

C7 Chepstow Wednesday 5 December 14.15 - 14.45

Coercion, Mimesis, and Normativity in UK Social Science Doctoral Funding (0379)

Richard Budd¹ *Liverpool Hope University, United Kingdom*

Introduction

This paper considers the organisational experiences of, and responses to, the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) Doctoral Training Centre (DTC) policy, which significantly reshaped the way that it supported social science PhDs in the UK. The application process for this scheme was initially launched in 2009, with universities able to bid for either large (DTCs) and smaller Doctoral Training Units (DTUs). 84 applications for this funding were submitted, but the policy launch and final award straddled a government Spending Review. The result was that all ESRC doctoral funding was then channelled through 46 universities in 21 Doctoral Training Centres for the next six years. This excluded the majority of UK HEIs from offering ESRC-funded doctorates, many of whom had previously had this funding for some of their students. The ESRC took the unusual step of issuing, in 2011, a justification of the policy, asserting a breadth in the quality of applications and also a 'different fiscal and policy climate' to the initial call for DTC/DTU applications (ESRC, 2011, p.1). They also commissioned an independent review of the policy. This resulted in a report that, among other criticisms, cited a heavy bureaucratic burden associated with running DTCs, and the exclusion of 'pockets of excellence', i.e. areas or departments of the highest quality within universities whose social science research across the board was less strong (Bartholomew et al., 2015). The policy was revised in 2015, culminating in the creation or amalgamation of DTCs into 14 Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs) from 2016 onwards, this time involving 81 universities.

The research base on this topic is limited, the majority coming from senior academics involved in running the DTCs. They describe, in general policy terms, an 'increasingly dirigiste' ESRC imposing conditions on doctoral training and completion rates (Mills, 2009). The DTC policy redirected funding more exclusively towards research-intensive universities, partly reflecting a national preoccupation with competing in the global knowledge economy (Lunt et al., 2014). DTCs themselves were also reported as difficult entities to create and run, particularly when 'forced marriages' with partner institutions required cross-university coordination (Deem et al., 2015). The latter paper also discussed how the burden – and therefore costs – of administering ESRC doctorates had essentially been transferred to the universities. Other work describes how this policy, alongside similar initiatives from the other research councils, created a doctoral landscape of regional territories which to some extent discouraged collaboration outside them (Harrison et al., 2016).

Methodology and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior academics or university managers responsible for the organisation and provision of social science doctorates and/or research bids and strategy. Participants were drawn from across the sector, from universities within as well as temporarily or permanently (at least to date) excluded from ESRC doctoral funding. The interviews were conducted in two tranches: mid 2016 and early to mid-2017. The first coincided with the period when the bids for DTPs were being compiled and submitted, and the second with the time when the successful DTPs were being created or realigned.

The interviews sections where participants were talking about the organisational behaviour or their university's view were isolated from personal perspectives, and analysed according to three chief categories: coercion, mimesis, and normative alignment. These are drawn from literature within a branch of neo-institutional theory, which asserts that organisations do not necessarily change based on rational improvements in efficiency (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Rather, they are driven by a forced alignment with legislation or other formal rules, copying – usually successful – peers to solve new problems or reflect legitimacy, or an allegiance to professional codes of practice.

Findings

The general view from those closer to ESRC funding (i.e. within DTCs and/or DTPs) was that this policy was probably the best way to fund and organise, but that there were aspects which needed to be addressed. Some of these were as highlighted in the 2015 Bartholomew Report and existing literature, and a number had been carried through into the DTP iteration. What was clear, though, was that participants across the board cited a range of organisational problems experienced by inclusion or exclusion from the ESRC doctoral funding circle. These related to both bureaucratic, funding issues, as well as performance around REF, the UK's periodic research assessment exercise.

What is new though, and which emerges through the analytical categories, is the detail of the internal political and administrative issues that DTC partnerships faced, as well as the steps that those universities without ESRC funding took to maintain or adapt their doctoral provision. Coercion was evident at a number of levels: central government, the ESRC, between universities in the case of joint DTCs, and then within the individual departments and faculties. There, was though, a degree of alignment which could be considered voluntary rather than forced, and this suggests that the theory requires some amendment. Mimesis was evident firstly in the ESRC policy, adapted from a somewhat similar funding scheme already in place through one of its sister organisations, the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC). It could also be seen in universities who were hopeful of being included when DTC policy was reviewed, in that they implemented elements of DTC operations but without the 'kite mark' or funding. Normatively, it could be argued that the ESRC was in itself creating a new norm around what doctoral training should be. Also, universities with extensive doctoral programmes saw the ESRC label as essential to their organisational identity, while those who were less well developed in this regard complained how the policy their excluded them from developing their own capacities which, to some extent, deligitimated their status in the sector.

There are, then three key contributions to the literature. One is that it provides further detail on the broader effects of DTC policy. Secondly, it allows us to identify the relative in-/ability of universities in the UK to maintain or develop their doctoral provision, and finally, as mentioned earlier, it suggests that the theoretical explanation did work in the main, but only after some adjustments.