

Beyond the Basics: Understanding the Complexities of Standards in PhD Education

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Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

Trends towards homogenization in European education, particularly evident in Ph.D. programs, are fuelled by globalization's push for international alignment; exemplified by initiatives like the Bologna process and the Salzburg Principles. However, diverse discipline-specific doctoral cultures and institutional PhD programme types resist homogenization, asserting unique identities while striving for legitimacy.

In Austria, the introduction of structured doctoral standards causes challenges too. This study examines how doctoral programmes navigate homogenization pressures while preserving their distinctiveness. Using data from a survey with 22 Austrian public universities and 25 interviews with representatives from these institutions, three programmes are analysed: an interdisciplinary programme (arts), a complex doctoral school (social sciences) and a specialized doctoral college (informatics).

Findings reveal a tension between homogenization and individuality, influenced by internationalization, funding, and disciplinary culture. Balancing standardization with diversity is crucial, emphasizing flexibility, interdisciplinary collaboration, and equitable support to ensure quality while fostering innovation and inclusivity in Ph.D. education.

Full paper

Introduction

There is a noticeable trend towards more standardized approaches in doctoral education across Europe. These tendencies cover processes and factors that contribute to making doctoral programmes and student experiences more uniform across different institutions or disciplines. As academic institutions seek to compete globally and attract a diverse pool of students and faculty, there is a push to align doctoral programmes with international standards and practices. This can lead to a convergence of curricula, research methodologies, and evaluation criteria, making doctoral education more consistent across borders (Ehrenberg et al., 2010; Pausits et al., 2022; Yudkevic et al., 2020). Especially the Salzburg

Principles have led to a certain uniformity in the debate about the third level of higher education (BMBWK & EUA, 2005; EUA, 2010).

However, homogenization tendencies are diametrically opposed to different discipline-specific or subject cultures and types of doctoral programmes at institutional level, which should bow to the dictates of homogenization but at the same time fight for their legitimacy.

In Austria, with the introduction of the structured doctorate, an attempt was made to introduce uniform standards by specifying six criteria and to ensure a common baseline of doctoral programmes and thus also degrees across various institutions, both at country level and internationally (BMBWF, 2022).

However, adapting these criteria poses challenges for the disciplines and institutions, especially since different types of doctoral programmes still exist side by side.

Research Question

This proposal deals with the questions of how different types of doctoral programmes (third-party funded doctoral colleges, doctoral schools and traditional doctoral programs) deal with challenges of homogenization while maintaining their identity and how standards for doctoral education can be implemented in different institutional settings.

We have the underlying assumption that the type of a doctoral programme and study field influence the specific form of doctoral education and how standards can be integrated since each field of study implies specific quality criteria.

Methods

These questions will be answered using data from an online survey among public higher education leaderships of all 22 public universities in Austria, conducted in 2023. Surveys provide information about strategic decisions at the university level.

In addition, we use 25 oral interviews with study programme managers, supervisors, students and alumni to address programme level and the study type issues. We have chosen three programmes:

1. The interdisciplinary doctoral programme "Artistic Research" at University of Applied Arts Vienna (since 2019) has a high degree of internationalisation of doctoral students and a strong interdisciplinary orientation. The thematic openness of the doctoral programme and the form of the thesis as "reflective documentation" in addition to an independent artistic project are described as characteristics for this doctoral education.
2. The Vienna Doctoral School of Social Sciences (ViDSS) was founded in 2022 as a doctoral school in the interdisciplinary social sciences and comprises of nine institutes and disciplines. The organisational structure of the ViDSS is the most complex of the doctoral programmes and consists of a combination of programme management, steering board, scientific advisory board and student representatives.
3. The Doctoral College MSCA (Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action) LogiCS@TUWien (since 2022), is hosted by the Informatics faculty of the Technical University Vienna and co-financed by the European Union. Study places for early career researchers from Europe and beyond are fully

funded. The aim of the programme is to provide specialist qualifications for research, both at universities and for non-university research institutes and industry.

These three cases exemplify distinct situations, challenges or requirements that disciplines face when enhancing quality. The diversity of the programmes provides information on different strategies and challenges in implementing homogenizing standards.

Results

Results show an ambivalence or a continuum between homogenization and individuality. The types of doctorates differ according to the degree of internationalization, financing requirements and discipline-specific doctoral culture, which influences the introduction and implementation of standards. The online survey and the qualitative interviews show that the implementation standards vary depending on the subject of study. The interviews provide clear evidence of different discipline-specific doctoral cultures across the three doctoral programs.

Discussion

Policy frameworks, funding structures and academic incentives can drive homogenization by prioritizing certain types of research and outputs. For example, funding agencies may favour projects with clear practical applications or measurable outcomes, leading doctoral students to focus on specific research areas or methodologies that align with these priorities.

To address challenges associated with overall standards, institutions and policymakers must strike a balance between standardisation and diversity in doctoral education. Emphasising flexibility, interdisciplinary collaboration, and inclusive practices can help preserve creativity and diversity while maintaining high educational standards.

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