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Thematic session on Doctoral education

BFUG MEETING – 27/28 NOVEMBER 2014

Introduction of the session – 28 November 2014

**Programme**

09.00 – 09.30 presentations of the report of the ad hoc working group on the Third cycle

09.30 – 09.45 presentation of the main outcomes of the Italian Presidency event on Doctoral education

09.45 – 10.30 general discussion

**Background**

Given its pivotal position, Doctoral programmes have been looked at from two main angles: education and research. They are the last step of the educational path, where talented students prove themselves in the frontier of knowledge by creating innovative and original knowledge. In the process, they are expected to refine their competences in analysing new knowledge and in critical thinking, in presenting it to different kind of audiences, and can be expected to be able to promote technological, social and cultural advancement in a knowledge based society. In synthesis, they are expected to develop both their disciplinary related and generic skills and competences at the highest level in a formal education context. Both the Overarching Framework of Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area and the European Qualification Framework include these programmes in their highest level, respectively level three and level eight. It is also understood within the Bologna context that the structural reforms and the policies applied to previous level of higher education should also apply to Doctoral programmes, while taking into account the specificities of its research – based approach.

Looking at the side of research, as has just been anticipated, Doctoral graduates are trained in producing new knowledge, are fully autonomous in developing it further in the realm that suits them best, being it the academia or the non – academic world. They should be embedded in stimulating research environment and be involved in major research project, with international profile.

In the light of the request put forward by Ministers in Bucharest, the Bologna Follow Up Group created an ad hoc working group on the Third cycle[[1]](#footnote-1) as a sub-structure of the Working Group on Structural Reforms. The ad hoc working group prepared its report and – given its robustness and complexity – the Working Group on Structural Reforms proposed that its recommendations are directly discussed by the BFUG. As a matter of fact, partly induced by the European political strategies, mainly the Bologna Process and the construction of the European Research Area, and partly on the basis on national priorities, all European countries have revised their strategies on Doctoral education[[2]](#footnote-2).

Where the initiative has not been taken by politics, however, Higher Education Institutions have questioned and improved the quality of Doctoral education on their own initiative. The majority of Institutions have implemented part of the Salzburg Principles promoted by the European University Association or have joined other bottom – up initiatives like the Tuning recommendations on how to develop Doctoral programmes.

In many Institutions, a mean to reach these ends has been the creation of Doctoral Schools and, more generally a structured approach to Doctoral programmes. “Structured doctoral training” leads to clearer governance structures and policies at the institutional level concerning admission, quality assurance, assessment, supervision. In parallel, sometimes as interlinked strategy, institutions embedded training activities in the discipline or in transferable skills leading to “structured Doctoral programmes”.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that in the past weeks, several European events took place around the topic of Doctoral Education, all in connection with the Italian Presidency of the Council of the European Union:

* Trento, “Promoting talents, spreading excellence”, 18 and 19 November 2014;
* Padova, “International, Intersectoral, and Interdisciplinary: the triple “i” approach to doctoral training”, 20 and 21 November 2014;
* Bucharest, “Future of Higher Education - Bologna Process Researchers’ Conference”, 24 – 26 November 2014.

These events were attended by practitioners of Doctoral Education and the main outcomes of them are relevant for the follow up work on Doctoral Education within the Bologna context.

We can easily say that the challenges faced by national authorities and Institutions have a European dimension and that solutions should be found at the European level. The construction of the European Higher Education Area and of the European Research Area is a tentative solution on the table.

*The main aim of the thematic session is to present the work of the ad hoc working group on the Third cycle for BFUG consideration and to present the most recent developments of the European debate, as mirrored in the Italian Presidency events and in the Conference on the “Future of the European higher education”. The inputs and comments by participants should serve to contribute to the preparation of the Ministerial Conference in Bucharest, to pave the way of further work in the EHEA on the issue and to steer BFUG work.*

In addition to the inputs that will be provided by the two keynote speakers, additional questions could be considered by the BFUG members to widen the perspective and the development of future strategies:

* In the EHEA, the connection between the realm of higher education and research has always been recognized but mainly looked at from the point of view of education. In the ERA, the field of higher education has been taken into consideration only to a limited extent and the issue of Doctoral training considered only as the first step into research. How can we follow up Ministerial statement made in the past on the synergies between these two political initiatives at the European level?
* In the EHEA, structural and policy reform in higher education should also conduct to the strengthening of the knowledge triangle and the products of increased cooperation in research at the European level should also look at how we can face the grand challenges of modern societies. How could we facilitate this process?

1. <http://www.ehea.info/work-group-details.aspx?wkgroupId=22> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Depending on the context, Doctoral programmes can be referred to as “Doctoral education” or as “Doctoral training”, in one case underlining more the learning process beneath and in the other the research approach. For the purpose of the discussion, we interpret both terms as equivalent. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)