

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

0210

Q10 | Cardiff

Thu 12 Dec 2019

17:30 - 18:00

The Nordic doctorate at a crossroads between Bildung, schoolification and projectification

Søren S. Bengtsen¹, Anders Sonesson², Anders Ahlberg²

¹Aarhus University, Copenhagen, Denmark ²Lund University, Lund, Sweden

Research Domain: Postgraduate Scholarship and Practice (PGSP)

Abstract:

The Nordic doctorate has its roots in the Germanic Bildung-tradition, with a decentralised and discipline-oriented curriculum, local and individualised leadership and autonomous supervisors. Currently, the Nordic doctorate has arrived at a crossroads where it is pulled in two different directions. The first characterised by formalisation and centralised Graduate Schools with study directors, middle-management and educational bureaucracy, and an increasingly generic curriculum. The second characterised by the projectification of academic work through new modes of governance on national and EU-level. The double pull threatens to create a 'torn curriculum', where curricular planning, formal requirements, and supervision and community support are not aligned, which confuses and fragments the learning journey and the PhD-degree. We argue that a new way is needed, which lies not in choosing either tradition, but to form a societally oriented, community anchored, and at the same time highly specialised and research-driven doctorate.

Paper:

Introduction

The Nordic doctorate has its roots in the Germanic (Northern European) Bildung-tradition with a decentralised and discipline-oriented curriculum, local and individualised leadership and autonomous supervisors. It is highly diversified and embedded in the day-to-day practices of departments. However, the Nordic doctorate has now arrived at a crossroads where it is pulled in two different directions. The first is characterised by formalisation and centralised Graduate Schools with study directors, middle-management and educational bureaucracy, and an increasingly generic curriculum. This pull can be related to the Bologna process and efforts to create a joint European HE area with compatible educational systems, coordinated national reforms and increased mobility (Andres et al, 2015; Elmgren et al, 2015), including global drivers such as professionalisation and quality assurance agendas (Gudmundsson, 2008). The second pull is characterised by the projectification of academic work (Ylijoki 2016) through new modes of governance on national and EU-level. Through new funding regimes, increased competition, and the notion of research excellence, an increasing number of researchers are collaborating in problem- or innovation-oriented research projects. Doctoral

candidates are project members, supervisors become project leaders, and the project becomes the doctoral curriculum. These two directions are the result of the same political agenda where doctoral education, and research, increasingly is viewed as a policy instrument for other ends, e.g. economic and social growth, sustainability and international competitiveness. The double pull in the Nordic doctorate threatens to create a 'torn curriculum', where curricular planning, formal requirements, and supervision and community support are not aligned - confusing and fragmenting the learning journey (Cornér et al, 2018). A discrepancy is created between the disciplines and the cross-disciplinary and generic career initiatives and funding schemes. We argue that neither of these traditions can point the way for doctoral education in the Nordic region. A third way is needed, which lies not in choosing either tradition, but to form a societally oriented, community anchored, and at the same time highly specialised and research-driven PhD.

Theory and method

The research team includes members from Danish and Swedish universities, who have a connection to researchers with similar interests at Norwegian and Finnish universities. Our study takes its departure in policy material around doctoral education in the Nordic countries, on the governmental level published through ministries for research and higher education in the Nordic countries, and on the institutional level through Graduate School strategy papers and assessment reports on the quality of doctoral education in each country. Further, we bring in examples from courses on doctoral supervision for doctoral supervisors and doctoral students that are offered at a selection of Nordic universities. These course plans show what is being prioritised by each Graduate School and how doctoral supervisors and students are encouraged to understand (1) the purpose of the PhD, (2) the nature of research, (3) the role of supervisors and research teams, and (4) their own individual role and responsibilities. Theoretically, our argument is informed by an understanding of the PhD as being enacted in a series of 'nested contexts' (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2016), where governmental policy is intertwined with institutional leadership, research agendas, disciplinary belonging, and the educational practice relating to doctoral supervision. Also, we draw on the understanding of doctoral education as part of a wider 'ecology' (Barnett, 2018), where the boundaries between political, societal, cultural, institutional, educational, and disciplinary domains become permeable and entangled. Finally, we draw from the idea of doctoral education and its pedagogies as 'distributed' and decentralised, where doctoral learning journeys do not only hinge on the interpersonal relationships with supervisors, but extends into a much wider and diverse 'doctoral learning penumbra' (Wisker et al, 2017) and involve support and feedback systems even outside institutional contexts.

Findings

The Nordic doctorate is construed in a complex and many-sided way where different discourses about the doctorate coexist but without a cohesive and unifying educational framework. Especially, we identify four different, and sometimes conflicting, strands within the Nordic doctorate: (1) *Career*: The doctorate is linked to an external job-market domain and conceived as an entry into professional domains outside the university. The focus is on generic competences and transferable skills that will

help boost the political economy. (2) *Research*: The doctorate is linked to an academic and often university-intern domain and conceived as an entry into the academy with the progress into researcher positions. The focus is on the dissertation, publication and contributions to the international research field. (3) *Education*: The doctorate is linked to the institutional interpretation of national and global policy drivers around doctoral education. The term 'doctoral student' weighs stronger than 'junior researcher', and the doctoral student is expected to undertake a curriculum consisting of certain obligatory elements set down by the Graduate School. (4) *Formation*: The doctorate is linked to the personal development, maturation, and growth of the researcher. A way of developing researcher and personal autonomy and independence and is coupled with a greater awareness of academic citizenship and cultural leadership, coupling the PhD with the wider societal and cultural domains.

Discussion and conclusion

The four different strands of the Nordic doctorate are not aligned and integrated and they risk pulling the PhD into widely different directions without a cohesive force. However, in Nordic universities, we also see an authentic interest from Graduate Schools to experiment and try out new initiatives. The Graduate Schools in the Nordic countries are not (yet) entirely bound by economic drivers, and there is still a strong and vital understanding of research as an educational, institutional and societal cohesive force. Even though being at a crossroads, the Nordic doctorate is not 'broken', and we point out that the Nordic countries have a unique chance to find a new way and to take ownership of the doctorate. To do this, the integration of its cultural rooting in the Bildung tradition is crucial, where a new doctoral curriculum may integrate the strands and build stronger cohesion between the domains.

References

- Andres, L., Bengtsen, S., Crossouard, B., Gallego, L., Keefer, J., & Pyhältö, K. (2015). Drivers and Interpretations of Doctoral Education Today: National Comparisons. *Frontline Learning Research*, 3(2), 63–80.
- Barnett, R. (2018). *The Ecological University: A Feasible Utopia*. London & New York: Routledge
- Cornér, S., Pyhältö, K., Peltonen, J., & Bengtsen, S. (2018). Similar or different? Researcher community and supervisory support experiences among Danish and Finnish social sciences and humanities PhD students. *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education*, <https://doi.org/10.1108/SGPE-D-18-00003>
- Elmgren, M., Forsberg, E., Lindberg-Sand, Å., & Sonesson, A. (2016). *The formation of doctoral education*. Lund University
- Gudmundsson, H. K. (2008). Nordic Countries. In Nerad, M., & Heggelund, M. (Eds.). *Toward a Global PhD? Forces & Forms in Doctoral Education Worldwide*. Seattle & London: University of Washington Press.
- McAlpine, L. & Amundsen, C. (2016). *Post-PhD career trajectories. Intentions, Decision-Making and Life Aspirations*. London: Palgrave Macmillan

- Wisker, G., Robinson, G., & Bengtson, S. (2017). Penumbra: Doctoral Support as Drama: From the 'Lightside' to the 'Darkside'. From Front of House to Trapdoors and Recesses, *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 54, no. 6 (2017): 527-38
- Ylijoki, O-H. (2016). Projectification and conflicting temporalities in academic knowledge production. *Theory of science* 38(1): 7–26.