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Structured doctoral programmes in Germany

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1. Introduction

The structured doctorate was developed as an alternative to the conventional individually supervised doctorate (See Moes 2008; Hauss/Kaulisch/Hornbostel 2010; Hornbostel/Simon 2010). There are serious differences among the various programmes that are summarized under the concept of "structured doctorate". Therefore, to speak of "the structured doctorate" in the singular makes no sense. Rather, we are dealing with a plurality of structured doctoral programmes that differ in, among other things, the level of funding and thematic focus. In the following, we will analyse this pluralism of structured doctoral programmes to develop questions that will help doctoral candidates to identify the strengths and weaknesses of different programmes.

2. There is more than one way to have a structured PhD programme

In this paper, we reject the notion that the concept of a "structured doctorate" contains a uniform understanding of doctoral studies. The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) has registered structured doctoral programmes in Germany for several years and counts about 200 of them (BMBF/DAAD 2015). The German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG)) can be regarded as the most important sponsor of structured doctoral programmes. There exist two funding lines, the Research Training Group and the Graduate Schools. The latter were one of three funding lines in the context of the German Excellence Initiative (2005-2017). Although both of the current funding lines concern the structured doctorate, the Graduate Schools and the Research Training Groups differ considerably. "Graduate Schools thus offer ideal conditions for doctoral students within a broad scientific area and, as integrative institutions with international visibility, they encourage students to be active members of their academic and social communities. As a result, graduate schools will extend far beyond DFG Research Training Groups and differ from them substantially." (See the DFG website.)

¹ This Policy-Paper is based on earlier work of the authors: Cornelia Fraune/Simon Hegelich 2012: Promovieren in Kollegs und Zentren: Entwicklung, Zielsetzungen und Angebote verschiedener Modelle strukturierter Promotion, fokus working-paper, 2012/1, Siegen. Translation: Alena Widder.



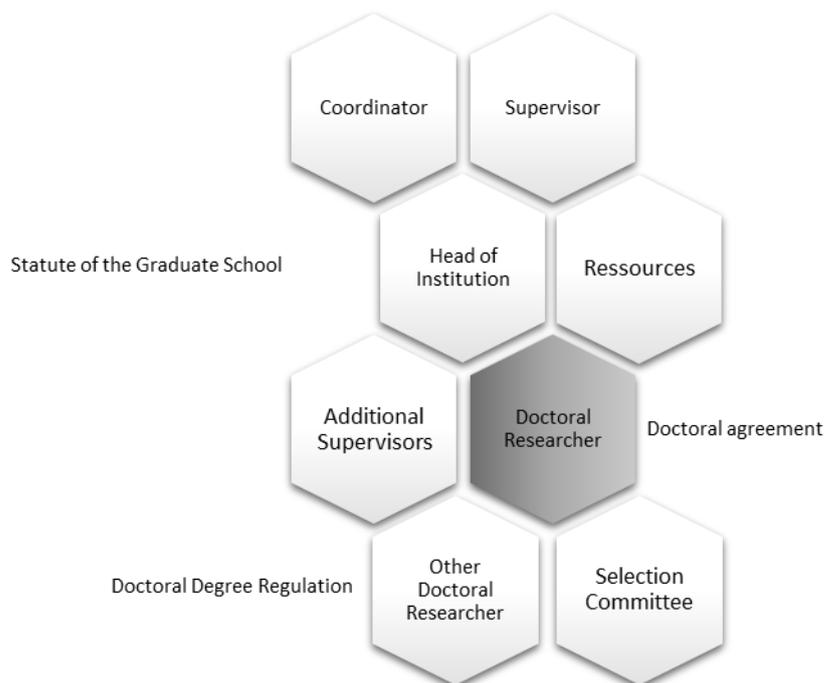
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Beyond the DFG, many other German research funding organizations, such as the Hans Böckler Foundation or the Volkswagen Foundation, also fund similar structured doctoral programmes. Moreover, there exist many structured doctoral programmes offered by universities without external funding. In general, these programmes have substantially less resources available and do not offer any posts or fellowships for doctoral research.

2.1. What is the magic formula for 'structure'?

The main idea of a structured doctoral programme is to address the weaknesses of the traditional model of individually supervised doctorates by supplementing the relationship between the doctoral candidate and the doctoral supervisor with additional structural features: These features consist of a team of supervisors, a doctoral agreement that supplements the doctoral degree regulation (Promotionsordnung), a statute of the college/ graduate school, a selection committee, a course offer, a coordinator who offers advice (especially concerning organizational questions) and a head of the institution, whose formal position is above that of the supervisor. Normally, doctoral researchers receive funding in terms of a salary or a fellowship, a workplace, and financial resources for their own research (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Structured doctoral programme



As described above, structured doctoral programmes are very heterogeneous. However, harmonizing these differently structured doctoral programmes is not necessarily worthwhile. For example, a graduate school that does not provide funding for its doctoral students but implements requirements in terms of conference attendance or publication that are similar to a fully funded research training group runs the risk that both supervisors and doctoral researchers might be overwhelmed.



2.2. Criteria for the evaluation of structured doctoral programmes

Therefore, it is not appropriate to speak of "the structured doctorate" in the singular. We are instead dealing with a plurality of structured doctoral programmes that differ in funding and thematic focus, amongst other dimensions. Despite the rhetoric of a third stage of the Bologna Process or the supposed orientation towards the "Anglo-Saxon model", the heterogeneity of doctoral programmes in Europe is increasing.

For doctoral researchers, these developments imply that the structures of different programmes are not an appropriate means of comparing them. Instead, researchers should ask what goals are to be achieved with these structures and whether they are adequate to that task. This central question has thus far not been much discussed in Germany. In recent years, the European University Association (EUA) has organized a process in which doctoral researchers and well-established researchers have formulated objectives for a reform of doctoral education (Salzburg Principles), evaluated their implementation (EUA 2005) and reformulated and specified these goals (Salzburg II, EUA 2010).

3. Salzburg Principles of the European University Association

In the following, we will explain how the Salzburg Principles can be used as a benchmark for comparing different structured doctoral programmes. The first point of the Salzburg recommendations seems to be paradoxical: On the one hand, it is agreed that the generation of new knowledge by research is the core principle of doctoral education. At the same time, it is emphasized that the doctoral education should also qualify for posts and jobs beyond the traditional scientific labor market. However, the idea is that doctoral researchers should qualify in a way that their competences being both useful and demanded in labor markets other than science. An institution should always be examined about the importance of research in the structured doctoral programme as well as on the professional perspectives that result from it.

One point that is emphasized repeatedly by doctoral researchers is the question of their status. This also includes their formal status, meaning whether the doctoral researchers exercise their rights in the context of academic self-administration as members of the status group of students or of academic employees. Even more important is the question of how the institution itself defines the status of doctoral researchers: Are they independent researchers or advanced students? The Salzburg Recommendations are very progressive in this regard: Doctoral candidates are "early-stage researchers" with appropriate rights and duties. This implies that they are perceived as "professionals" independent of their formal status. This shows that doctoral researchers are regarded as "scientists at an early stage" and not as students who are still "growing up" to become scientists. The structures that are supposed to promote progress towards the doctorate should therefore provide for an exchange between established academics and doctoral students "on an equal footing" and, in this regard, ensure that the doctoral researchers can learn and qualify by conducting their own research.

Closely related to the question of status is the study programme that, in various forms, is usually part of structured doctoral programmes. To put it bluntly, sometimes the impression is that the doctoral researchers are not considered early-stage researchers but as essentially master's degree





students with considerable (mostly methodical) deficits. There are, of course, many cases in which a course programme is useful or even necessary. This is especially the case if there is a gap between the skills earned during the bachelor and master's studies and the skills needed to complete the doctoral research project.

This may or may not be the case for fast-track doctoral candidates with BA degrees, for doctoral candidates who changed universities, or for foreign doctoral researchers. However, none of these cases argue for a compulsory course programme. On the contrary, it should be assumed that doctoral researchers have already acquired the knowledge and skills needed during their master's studies. In this respect, the Salzburg Recommendations far exceed German standards. Compulsory courses or seminars during the structured doctoral programme indicate a general deficit with respect to knowledge and skills rather than being intended to overcome individual deficits. "High quality doctoral education needs a stimulating research environment driven by research enthusiasm, curiosity and creativity, not motivated by the collection of credits" (EUA 2010, p. 6). Finally, all structured doctoral programmes should be characterized by the fact that potential conflicts are no longer resolved solely between the supervisor and the doctoral researcher. In addition, the institutions should actively work to improve the treatment of doctoral researchers: "Providing professional development to supervisors is an institutional responsibility, whether organised through formal training or informal sharing of experiences among staff. Developing a common supervision culture shared by supervisors, doctoral school leaders and doctoral candidates must be a priority for doctoral schools" (EUA 2010, p. 5).

4. Conclusion

We hope that these benchmarks, which are derived from the Salzburg Principles, will provide postgraduates with guidance in the increasingly dense jungle of structural PhD programmes. Graduates should recognize that the expansion of structured doctoral programmes in recent years has led to an enormous increase in competition amongst institutions for the "best minds". It is therefore worth comparing different offers. Regarding structured doctoral programmes, we welcome the increasing discussion about the objectives to be achieved with the newly created structures. After the "Sturm und Drang" phase of recent years, which was accelerated by the excellence initiative, a phase of reflection, benchmarking and the identification of best-practice examples would be helpful.

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DFG:

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