

SRHE CONFERENCE PROPOSAL 2012

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Research Domain 7

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**WHAT CAN FOUR INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDIES TEACH US ABOUT THE
DOCTORAL PROCESS?**

Part 1 Abstract (150 words max)

Four case studies from Australia, Estonia, Sweden and the UK are used to illuminate some of the issues and questions about the doctoral process that need to be addressed. Whilst there is general agreement that the research process at this level is about the creation of original knowledge, there are many other possible objectives. There is a potential conflict between long and short term aims as well as conflict between larger scale objectives (such as sustainability, economic and intellectual development), quality assurance procedures and the neoliberal agenda of value for money. This paper is written at a time when the arguments between the monetarists and Keynesians are in focus and investment in higher education research and development is under active consideration. (121 words)

Part 2 Outline paper (1000 word max)

This paper presents four case studies from Australia, Estonia, Sweden and the UK that raise questions about how nations use the doctoral process. It examines the impact of national policies (which themselves are responses to economic, environmental, social and historical forces). This paper is located at the junction of the academic and the political. It is being compiled in the UK when arguments are raging around the world about whether the monetarists should prevail by imposing austerity measures or the Keynesians should prevent a further descent into economic decline by encouraging public investment. Academic research and higher education is one of the areas suggested for such investment, but even were this to be widely accepted as a useful route forward, there are differing views about how such investment should be directed, and this paper aims to reveal some of the underlying frames of reference that may be influencing such investment.

The case study approach is chosen because the authors are all participant observers in the doctoral process in their own countries: as research students, academic developers and a director of research. The authors were asked to identify developments in their respective doctoral processes and they have collected data variously from attending various meetings, analysing institutional procedures, researching government statistics and decisions, working with supervisors and research students and making funding bids.

The Australian case study highlights the significant impact on the doctoral process that resulted from a series of government interventions around a complex funding scheme that were designed to cover funding on research completion rather than enrolment, with funding provided to cover a maximum of four years of full-time tuition. This was an overt strategy aimed at shortening time to completion. At the same time there were overt measures introduced to enhance student satisfaction and a focus on quality assurance.

The Estonian case study demonstrates the legacy of fifty years of Soviet occupation, the difficulty of recruiting and supervising students at an appropriate level when there was a lack of a formalised curriculum and the impact that the Bologna process has had on learning outcomes. A key challenge in Estonia is that there are too few doctoral graduates, studies have traditionally taken longer, there is little financial or social support and the drop out rate is high. The case study looks at some of the plans to increase both the quality and quantity of doctoral students.

From Sweden we have a case study based on is the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU). SLU is a life-science sector university and a sole player in Sweden when it comes to forestry, landscape architecture and veterinary sciences. Its research programme (unlike all the other universities in Sweden who are funded by the Ministry for Education) is directly funded by the Ministry for Rural Affairs. So SLU is driven by national vocational and environmental priorities, the long term aim being to educate excellent researchers and, "SLU's research, education, and environmental monitoring and assessment programs are the foundation for long term, sustainable development" (see SLU's strategy 2013-2016). This ambition of excellence is supported by a significant investment in supervisor training plus future moves to create doctoral schools, common regulations and employment rights for doctoral students.

The implications of the move to establish doctoral training centres is explored in more detail in the case study from the UK. It reveals the consternation that was caused by enforced collaboration between universities, the administrative strain placed on the universities that entered the application process and won their bids and the wider range of training opportunities and resources that are becoming available for the successful doctoral students as a result.

We look at these case studies in three different ways. Firstly we summarise some of the key issues that each case study raises (measuring student satisfaction, quality assurance procedures, the impact of funding sources, supervisor development, employment benefits for doctoral students and researcher training) and try to ascertain whether there is any commonality.

Secondly we begin to identify the potential conflicts between long and short term objectives where in Sweden we see long term investment matching national priorities and in Australia we see the impact of the target-driven culture. We also see the need for stability as highlighted in Estonia and some of the advantages of change as demonstrated in the UK. There are tensions between increased competition for completion in Australia, and the requirement for collaboration demonstrated in Sweden and the UK.

Thirdly we look at each case study as a whole to see if we can begin to identify any forces that might link to social, historical, economic, political or environmental movements.

(767 words)