

Dialogue with and the support of a wide range of stakeholders is central to developing doctoral education which can make a significant impact on society, including an understanding of the importance of developing local knowledge while also cultivating an international research environment.

Conclusion

The challenge of doctoral education and of the global research community lies in promoting the fruitful interplay between global and local. Local knowledge needs to be sustained by global acknowledgement and dissemination; global collaborations need to take into account local capacity building needs. Universities act as the interface between the global research community and local stakeholders; they have a unique mission in producing and disseminating knowledge and cultivating the research mindset. Doctoral education occupies a central position in fulfilling these important roles; it is the basis for meeting the challenges and fulfilling the ambitions of a global research community.