

‘Social science doctoral training policies and practices: perspectives on recent developments and organisational consequences of the UK transition to collaborative doctoral training’

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Objectives and background

The paper explores the history and shifting organisational parameters of three decades of doctoral training initiatives in social sciences undertaken by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), a public research funding body. The initial phase of the ESRC shift towards more centrally-steered doctoral training was extensively researched ([Burgess et al. 1994](#); [Collinson and Hockey 1997](#)) but only exploratory work exists on early stages of the new doctoral training centres ([Lunt et al. 2013](#)). ESRC doctoral training has moved from a largely *laissez faire* system in the 1980s (focused on funding the best students) through discipline-based training, benchmarking, recognition exercises and studentship competitions from the early 1990s (with the intention of sharpening the focus on methods training and timely completion of theses), to nationally-allocated, quota-based, discipline-specific exercises supplemented by a small generic national student competition by the mid 2000s. ESRC moved to the current system of doctoral training centres (DTCs) from 2011 onwards, with bidding in 2010. The DTCs, or Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs) as other UK research funding councils are calling them, are usually both multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary and are normally based in several departments of one or more universities. But ESRC money for studentships increasingly now needs supplementing by other funding (under the wider banner of 'collaboration'). This is justified in terms of the need to get employers more involved in funding doctoral training, especially as few PhD graduates are now able to enter permanent posts in academe and also serves to encourage the non-academic 'impact' of social science, as well as increasing research selectivity by prioritising research-intensive universities in the schemes. Such policy shifts are moving the centre of gravity of student funding from the ESRC itself to universities (who must provide some matched funding too). At the same time, there is enhanced ESRC surveillance of doctoral training. These trends are concerning for all UK Universities (UUK 2014). Furthermore, the DTCs, with their advanced training provision (which must be offered to a wider constituency than just DTC students), interdisciplinary pathways and cross-institutional or cross-disciplinary supervision, are significantly blurring institutional boundaries. Meanwhile, less and less funding is available to those wanting to do taught masters degrees ([Higher Education Commission 2012](#); [The 1994 group 2012](#)), even as a prelude to a doctorate. The introduction of collaborative training across institutions is also changing the relationship between research councils and the institutions and affecting the autonomy of the latter. The expectations of ESRC now go well beyond doctoral training itself as it is expected to

lead to more cross-institutional collaboration in research through DTC partners and a merging of institutional research and education strategies.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

The paper draws on several conceptual frameworks. The unexpected consequences of doctoral training policies are considered using theoretical concepts and analysis derived from public policy research ([Margetts et al. 2010](#)). The paper makes use of research on different levels and forms of university autonomy ([Estermann et al. 2011](#)) to examine which aspects of university autonomy are under threat by the shift to DTCs and DTPs. The literature on university collaboration and mergers is also taken into account ([Harman and Harman 2003](#); [Ursin et al. 2010](#)), since DTCs/DTPs might be one nudge towards forms of institutional merger. The paper further considers whether widespread moves towards collaborative doctoral training partnerships may be increasing pressures on UK universities to more closely resemble each other, drawing on literature ([Dimaggio 2001](#); [DiMaggio and Powell 1991](#)) which considers different drivers of isomorphism including mimetic, normative and coercive, at least two of which seem applicable to DTCs.

Modes of enquiry and data sources

The paper draws on auto-ethnographic narratives ([Chang et al. 2013](#); [Denzin 2014](#)) by the contributors, documenting their perspectives on and perceptions of the recent history of UK policy on social science doctoral training, an analysis of documentation on ESRC doctoral training current policies and field-notes ([Emerson et al. 2011](#)) from recent events and activities concerning collaborative social science doctoral training in three DTCs.

Findings and discussion

The paper discusses how current UK policy on doctoral training in social sciences came about and some of its unintended policy consequences. These include an erosion of institutional autonomy (academic, organisational and financial), a subsidisation of doctoral study by the new higher Home/EU undergraduate fees, as doctoral study does not produce much of a surplus ([Higher Education Policy Institute and British Library 2010](#)), a greater emphasis on private and third sector funding of doctoral students and a push to increased institutional isomorphism in the form of shared strategies, practices, policies and processes. At the same time, individual DTCs are claimed by ESRC to be a means of achieving greater differentiation. Student diversity is also challenged by these policies as the 'science model' used by ESRC assumes relatively young students with excellent recent first degree results, a formula which works well only for a minority of social science disciplines. Extended research excellence and collaboration is claimed by ESRC to be an important by-product of collaborative funding for doctoral training, although in the past, research collaborations tended to attract funding for doctoral students. Furthermore, inter-institutional collaboration was being encouraged by ESRC at the same time as the

former Office for Fair Trading was investigating various anti-competitive practices in UK universities. Additionally, collaboration of departments in different universities around doctoral training is much more complex than normal research or teaching collaboration, being much more fragile and fluid as well as expensive (since ESRC provides no contribution towards administrative costs). At the same time, some elite universities have not been required to collaborate with other institutions, hence they have lower running costs and can make studentship decisions more rapidly. The future for social science doctoral training in the UK is challenging because of the shortage of funding, both for studentships and administration and because DTCs are accompanied by more ESRC central direction than ever before. Though the paper focuses on UK social science research training initiatives, there are important implications for other disciplines and doctoral training policies in other countries

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