

Undervaluing Doctoral Education post COVID

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In July 2020, we wrote a personal reflection on [the isolation of doctoral education in the times of COVID-19](#), focusing on the effects of lost opportunities for skills development, training, and network-building in doctoral education. While we made some recommendations at that point for ways to counter a few of these issues, new systemic challenges have since emerged in different national and institutional contexts.

As national systems of higher education and individual higher education institutions grapple with loss of funds in this pandemic year, recent months have shown that the consequences may have dire implications especially for doctoral education. In this article, we demonstrate that by undervaluing the role of doctoral education in higher education, national higher education systems risk critical long-term damage, not only to higher education, but also to economic and human development.

The Value of Doctoral Education

With the rise of the knowledge economy, individual nations have sought to differentiate and to strengthen their higher education systems through inclusion of research universities. This trend includes the creation of doctoral-level programs across disciplines, from STEM fields to the humanities and social sciences. As such, doctoral students play an increasingly important role in the economic and sociopolitical development of countries through their roles in universities as participants in the creation of knowledge through research. Doctoral students are also involved as teachers or as teaching assistants in educating and training undergraduate students. In this way, doctoral students contribute directly and indirectly to the labor force across various industries.

With highly specialized knowledge in their respective fields, original research skills, and transferable competencies, doctoral graduates are expected to be important contributors to the knowledge economy, both within academia and industry. A doctoral degree has become a common prerequisite for academic research and teaching positions.

Centers vs. Peripheries?

The growing educational gap between centers and peripheries in international higher education, that is, between high-income, middle-income, and low-income regions, countries, national systems, institutions, and individuals, has been exacerbated during

Abstract

Undervaluing doctoral education by restricting support for PhD students and programs due to COVID-19 resource losses may shift global talent flows in the immediate future, and potentially in the long run.

the pandemic. In spite of the importance of graduate programs, many institutions and education departments in various countries have cut or plan to cut programs, especially in arts, humanities, and social sciences. This process does not only occur at institutions in peripheral countries, but also at top-tier institutions within center countries.

Doctoral programs, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, across the United States have suspended admissions for the Fall 2021, including at Harvard, Brown, Columbia, MIT, New York University, and more. The reasons given are related to limited resources, which departments are electing to redirect to support their current doctoral students. However, restricting admissions in this way may “squeeze the pipeline” for PhD students in the humanities and social sciences, with potentially more significant effects on the least advantaged of prospective students.

In March 2020, UK PhD students and early career researchers sent a letter to UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) requesting an extension of research funding for the length of the pandemic. However, in November 2020, UKRI “strongly advised” that students adjust their projects to fit their original funding periods, providing limited funds to those students struggling the most to complete their projects in time.

The UK and US cases above point to the restrictive effects of COVID-19 on doctoral education. For prospective PhD students, this limits access to doctoral education for at least one year, with possible knock-on effects as competition for limited places increases in the coming years. With fewer peers in their programs, current PhD students in the United States and in other similar doctoral systems may also be spread thin across departments to maintain the current level of departmental research and teaching functions. In the United Kingdom, without funding extensions, PhD students may be forced to change the substance of their research in order to meet resource constraints, arguably going against the very purpose of a doctoral degree.

Germany has done the opposite, with a cabinet decision in April 2020 to extend contracts for PhD students by a length of time equal to the amount of time lost due to COVID-related restrictions.

On the other hand, universities in Hong Kong and Singapore decided to provide funding and additional places for students whose study abroad plans were interrupted due to COVID-19. Prestigious individual universities, such as Hong Kong University and The Chinese University of Hong Kong, offered lucrative scholarship schemes for outstanding candidates who hold a PhD admission offer from top universities around the world. These plans have successfully attracted a considerable number of applications from students from various countries.

Brain Drain or Brain Gain?

The above examples demonstrate how global talent flows might change during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Nations and institutions that highly value doctoral education are taking advantage of the situation and expect to obtain long-term benefits of “brain gain,” as these students adjust to local lifestyles, learn the local language, receive training, conduct research, and build academic networks, regardless of whether they are domestic or international students.

Nonetheless, providing global economic and social activities return to “normal” in a few years, will institutions at the center continue to attract top talent and PhD graduates in research, teaching, and postdoc positions, in spite of their decisions during the pandemic period? Although these institutions at the center, such as those in the US or UK cases, may undervalue PhD education in their current decisions and pause PhD recruitment for a year or two, the unequal power dynamic in global higher education might persist to their advantage. However, from the world wars to the recent geopolitical tensions, history has shown that international talents demonstrate their preferences through the way they flee and flow in times of trouble and in times of stability.

Conclusion

The training and support (financial and other) of doctoral students in COVID-19 times are critical for the future of research and the next generation of scholars across disciplines. Universities are making hard decisions regarding whether to cut funding—in particular in the humanities and social sciences. Although these cuts might seem financially beneficial

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in the short term, such decisions have ramifications for research capacity building in the long run. Changes in national/institutional policies may alter global talent flows for a few years, but it is difficult to conclude who will benefit most and for how long. With the shifting world order, the clear effects of populist nationalism in some countries at the center, and with more openness and multilateralism in the policies of emerging economies, there is no guarantee that global talent flows will once again turn in their favor. ▲

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