

Doctoral Education through the Lenses of the Bologna Process

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Abstract: The agenda of Higher Educational institutions and other organisations reveals a growing concern with the extension and impact of research at the postgraduate level. Doctoral studies are thus acquiring a greater significance and value. The international and European context demonstrates the existence of an increasing number and a greater diversity of research students enrolling in postgraduate studies, particularly in doctoral programmes. Consequently, it is the purpose of this paper to examine doctoral education through the lenses of the Bologna Process. This perspective is chosen particularly due to the importance of Bologna at educational, political, economic, and social levels in Europe but also beyond. In fact, among other discourses, Bologna has been shaping the 'trends' relating to doctoral education. Alongside with Bologna Ministerial documents, others from some consultative members (the so-called 'E4 group') are analysed. In the last section, some main challenges to doctoral education are highlighted.

Keywords: Higher Education, Bologna Process, Educational Policy, Doctoral Education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Doctoral education is currently high on the higher education policy agenda in Europe. It does not only represent the most important interface between two major reform processes, the Bologna Process to create a European Higher Education Area and the Lisbon Strategy to create a European Area of Research and Innovation; it is also a focal point in national and regional policies vis-à-vis the emerging knowledge societies and economies (Kehm 2009:229).

The quotation that opens this introduction points out that the topic of this paper is not only relevant to be discussed at educational level, but should also be considered as economically, socially and mainly politically-driven. It suits this theoretical reflection with a supra-national relevance, because of the close interconnection between the European Higher Education (HE) Area and the European Area of Research and Innovation, which (alongside with a more 'instrumental' agenda such as the Lisbon Strategy) has the main objective the construction of the *Europe of Knowledge*. Indeed, it is inevitable to focus on the Bologna Process when approaching the European HE policy, particularly since 1999 - or even before with the Sorbonne Declaration (1998) that might be viewed as a 'prelude' to Bologna. Moreover, the Bologna Process contextualises the European educational, social, cultural, economic and political movements and

commitments towards the *Europe of Knowledge*, which is

widely recognised as an irreplaceable factor for social and human growth and as an indispensable component to consolidate and enrich the European citizenship, capable of giving its citizens the necessary competences to face the challenges of the new millennium, together with an awareness of shared values and belonging to a common social and cultural space (Bologna Declaration 1999:no page).

Consequently, we may assume that postgraduate studies and research (where the doctorate – the third cycle of Bologna – suits itself of a greater importance) are essential to achieve that goal, as the various Bologna Ministerial documents and others produced by Bologna's consultative members seem to demonstrate, as it will be explored throughout this paper. In the final section of this theoretical approach, a reflection about the challenges of the European HE policy, stimulated by Bologna, to doctoral education will be shared.

To conclude the introduction, it cannot be forgotten that the Bologna Process is undeniably critical for the shaping of European HE policy, namely at doctoral level (one of the first 'formal' steps towards a research career). It is thus essential to understand the place of doctoral research within the European educational policy, even to foster comparisons with what is/has happened in different parts of the globe. It could also be assumed that the importance of this systematisation goes beyond Europe's frontiers, calling for a wider academic audience because of the intense cooperation and dialogue between HE institutions of the European

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HE Area with other institutions from other regions of the world (and vice-versa). Theoretical syntheses might be central to understand the transformation of HE policies in Europe and beyond.

2. PREAMBLE: WHAT IS THE BOLOGNA PROCESS?

The Bologna Process is named after the Bologna Declaration, signed in the city of Bologna on the 9th of June of 1999 by 29 European HE Ministers. This document prescribed the European educational, social, cultural, economic and political commitments and movements towards the construction of the *Europe of knowledge*, and the creation of the European HE Area (in future documents adding the European Area of Lifelong Learning as well as the European Area for Research and Innovation).

The main objectives that underline the ongoing Process which was introduced by the Bologna Declaration (1999) are: (i) the adoption of *easily readable and comparable degrees*; (ii) the *adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles* (the third cycle related to doctoral studies was established in 2003); (iii) the *establishment of a system of credits*; (iv) the *promotion of mobility* of staff and students; (v) the *promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance, with comparable criteria and methodologies*; and (vi) the promotion of European institutional co-operation, *integrated programmes of study, training and research* that need to *continuously adapt to changing needs, societies demands and advances in scientific knowledge* (no pages). Nevertheless, other objectives (or the above more specified) were added and/or clarified throughout the years.

Even though a specific attention has not been paid to the third cycle of studies in 1999 (which was formally introduced only in the Berlin Communiqué in 2003), the assumption of an European co-operation in terms of research as a priority demonstrates not only the importance given to research, but also opens the space for further discussions and actions around the topic. In fact, the establishment of the third cycle and references to research activities and careers are strongly framed in some Ministerial documents – as it will be approached in the next section. Finally, it may be stated that the previous Bologna objectives, though not connected to specific levels of study but easily linked, should be considered ‘independent’ objectives to be achieved throughout the years, using different

strategies and with the ‘help’/intervention of diverse Bologna partners.

3. DOCTORAL EDUCATION IN BOLOGNA MINISTERIAL DOCUMENTS: AN OVERVIEW THROUGHOUT THE YEARS

In 2003, the Berlin Communiqué underlines that the *two pillars of the knowledge based society* are the European HE Area and the European Research Area, which should be closely linked: it is, in fact, expected a synergy in Bologna countries to foster Europe’s innovation as well as social and economic development. The foundations of those two pillars are identified as research, innovation, mobility, and quality.

Within the 2003 Communiqué it is assumed that the second cycle of studies *should give access to doctoral studies* (2003:4). The third cycle of studies and research is considered extremely relevant for the competitiveness of the European HE system, at social, technological and cultural levels. There is thus an emphasis on: (i) research training, (ii) the promotion of interdisciplinarity, (iii) the need of increased mobility at doctoral and postdoctoral levels; (iv) the need of European co-operation in doctoral studies and programmes, and the establishment of networks; and (v) the need of financial support from each country and European bodies to research.

From 2003 it is also important to retain the promotion of the design of a Bologna qualifications framework, which encloses all levels of study:

Ministers encourage the member States to elaborate a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications for their higher education systems, which should seek to describe qualifications in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile. They also undertake to elaborate an overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area (Berlin Communiqué 2003:4).

Following this objective, the Joint Quality Initiative Informal Group created the ‘Dublin Descriptors’ for the three levels of study that were formally adopted in 2005 as the Bologna Qualifications Framework (Bergen Communiqué 2005), which should then be implemented in the form of national frameworks for qualifications. The Bologna Framework is mentioned in the next subsection.

Bergen Communiqué stresses as a further challenge and priority: the enhancement of research and the importance of research in underpinning higher education for the economic cultural development of our societies and for social cohesion (2005:3). It is interesting to notice the links between research, cultural and social aims, in addition to the 'expected' financial impact.

Moreover, in 2005 Communiqué, research and research training are central in fostering quality and enhancing the competitiveness and attractiveness of the European HE Area. Therefore, further links between HE institutions and other sectors, where research is promoted and carried out, should be developed to achieve a coherent and strong Europe of knowledge.

It is worthwhile to observe, in this Communiqué, the level of detail given to doctoral level qualification: (i) it should be aligned with the overarching framework for qualifications of the European HE Area; (ii) the core aim of the doctorate should be the advancement of knowledge through original research; (iii) there is the need to have a transparent supervision and assessment; (iv) the doctorate should be finished in a normal timescale of 3-4 years (full-time); (v) doctoral training should be as interdisciplinary as possible, and focused on transferable skills to answer the 'wider' labour market; (vi) the number of doctorate holders moving to research careers should increase, and (vii) doctoral candidates/students should be considered 'early stage researchers'. In fact, due to the significance of this topic, it was asked the European Universities Association (one of the main Bologna partners) to develop 'basic principles for doctoral programmes'. Discussions were held and the 'Salzburg Recommendations' were established to be the 'ten principles for the third cycle' (Christensen 2005; EUA 2010). These will be highlighted in the next subsection.

London Communiqué (2007) reaffirms the importance of continuing to adapt and further develop the European HE system so it can remain competitive and *can respond effectively to the challenges of globalisation* (2007:1). The assumption of the central place of HE institutions as *centres of learning, research, creativity and knowledge transfer* (2007:1) is undeniable. Therefore, it is essential, among other things, to stimulate research and innovation as well as its quality, particularly in a time with increased numbers of doctoral candidates/students. Consequently, actions around the following aspects should be stimulated: (i)

increase in the mobility of staff and doctoral students; (ii) development of a 'fluid' access and progression between cycles of studies; (iii) development of a wide range of doctoral programmes that should be embedded in *institutional strategies and policies* (2007:5); (iv) promotion of discussions about the curriculum at doctoral level, which should answer the needs of the labour market; and (v) improvement of *the status, career prospects and funding for early stage researchers* (2007:4). Furthermore, the links with the European Universities Association are reinforced.

Two years later, Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué (2009) reiterates most of the perspectives identified in previous Ministerial documents, while recognising the *global financial and economic crisis* (2009:1). Specifically, it is mentioned that the Europe of knowledge should be *highly creative and innovative* (2009:1) and that a *broad, advanced knowledge base and stimulating research and innovation* (2009:1) should be created, among other aspects. Therefore, the emphasis might be put on (i) linking *education and research at all levels* (2009:1) and on a student-centred learning, teaching and curriculum; (ii) equipping students from all levels *with the advanced knowledge, skills and competences* (2009:3) required by the labour market; and (iii) promoting mobility opportunities for staff, students and early stage researchers.

Particularly related to doctoral level, in Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué (2009) there is the ambition of increasing the number of people with research competences. In terms of training, it is recognised that *doctoral programmes should provide high quality disciplinary research* (2009:4), which should be *complemented by inter-disciplinary and inter-sectoral programmes* (2009:4). This might strengthen the employability profile of doctoral students/early stage researchers. In fact, making the career development of early stage researchers more attractive remains a main objective.

In Bucharest Communiqué (2012) the economic and financial crisis continues to be recognised not only with implications to society, but also affecting HE, namely in terms of funding available and 'permanent' graduates' job prospects. Nevertheless, it is realised that: *Strong and accountable higher education systems provide the foundations for thriving knowledge societies. Higher Education should be at the heart of our efforts to overcome the crisis* (2012:1).

Despite of the changes in the European context, the commitment in achieving Bologna's objectives persists. In what regards research and innovation, it is reiterated the relevance of encouraging *knowledge-based alliances in the EHEA, focusing on research and technology* (p.5), and of establishing links with the labour market/employers, important external stakeholders to boost graduates' (as well as early stage researchers') careers: (...) *improving cooperation between employers, students and higher education institutions, especially in the development of study programmes (...) help (to) increase the innovation, entrepreneurial and research potential of graduates* (2012:2). This Communiqué continues to highlight that the links between research, teaching and learning at all levels of study should be stronger and made more explicit. In fact, *research should underpin teaching and learning* (2012:2).

Specifically related to doctoral training, quality, transparency, employability and mobility need to be promoted, in order to build *additional bridges between the EHEA and the ERA* (2012:5). It is interesting to observe that these priorities took into consideration the 'Salzburg II Recommendations' (by the European Universities Association – EUA 2010), and the 'Principles for Innovative Doctoral Training' (by the European Commission 2011), which we will be focusing on in the subsection below.

More recently, Yerevan Communiqué (2015) stresses the continuing economic and social crisis, re-emphasising that the European HE Area is essential to address current challenges and to overcome difficulties. Curiously, no references to doctorate level and research are found in this document. It is only mentioned the need of developing entrepreneurship and innovation in all graduates to answer the imperatives of the changing labour market, and the need of bringing research, teaching and learning together.

3.1. Three Documents = Intertwined Aims

One Bologna's objective was (or still is) to achieve compatible and comparable degrees, namely to facilitate the mobility of staff and students from diverse levels of study. The Joint Quality Initiative Informal Group (2003, 2004a, 2004b) elaborated what are called the 'Dublin Descriptors', which were adopted as the Bologna Qualifications Framework in 2005 (as it was already referred to above). As the Descriptors are presented, they might be adaptable by each country to

suit its own needs, culture, HE system, though at doctoral level it is not expected to exist over-regulation, following what Bologna Communiqués highlighted. Moreover, the Descriptors might be characterised as transparent, allowing quality assurance and self-regulation.

The learning outcomes for the third cycle that the Framework for qualifications of the European HE Area identifies seem to characterise doctoral research as 'composed' by the following interconnected aspects:

- (i) The enhancement of a set of personal, social, academic and professional competences that will be essential for the doctorate holder to be successful both in a doctoral research and in a future professional path, which may be inside or outside Academia (thus, we may refer to a diverse high-level transferable competences) – e.g. (...) *are capable of critical analysis, evaluation and synthesis of new and complex ideas; can communicate with peers, the larger scholarly community and with society* (...) (Joint Quality Initiative Informal Group 2004b);
- (ii) The creation of a final product that is mostly characterised by originality, which may be considered one of the most important aspects that define the nature and/or purpose of the doctorate – e.g. (...) *have made a contribution through original research that extends the frontier of knowledge by developing a substantial body of work, some of which merits national or international refereed publication* (Joint Quality Initiative Informal Group 2004b).

It is interesting to observe that, after the definition of this overarching framework, the European Universities Association, in February of 2005, carried out a seminar for which 'ten basic principles for the third cycle' were systematised, which were agreed upon by the HE Ministers in May of 2005 (Bergen Communiqué). The 'Salzburg Recommendations' (Christensen 2005; EUA 2010) reinforce what could be found in Bologna Communiqués but in a more organised manner. The ten topics are: (i) the advancement of knowledge through original research; (ii) doctoral programmes embedded in institutional strategies and policies; (iii) European joint doctoral programmes; (iv) doctoral candidates/students recognised as early career researchers; (v) the importance of supervision and assessment for the success of the doctoral experience; (vi) the aim for critical mass and innovation; (vii) the

duration of a PhD; (viii) the focus of doctoral training on interdisciplinarity and transferable skills; (ix) increased mobility and partnerships; and (x) appropriate and sustainable funding.

Additionally, the 'Principles for Innovative Doctoral Training' (European Commission 2011) continues to address some of the same issues, such as: interdisciplinary research, training in transferable skills, mobility and networking through joint degrees, for instance. However, it points out the need for: aiming at quality assurance in doctoral education; expanding the contact of doctoral research with external stakeholders (from the labour market and beyond) for training, funding, networking, knowledge transfer activities; creating an attractive institutional environment; and aiming at research excellence.

4. CONTRIBUTION OF THE E4 GROUP TO YEREVAN COMMUNIQUÉ: THE MOST RECENT TRENDS

In addition to the previous systematisation, it is enriching to focus on the contribution of the consultative members of the European HE Area, particularly considering the E4 group. This group, close to the Bologna Follow-Up Group, is constituted by the European Students' Union, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education, and the European Universities Association. Each Association has its own role and, accordingly, the suggestions they share with Bologna HE Ministers, previously to each European HE Area Ministerial Conference, fall under the remit of each group, though always framed by Bologna objectives and priorities identified in each meeting. The recommendations made to HE Ministers that took part in Yerevan Communiqué in 2015 will be highlighted, since this was the last Bologna Ministerial Meeting to be held. Following the topic of this paper, the objective is to analyse if doctoral education is mentioned, and what the approach or emphasis is used.

The European Students' Union (ESU 2015a) just briefly mentions the third cycle of Bologna. It is stressed that the three-cycle system has been implemented in the majority of the countries of the European HE Area, though there are some variations regarding what constitutes (or should constitute) each cycle. Thus, there should be more political engagement and consistency in implementing structural reforms, not only at central/national level, but mainly at institutional level.

When mentioning the diversity of student representatives (ESU 2015a), it is agreed that students of all levels should be represented in decision-making structures. Nevertheless, there is a particular concern with the heavy workload in terms of *research or teaching responsibilities of Masters and PhD students* (ESU 2015a:17), since this is viewed as an obstacle to involvement/engagement. In the Statement presented by ESU to the Ministerial Conference (2015b), the focus is on *genuine academic freedom for students and academics* (2015b:3-4) in organising themselves in legally organised entities, where they have the freedom of expression. No academic, legal or financial repercussions should come from sharing opinions and views.

Recommendations from the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA 2015) to Ministers responsible for HE in the European HE Area address several interconnected issues: the adoption of the revised European framework for quality assurance; the promotion of the independence of quality assurance agencies; the contribution to the development of guidelines of good practice related to quality assurance activities; the transparency and availability of quality assurance reports; and the independence of quality assurance agencies. Though not explicitly focused on doctoral level, quality assurance instruments, policies and practices are central for the transparency of the Bologna system.

The European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) might be characterised in the following way:

EURASHE holds the view that all institutions of professional higher education have a three-fold mission, i.e. teaching, research and services to the community. Their scope and focus depend on the specific profile and mission of the institution, and may have varying stresses and outputs. Professionally-oriented institutions and programmes with their close links to the world of work and regional embedding, emphasise the key role of learning and share a broad interpretation of innovation and research aiming at practical applications and product development (EURASHE 2015:2).

The focus of EURASHE's analysis and insights is on professional-oriented HE institutions and the link to the labour market, as well as regional impact of

research outputs. Even though there is no explicit reference to the doctoral level, there is the premise that the research, development and innovation agenda should *be informed by the world of work in order to meet the needs of society and of the world of work* (EURASHE 2015:10). Accordingly, it is stated there should be a fruitful interaction between researchers and stakeholders – aspect that, in fact, has been explored in several Bologna Communiqués (as it can be observed above). Additionally, research, development and innovation activities undertaken at professional HE institutions should be recognised. Research is therefore not subsumed to the ‘traditional’ HE context, but it is closely in dialogue with professional sectors. In fact, the ‘world of work’ requires transferable competences from the graduates that allow them to cope with complexity, unpredictability and change.

The European Universities Association (EUA) is not only a consultative member of the European HE Area, but it actually plays an essential role, namely at decision-making level, in the Bologna Process (as it was highlighted in at least two Communiqués). EUA guarantees that the voice of European Universities are heard throughout the decision-making process, impacting on discussions and negotiations, namely related to the implementation of the Bologna Process.

The publication ‘Trends 2015’ (Sursock 2015) presents the results of questionnaires (responded by 451 European HE institutions from 46 countries), which *document the universities’ perceptions of the changes that have taken place in European higher education in the past five years particularly in relation to learning and teaching* (2015:10). Considering the topic of this paper, specific aspects are identified: (i) 44% HE institutions offer joint programmes with HE institutions in other countries at doctoral level (as Bologna Communiqués prioritise); (ii) 49% HE institutions mention an increase in the number of students (particularly during the last five years) at doctoral level (fact that was also pointed out in Bologna Communiqués), and in some cases *stricter requirements for academic staff to hold doctoral qualifications* (2015:60); and, simultaneously, there is a growing diversity among the student body, though the analysis does not separate the levels of study.

5. FINAL THOUGHTS: CHALLENGES TO DOCTORAL EDUCATION

Documents from Bologna Ministerial documents and others from consultative associations reveal an

awareness and concern about the nature and practice of research in general, and doctoral studies and research in particular. The European educational agenda discloses a strengthening idea regarding the importance and the need of research at postgraduate level, due to different types of concerns, priorities, and discourses. Therefore, challenges to doctoral education emerge:

- Massification at diverse levels of study, namely at doctoral level, and simultaneously a growing heterogeneity of students’ profiles are two important aspects to consider. Additionally, there is the same number of academics to supervise (the emerging numbers and profiles of) doctoral candidates/students. It could then be asked: if the literature in the field assumes that the relationship between the doctoral student and supervisor is one of the main factors for PhD completion, how to deal with the quality of the supervision (in practice), when there is an increase in the numbers (and profiles) of the students that the academics need to supervise? How can a quality culture be assured and promoted?
- External stakeholders (namely the civil society, the labour market, governmental and economic spheres), and the increasing number of agendas within the HE sector are multiplying the pressures put on the HE and, particularly, in the research that is developed at doctoral level and beyond. Thus, what commitments should be made so originality and creativity have space to flourish in the doctoral outputs of different (inter)disciplinary domains?
- Comparability of degrees is one of the most recognisable objectives of Bologna. However, when referring to the third cycle, how can comparability be assumed and ‘defined’ if the doctorate asks for innovation, creativity, and cross-cutting approaches? Therefore, how to ‘define’ and compare supervisory approaches, when it might be assumed that supervisory styles, institutional culture, professional/(inter)disciplinary/(inter)sectoral culture and characteristics, for example, have a great influence on the quality of the research experience, (original) output(s) and impact?
- Even though there are recurrent themes in the above-mentioned documents, the definition of

either generic or specific students' and supervisors' roles/ responsibilities do not exist. So how can the quality of doctoral education and supervision be compared, achieved, maintained or evaluated, namely cross-country (even at European level)?

- Mobility of doctoral students and academic staff need to be promoted. Nevertheless, more discussions are needed about certain issues, such as the competences, skills and learning outcomes that are commonly assumed of extreme importance to be achieved and demonstrated by the end of the doctorate. Again, autonomy and flexibility must be guaranteed. But is there a common basis to assess PhD thesis and doctoral students' competences when they reach the end of the third cycle?
- Extremely structured doctoral programmes may not give space to heterogeneity as well as innovative and creative strategies, though it is found in Bologna Communiqués that over-regulation of the third cycle should not happen. This seems to be a paradox.
- The focus (or pressure) on time to completion (3-4 years in the case of full-time doctoral students) may decrease the research quality as well as the mobility interactions, and the development of high order competences, skills and attributes. How to combine different (apparent) tensions, particularly: quality of a final output (e.g. thesis) *versus* competences' development *versus* PhD completion in 3-4 years?
- The new structure of the first and second cycles, particularly in what concerns their duration (3+2 years or 4+1 years) highlighted some problems within some countries. These shorter training periods are starting to have consequences in the development and achievement of students' high-level competences, such as the ones necessary to develop high-level research, particularly at doctoral degree. That is, some European countries are facing the following problem: candidates who want to engage in doctoral research are starting to show a low pattern of competences, since they did the three cycles in a row, do not have other personal, academic and professional experiences (because the labour market is not being able to absorb an increasing number not only of new undergraduates but also

masters' holders), and do not have sufficient time to develop high-level competences. What is the priority: degrees (and/or) quality learning experiences?

- Since there is a focus on the process of doing a doctorate (skills' and competences' development) as well as on the product (thesis), it is important to establish some guidelines and also a grounded process to assess both students' final work and the entire development/process. The European Credit Transfer System must thus credit both the product and the process. This issue acquires a more important relevance, because this 'quantitative' intention may influence the quality of the process of doing research: if not correctly designed, it may not measure what is involved in its complexity.
- The doctorate is considered not only a landmark in the development of highly skilled professionals to work inside and outside Academia, but also a product that will give the economy, society, and culture important outputs. This latter idea highlights that the doctorate is embedded in a paradigm that gives a great importance to the development of social relevant research. Thus, doctoral studies and research are rooted in ideals such as originality, creativity and innovation. However, a broader discussion must be stimulated regarding the concept of *useful knowledge*, its understanding and consequences, as Peters and Olssen have already stressed (2005). This issue puts the emphasis on economic and political pressures over postgraduate studies in general, and in doctoral research in particular. Thus, it should be questioned: What should we do with doctoral research in arts, literature and culture? Does the market need literature? Again, following the idea of *commercialization of research* as underlined by Peters and Olssen (2005) for instance, more engaged reflection is needed.

All those previous aspects may influence the quality of doctoral degree and therefore may be considered challenges to be further addressed. Thus, shared discussions, reflections, practices and experiences must be promoted within HE institutions from several countries so academic community is stimulated to be committed with the enhancement of doctoral education, supervision and research quality.

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