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Abstract

In 2010 the ESRC launched 21 Doctoral Training Centres (DTCs), channeling its entire doctoral funding through 46 universities, marking a continuation of its increasing influence on doctoral degrees and their locations. There is currently a limited research base on this topic, and this paper draws together three complementary strands that explore the DTC phenomenon and broader UK social science doctoral funding landscape. Firstly, a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of key ESRC texts will explore how the ESRC justifies and frames this policy. Secondly, interviews with senior academics from across the sector will provide an institutional perspective of this context and how it is negotiated. The third strand will incorporate interview data from doctoral students, again from across the sector. The data collection and initial analysis will have taken place over the summer of 2016, and this presentation will highlight the initial findings for discussion and development.

Introduction

This paper is drawn from an ongoing project that examines the funding landscape for doctoral researchers in the social sciences from three perspectives: policy documents, academics, and doctoral students. Following a decision-making process that spanned a government spending review, 21 Doctoral Training Centres (DTCs) involving 46 universities were launched by the ESRC in 2010 through which it channelled its entire doctoral funding programme. 13 of these DTCs are single-institution centres, with the remainder operating as consortia of between 2 and 10 university partners. This DTC model has been copied and adapted from the Centre for Doctoral Training (CDT) initiated by the EPSRC several years earlier, and by 2016, all other research councils had implemented their own variations of the scheme. This is an area that currently has attracted relatively little scholarship, and this paper seeks to address some of the gaps in the literature.

There are a number of obvious effects of this DTC policy, and in this paper we will be focusing in particular on the social sciences. The first is one of stratification, of the creation of a 'two-tier' sector as DTCs are concentrated almost entirely in pre-92 universities (Deem et al, 2015). Scotland alone included (all of its) pre- and post-92 universities in its Scottish Graduate School of Social Sciences (SGSS). South of the border there are no post-92 institutions involved with a DTC at all. Recent research by Harrison (2016) et al of RCUK CDT/DTC policy overall has also highlighted the emergence of a regionalisation of doctoral study partnerships, and indeed all of the ESRC DTCs which formed consortia had a regional identity. This ESRC policy could be seen as a continuation of its 'increasingly dirigiste' (Mills, 2009) intervention in doctoral provision where first the curriculum and time frames of ESRC-sponsored doctorates became prescribed. This has now been extended into an active shaping of HEIs' internal policies, framed as flexible but in practice embedded within increasingly strict parameters (Lunt et al, 2014). There was an initial plan to fund larger DTCs and smaller Doctoral Training Units (DTUs) to allow smaller departments or research groups to access ESRC doctoral funding, but after the 2010 Spending Review, the DTU component of the scheme was dropped (Deem et al, 2015). The ESRC is also the only funder which no longer offers collaboratively funded CASE scholarships, and this further limits the ability of universities without a DTC to attract and support doctoral students. This means that the majority of universities - including what what Bartholomew (2015) terms

'pockets of excellence' - are excluded from state funding in the social sciences as the entire ESRC doctoral training scheme is now channelled through a relatively exclusive group of universities. This exclusivity has a second potential effect which relates to social justice. It is well documented in the literature that pre-92 universities, on the whole, have a poor track record of attracting working class students. Furthermore, as postgraduate study (and particularly doctoral research) is concentrated in the post-92s, there is a likelihood that less affluent students are being systematically excluded from research degrees (Wakeling & Hampden-Thompson, 2013; McCulloch & Thomas, 2013). The Bartholomew Report (2015), a mid-term review of the ESRC DTC initiative, also highlighted this issue, indicating that this might be exacerbated by the current lack of flexible routes to a doctorate, particularly in undersubscribed areas such as education, social work, and social anthropology which attract practitioners and/or mature students.

It could be argued that a number key perspectives have been missing from the debate thus far, and this project seeks to contribute three. Firstly, there has been some analysis of the development of ESRC policies over time (Lunt et al, 2014; Deem et al, 2015), but not of the way that the ESRC describes and justifies DTCs as a policy solutions. Secondly, while there are some indications from within the DTC community of how they and the wider sector may be affected, there is little to indicate how doctoral funding policies are viewed and acted on by other institutions. The Universities Alliance, for example, has launched its own doctoral scholarship scheme, and there are other, institution-specific responses to the limiting of access to ESRC scholarships. Thirdly, the student position appears to have been largely neglected; as Deem et al (2015) highlight, there are likely to be implications for the doctoral experience both within and outside DTCs.

It is important to note that by the time of the conference, the second round of DTCs (rebranded as Doctoral Training Partnerships, or DTPs) will have been announced and launched. We will therefore know who is still in, who the new entrants are, and who is now (or still) out. Furthermore, the implications of the White Paper in areas such as the reorganisation of RCUK into UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), as well as the fall-out from Brexit will be emerging, and these may well feature in the participants' accounts.

Methodology

Data will be drawn from three sources. Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2007) of the ESRC documents that have shaped the DTC network, from the initial bid call, to the mid-term review, and the second bid call. This will be triangulated with data from semi-structured interviews about the shape and nature of doctoral funding and the doctoral student experience from two sources. One will be up to 30 senior academics from across the sector (pre- and post-92, with and without DTCs) involved with organising and delivering PGR provision in the social sciences at their institutions. The second set of interviews is with up to 30 current domestic and international doctoral students, again from across the pre- and post-92 spectrum. Initial CDA analysis, as well as the key themes from the literature, have assisted in the construction of the interviews and will constitute a framework through which the interview analysis will be conducted.

The data collection was ongoing at the time of submission, and as such this presentation will present an overview of the initial findings to generate discussions and potential avenues for theoretical analysis.

References

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