

“Structures of Injustice in doctoral studies in Europe”

Research Proposal

Krystian Szadkowski – Marie Curie Research Fellow, Early Stage Researcher in Education International Research Institute.

The Marie Curie ITN “Education as Welfare - Enhancing opportunities for socially vulnerable youth in Europe” (EduWel) aims to consolidate research on education and welfare and evaluate its capacity to tackle the multiple challenges and pressures a large proportion of young people in Europe faces in transition from school and university to working life. The scientific objective of the research and training programme is to identify factors which turn youth into vulnerability and mechanisms with which to extend young people's opportunities in work, autonomy and participation - the central dimensions of welfare.

Introduction

The higher education systems in Europe have been undergoing deep changes in the last two decades. The emergence of a new knowledge-oriented form of capitalism and establishment, firmly, of the term of knowledge-based economy in the vocabulary of policy makers has put the university in the very centre of contemporary economic and political debates. The Lisbon Strategy was one of the first documents in Europe which addressed this issue directly. Its aim to establish in Europe “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world” by bringing into being the European Research Area in connection with the European Higher Education Area has not been achieved. Nevertheless, one of the main goals of Europe 2020 remains exactly the same: to closely connect the process of the production of knowledge with that of economic growth. Universities, understood in their teaching and research function, are now supposed to deliver a highly skilled labour force for the labour market, and marketable knowledge. Higher education policy is thus much more concerned with science and technology and with economic applications of knowledge. This is not without consequences for the financial situation of faculties such as like humanities and even social sciences.

Together with change in the aims of the scientific and higher education sectors in Europe comes the change in the modes of its governance. Universities have been given more autonomy in managing their financial resources and academic staff and have also been encouraged to diversify their funding sources (partnership with business is promoted). The

direct link between institution or staff effectiveness and level of public funding or private investment has been established and funding has been widely redirected from immediate donation to grants open to competition. One natural consequence of this state of affairs is a growing involvement of external stakeholders (business, industry or representatives of civil society) in university governance bodies.

The fundamental paradox in this situation, indicated by many scholars (Kwiek 2006, Szkudlarek 2010) is the following one: when we enter the realm of the knowledge-based economy, with knowledge and information considered to be the most important source of welfare, the public spending on education and research process, in which the biggest part of the new wealth is produced, is becoming lower and lower. Additionally, the global financial crisis has been used by many European governments as a perfect excuse to maintain the status quo in funding for public higher education at actual level or to even make severe cutbacks.

Any university subjected to a sustained economic assault would naturally start to compete for resources and seek profit. The application of economic logic into the sphere of higher education requires the university to reduce the costs of the educational and research process and forces the management of universities to employ successively lesser paid workers. This is why the higher education system, at its current level of expansion, demands an uninterrupted inflow from a non-degree labour force. The doctoral candidates, generally speaking, are here the most suitable. A university could easily transform them into a cheap or even free labour force.

This is the point from which this research begins. In order to shed light on the contemporary working conditions of academic teachers and researchers, attention should be turned to the weakest link in the academic labour chain – the doctoral candidates.

In this research proposal the context concerning the doctoral candidates and the problems connected with their mixed status will be described. The scope of the research will be the European Higher Education Area with the concentration on the Polish example. The pedagogical aspects of doctoral programmes, formation of researchers' identity issues or relation between universities as organizations and their direct economical environment, however important, will play marginal role during the research. The main focus will be on the ambiguous status of doctoral candidates and its implications for working and living conditions. Then the text will turn to the specificity of the situation of doctoral candidates in

Poland to finally delineate the research questions, aims, and the methods planned to be used during the research process.

Doctoral candidates in context

In the last decade alone there has been a steady increase in the number of doctoral candidates throughout all the OECD countries, followed by the number of PhD holders which has grown rapidly by some 40%. A similar trend can be observed in countries with already large, but yet growing higher education sectors such as China, India, and Brazil for example.

In Europe the doctoral programmes have been treated as a part of the Bologna Process (third cycle studies) since the Berlin Conference in 2003. Berlin's Communique states it clearly:

Conscious of the need to promote closer links between the EHEA and the ERA in a Europe of Knowledge, and of the importance of research as an integral part of higher education across Europe, Ministers consider it necessary to go beyond the present focus on two main cycles of higher education to include the doctoral level as the third cycle in the Bologna Process. They emphasise the importance of research and research training and the promotion of interdisciplinarity in maintaining and improving the quality of higher education and in enhancing the competitiveness of European higher education. Ministers call for increased mobility at the doctoral and postdoctoral levels and encourage the institutions concerned to increase their cooperation in doctoral studies and the training of young researchers (Berlin 2003: 2).

In the broad picture of Europe of Knowledge, doctoral candidates are of great significance. Mainly because they are, themselves, the crucial link between the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area and the increase in their number is one of the stakes of European knowledge society project. Creation of a new doctoral programme focuses on such important aspects as: enhancing employability of doctoral candidates by providing them with “transferable skills”, quality of supervision and taking a step forward in organizing doctoral training programmes around research groups and problem-to-solve oriented topics (often chosen by industry). Doctoral candidates' international and intersectoral mobility is also an issue of huge importance.

Researchers have listed a wide set of problem areas or tensions with the current state of doctoral education in Europe (Kehm 2004, 2007; Teichler 2006). Starting with conflict between its models (master-apprentice vs. graduate school), regulated vs. informal admission, the financial insecurity of doctoral candidates by the growing number of doctoral candidates, but not in “relevant” fields (growth in humanities rather than IT or biotech), brain drain, and

low mobility, to problems such as the long average duration of a programme and the lack of high quality supervision and, last but not least, the status of doctoral candidates.

In-between status of doctoral candidates

Despite the fact that there is no study directly addressing, and devoted only to the issue of the status of doctoral candidates and the consequences thereof, the abundance of researchers in fields of the higher education studies indicates that this is something to be carefully addressed, examined and, finally, solved. Jan Sadlak (2004: 8) asserts that the question of the status of doctoral candidates is a "problem of particular relevance". Barbara Kham (2004: 324) shares the same standpoint simultaneously linking the question of status to the mode of funding. If we treat doctoral candidates, she writes, as fee-paying students who provide an important part of the income of an institution then we should also accept that they can demand a certain amount of services and support for their money. In other words, when they contribute to the research output or, to some extent, provide teaching services in the institution we should agree on their workers status and pay for the produced added value. Powell and Green also ask if PhD is "an academic award or a mechanism by which to undertake high-level research?"(2007: 203). According to them the status of doctoral candidates should rely on the answer to such question. However the very move of doctoral candidates to the status of employee of could bring some financial problems for higher education systems which have applied the mixed model.

According to the results of a survey conducted by European Universities Association (EUA 2007) among the Bologna Process member countries, in 10 of 35 participating countries' higher education systems doctoral candidates have the status of students (e.g. Italy, Latvia, UK) and only in 3 of examined countries they are employees (e.g. Denmark, Netherlands). In the remaining 22 countries doctoral candidates have mixed status, being neither students nor workers (e.g. Poland, Belgium, and Germany).

As stated in the Salzburg Principles (Bologna 2005), the effect of Bologna Follow-up Group seminar devoted to doctoral education, doctoral candidates should be recognized as professionals. It does not matter which formal status they have it is crucial that they are given all commensurate rights. Despite the fact that doctoral education seems to be a major priority for European universities, it is not always the case. In many cases doctoral candidates are treated as people who have worker and student obligations, but are not provisioned the rights of either.

We should start seeing the university as a form of expanded post-Fordist employment, where the doctoral candidate is someone who can be put to work but does not have the rights of labour and all privileges due. According to Bousquet (2008) we cannot say that the higher education system does not employ PhD holders in positions qualifying for tenure, but it bares noting that this procedure has become secondary to “the process of extraction teaching labour from non-degreed, or not yet degreed persons, or whose degrees are now represented as an ‘overqualification’ for their contingent circumstances” (2008: 21). Considering the doctoral candidates during the period of studies as qualified for a normal labour market makes very little sense. They are needed only in the cheap teaching process inside the university, but outside, on the labour market, there is not much use for them. Szkudlarek, in the specific Polish context, also indicates that “the crowds of doctoral students at the gates of the academe form a reservoir of low-paid or unpaid teaching and technical work; [who] also lower the wage pressure from those employed full time” (2010: 361). Many students, once graduated, realize, at the very moment they receive their PhD that this will be the end, and not the beginning of their academic career.

Doctoral students in Poland

An example of this mixed status of doctoral candidates and its negative consequences can be drawn from Poland, where the number of doctoral candidates is rapidly growing. In 1990/1991 there were only 2, 700 doctoral students, and in 2009/2010 there were 35, 600 doctoral students (nearly 1300% of increase in 20 years) with 33, 3% in humanities. 46,16% of doctoral candidates have a scholarship (GUS 2010a: 281). Scholarships vary according to university. The average is 270 € and cannot be more than 60% of the assistant wage: 365, 85 €. Minimum wage in Poland in 2011 is 346, 5 €. The average monthly rent for a bachelor flat in Poznan is 225€. Average monthly price for a room with a bathroom in a dormitory, in Poznan is: 100€. The median gross income in 2010 in Poland was 775,75 €. It includes a pension system rate for ZUS 106,35 € and the II pension pillar of 56,63 € and rates for the health insurance. That results in a median net income of 557,15 €. Basic scholarship is 270 € (but without taxes, health insurance, pension system rate) that means 48% the of country’s median net income. Income poverty is one of the most important sources of vulnerability but not the only one. According to the UN Report *Rethinking Poverty*, in developed countries like these from the EU and OECD group, the poverty threshold is defined as 40, 50 or 60 (it depends) per cent of a country’s median income.

Working poor is a category widely present in the literature (Eurostat 2010), and refers to the people who earn less than 60% of the population's median income. According to the CBOS report (2008) - nearly 6,6% of the population of working people in Poland can, in this sense be described as poor. The report indicates that there is a relatively high percentage of working poor with a university degree - 4,2% of the group consist of people with MA and 4,5% with BA. And 15,5% of working poor are intellectual employees. Desperak (2010) concludes her report on precariat with university diplomas in Łódź, saying that in contrast to Western countries, graduates in Eastern European countries are highly affected by the processes of precarization. Polish doctoral students can be classified in this group during their time of studies.

Scholarships are granted to doctoral students after the enrolment procedure, according to their position in the final ranking. They can be cancelled or extended after each year of studies. Doctoral students with stipend are obliged to teach up to 90 hours per year as a form of training. Students without a scholarship are able to refuse obligatory teaching hours. Academics that are also carrying out a research are obliged to teach between 120 and 240 h annually. At the same time, there is an observable decrease in the number of assistant positions – by 28,3% between 1996/97 – 2008/09 (GUS 1997, 2009). Dąbrowa-Szeffler and Sztabiński (2008) suggests that this phenomenon is connected to the general increase in the enrolment rate in doctoral programmes. According to research findings more than 70% of doctoral students in humanities want to continue their career within the academia. More than 10% don't have any plans for the future. The employability rate within academia is not more than 10% of doctoral graduates each year.

In accordance with research held by Dąbrowa-Szeffler and Sztabiński, holding a PhD in humanities is not an asset for employers in Poland, but rather obstacle for future employment: “Sometimes you need to cross out the Doctorate period from your CV” – said one of the research participants. Managers responsible for, so called, “human resources” in Polish private companies sometimes find a person with a PhD too competitive and dangerous for their own position inside the enterprise.

At the same time, we are observing a falling rate of registration for PhD title conferment procedures, in 1990 – 32%, 2008 – 23% (Ernst&Young 2009:46), and since 2005 a falling (GUS 2010b: 294) number of scientific degrees awarded. This means that despite the growing

number of doctoral candidates there are obstacles which obstruct them to register, write and defend a thesis.

All this data can be used to formulate a case study hypothesis that in the current higher education system in Poland, especially in the massified sector of humanities, the growing enrolment in doctoral programmes has been used to decrease internal labour costs.

Research Questions

My general research question will be:

How the mixed status of doctoral candidates affects their conditions of work and study during the course of doctoral programmes?

This question has various sub-areas:

- 1) **Commercialization** - What are the implications of the commercialisation of education (growing focus on reducing costs and effectiveness)? What are the implications of the "seems to be" gender neutral approach, the strict criteria of measurement of effectiveness?
- 2) **Internal and external labour market** – How does a mixed status affect the capability of doctoral candidates for work during their studies? What are the well-being consequences of their low income (scholarship) level? What is the result of imperative mobility for youth in doctoral programmes? What are the well-being results for doctoral students when doing unpaid or low paid labour within the university (teaching in the form of training etc.)?
- 3) **Political organization** – What are the obstacles to effective negotiations of doctoral candidate positions at the policy level? What are actually existing frameworks for exercising the political voice of doctoral candidates? What are obstacles to achieving their aims? What are the possible structures for effective collective bargain (unionisation)?

In the Polish context, specifically, I will be also searching for answers for the following sub-questions:

- 4) **Choice of Doctoral Programmes** - What is the class position and gender of applicants for doctoral programmes in humanities in Poland? What motivates the

decision to continue education in the third cycle of HE? Does motivation differ between male and female applicants? What are the social and economic conditions for this choice?

- 5) **Dropout** - What are the reasons for dropping out of doctoral programmes? What is the gender structure of those who dropped out? How does gender interface with class position and inequalities present in third cycle studies? What influence does a strong cultural imperative on women to do care work have on the decision to quit a doctoral programme? What are the structural obstacles which make it difficult to link raising a child and scientific work?

Aims of the research

LONG-TERM OBJECTIVES:

- To focus the attention of academic trade unions on the issue of doctoral candidate status and emphasize the common interest which they have in fighting together for decent forms of employment inside the academia.
- To deliver the knowledge which can be used in public debate in the European context as a unionist argument for treating doctoral candidates as workers

SHORT-TERM OBJECTIVES:

- To identify the factors, related to the given status, which negatively and positively affect doctoral candidates' situation.

Methods

The method of building the knowledge from below followed up by critique in purpose to achieve practical aims and establish political relations is widely prevalent in the practice of Education International Research Institute. Research reports prepared on the basis of Membership surveys, questionnaires distributed globally among teachers' trade unions representatives, have their roots in the long tradition of workers inquiries.

In the following research process I will use text-analysis methods for coming to grips with recent Higher Education policy in Europe, especially with reference to Doctoral Programs. The same techniques will be used to come to terms with legal documents regarding the doctoral candidates in Poland.

Afterwards, using the Education International membership survey I will contextualize quantitative and qualitative data gathered. A special questionnaire concerning the issues of doctoral candidates and their situation in general will be delivered to some of the European Education International members' organization. Questions included in the questionnaire, among others, will refer to current legal status of doctoral candidates, modes of accessible political organization in their workplace, unions' collaboration with doctoral students' representatives etc. Short description of doctoral candidates' formal and informal obligations in their workplace will be also a contribution of great importance for the research.

To build a qualitative case study I will use a method of an open-ended, deep interview. The reason for choosing this method is to allow the researcher to meet the other perspective in as full a range as is possible. For that reason a framework must be created in which the participants can respond with ease, honesty and probity. Interviews conducted in a participatory manner enable full involvement of participants. I will perform 15 deep interviews with the doctoral students of one Department in Humanities in Non-warsaw University, as well as 10 with applicants for Doctoral Programs, 5 with Department faculty, 5 with doctoral student representatives and 5 with Polish policymakers.

10 deep, open-ended interviews with representatives of doctoral candidates in humanities and directors of Graduate Departments in the United Kingdom (Nottingham, London) and Netherlands (Utrecht) will be taken parallel to build the case studies. This would be a chance to search for solutions and examples of a different practice in enhancing the conditions of doctoral candidates' for work and opportunities for making a political voice.

However, further research will be necessary to cover the findings with suitable and representative empirical data.

Conclusion

Solidarity against the introduction of market mechanisms in public higher education between full and part-time academic employees and doctoral candidates is needed. As well as common effort for achieving the decent forms of employment for all who work in the academia. This is one of the main reasons why the issue of the status of doctoral candidates should be addressed by unionised academic teachers. The first step, however, is the struggle for the recognition of doctoral candidates as academic workers with all commensurate rights. This cannot be made without support from the academic trade unions.

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