



Evolution of Doctorate Policy Governance: The Rising Influence of International Organizations

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Abstract

Recently, the European Union and the OECD introduced an extensive set of measures designed to promote research careers, including those of doctoral candidates. These measures enforce the authority of international organizations through soft law mechanisms to indirectly influence relevant national education policies. They are also reframing the concept of a doctorate by embedding it in the discourse of economic competitiveness. This underscores the urgent need to question the marketing and educational expectations for the doctoral degree.

Over the past twenty years, notably since the Bologna Process introduced a three-cycle higher education system consisting of bachelor, master, and doctoral degrees, governments have progressively intensified their focus on doctoral education, which was once primarily viewed as something within the domain of the academic community.

However, there is yet another, less extensively documented trend: the growing emphasis placed on doctoral training internationally and globally, notably by international organizations such as the European Union (EU) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). In this article, we examine recent policy initiatives from international organizations and contend that the involvement of such organizations in shaping research career strategies alters both the institutional governance framework and substance of doctoral policies.

Advent of Doctorate Policies within Research Career Strategies

To fully grasp the significance of the recent developments within international organizations, it is useful to review how doctoral education first became integrated into research policy matters.

The example of the European Commission (EC) is compelling because it suggests a rather complex institutional process from the early 2000s onwards. On the one hand, the question of doctoral education first gained prominence at the international level within the context of the Bologna Process and the subsequent establishment of the European Higher Education Area. This highly discussed intergovernmental initiative aimed to improve cooperation between universities, enhance quality, promote mobility, and increase the employability of graduates. Besides aiming to have a positive impact on doctoral education in these areas, the Bologna Process has also contributed to the agenda of university modernization, notably promoted by the EC as one of the signatories and implementing members of the Bologna Process. On the other hand, doctoral education also gained momentum within the policy framework of the so-called European Research Area (ERA)—a policy initiative established in 2000 by the EC with the goal of making Europe “the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world.” The ERA assisted in facilitating significant growth in EC research policies, with increased funding, enhanced instruments, and a new policy focus on social challenges and research excellence. The EC’s efforts to establish a single market underscored the need for a more organized approach to research careers. Of note, in 2005, the EC endorsed the European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers. While doctoral candidates were still classified as students (and thus part of higher education-related public policies), they were now designated as “early-career researchers,” thereby linking research career policies to doctoral training programs.

Therefore, by recognizing doctoral students’ work and status, this change in classification enabled the EC to establish its authority within the domain of the doctorate. Since then, driven by various policy initiatives, including those resulting from the 2009 Lisbon Treaty, which established research policy as a shared competence between the EU and member states, the EC has consistently pushed to create new doctoral programs, alliances, and increased intersectoral mobility in research.

Marketization of the Doctorate

The classification of doctoral candidates as early-career researchers has had a major effect on doctoral policy governance in international organizations, and recent policy initiatives serve as a good example of this effect.

In the summer of 2023, the EU and the OECD jointly introduced major policy measures related to promoting research careers including those of doctoral students. First, the EC proposed a comprehensive set of measures that encompassed a proposal for a Council Recommendation to establish a European framework for research careers, a novel Charter for Researchers, and the European Competence Framework for Researchers (ResearchComp), which is designed to enhance intersectoral researcher mobility. Second, in a joint effort, the OECD and the EC presented a document outlining the foundational concept for the upcoming Research and Innovation Careers Observatory (ReICO) that was further complemented by OECD recommendations to promote diverse career pathways for doctoral and postdoctoral researchers.

By primarily addressing researchers' careers, all of these initiatives are pertinent to doctoral careers. Moreover, in addressing researchers' careers, they establish a specific framework for doctoral training within which policy action should be taken. In short, the policy documents highlight in their main narrative a significant lack of support for researchers, including those with doctorates, who are endeavoring to transition into various employment sectors outside of academia. They posit that doctorates should contribute to the job market in a direct and seamless way. For example, in the [proposed European research career framework](#), states are prompted to “encourage interaction and cooperation, including partnerships, between academia, industry, other businesses, public administration, the nonprofit sector, and all other relevant ecosystems of actors,” and to ensure that “doctoral training and targeted training are developed or codeveloped on the basis of the actual skills needs of the parties concerned.” Hence, it appears that the essence of doctoral education is no longer confined to academic curiosity but is evolving beyond its traditional mandate of nurturing future academics to serve as a vital strategic instrument and an impetus for economic growth. Such reasoning is a usual characteristic of the modern neoliberal governance logic that advocates for the state bringing about market-relevant reforms in every aspect of society.

As a result, framed within the market logic, these initiatives are not merely technical frameworks to refine the doctoral career trajectory. They also introduce a cognitive dimension, recalibrating the perception of the doctorate within the broader contours of higher education and research.

Soft Law Regulation: Implications for National States

Finally, the changes described above also prompt the question of their impact on national policies.

Altogether, policy recommendations, policy instruments (ResearchComp), and benchmarking tools (ReICO) can be identified as “soft law” measures, an often used method of governance in international organizations. The main goal of this method is the diffusion of common political objectives and cognitive principles, rather than a complete harmonization or the centralized implementation of identical policies. Hence, they rely more on emulation and peer evaluation than on formal constraints; they allow different national responses to common problems. Yet, to our knowledge, national case studies regarding doctoral training only occasionally establish links with evolving policies at the level of international organizations. However, this is a critical issue, especially considering the diverging policy models and academic cultures across both the EU and OECD.

Appreciating international organizations' actions is important in understanding the transformation of the governance structure of doctoral policies, also because it enables us to focus on the changing role of doctoral training, which seems to occur more discreetly behind the scenes of more public discussions on research careers. Within the requirement of the job market to enhance employability, a sole emphasis on employment market relevance might restrict the broader purpose of education, and this issue applies even for advanced programs like doctorates. A holistic education equips PhD candidates with specialized skills on the one hand and the ability to adapt, innovate, and contribute meaningfully to society on the other hand. Therefore, doctoral education

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should strike a balance, integrating both practical, market-oriented skills and a humanistic foundation. This approach ensures that graduates are not only prepared for the job market but also possess the intellectual breadth to navigate the challenges of the ever-changing global landscape. Such a comprehensive education benefits individuals and also enriches societies by producing well-rounded, socially-aware professionals and scholars. ▲