

# Introduction

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## Contextualizing doctoral supervision

Doctoral studies are the highest level of education that universities provide. This accords them enormous importance, but the interest of the PhD extends beyond its preeminent position within the education system. Indeed, a crucial characteristic that defines and differentiates doctoral studies from other university programs is the fact that they constitute a learning process that includes not only knowledge acquisition, but also knowledge generation. It represents, thus, the first step in a research career that requires doctoral candidates to make an initial contribution in their scientific fields.

The paradigm of the knowledge society as the current productive system points to doctors as key actors in the generation, transfer and relevance of R&D, by connecting institutions involved in research and innovation with the welfare society. In this context, there is a need to increase the number of people with research skills, and at the same time, a need to increase the visibility of their contribution to society and their employability. Universities therefore play an important role in preparing doctoral graduates for the current labor scenario. Specifically, the Dublin Descriptors (2004) establish that PhD graduates, in order to obtain their degree, should:

- ✦ have demonstrated a systematic understanding of a field of study and mastery of the skills and methods of research associated with that field;
- ✦ have demonstrated the ability to conceive, design, implement and adapt a substantial process of research with scholarly integrity;

- ✦ have made a contribution through original research that extends the frontier of knowledge by developing a substantial body of work, some of which merits national or international refereed publication;
- ✦ be capable of critical analysis, evaluation, and synthesis of new and complex ideas;
- ✦ be able to communicate with their peers, the larger scholarly community and with society in general about their areas of expertise;
- ✦ be expected to promote, within academic and professional contexts, technological, social or cultural advancement in a knowledge-based society.

All these requirements make doctoral education a much more complex matter than it was 20 years ago. The doctorate has been supplemented with a number of additional demands, activities, responsibilities, duties and opportunities for all the stakeholders involved in the process. This represents a new challenge for academic and research institutions responsible for doctoral training, which need to professionalize all the stakeholders with a role in the doctoral process. In this landscape, the professionalization of supervisors constitutes a cornerstone, given that they lead the development of the doctoral candidates they advise, while following the directives of the institution's policies. Indeed, the Salzburg Principles II (2010) establish that doctoral supervision, understood as a collective and collegiate effort with clear responsibilities of the supervisor, the PhD student, the doctoral school and the university at large, must be at the core of doctoral education development. They also charge universities with the responsibility for providing the corresponding professional development to PhD supervisors and facilitating a shared common culture of research.

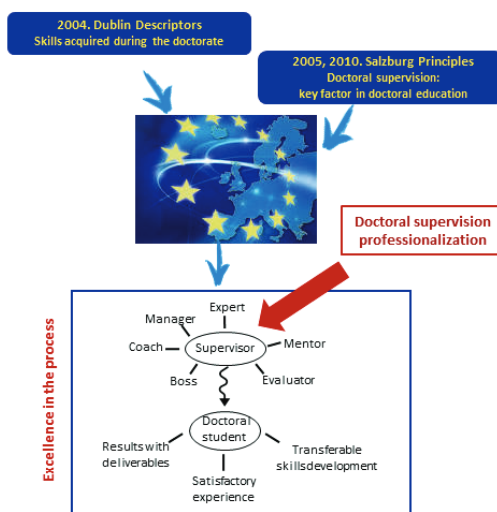
## **New perspectives in doctoral supervision**

In the context described in the previous paragraph, PhD supervisors, along with their institutions, are responsible for preparing current and future generations of doctors to lead the European knowledge space. To undertake such a responsibility, the role of the PhD supervisor goes far beyond that of the lecturer typical of a teacher-student relationship. Moreover, the vision of the PhD supervisor as an authoritative distant figure centered solely on the research contents of a thesis is being superseded by the need for a professional doctoral supervisor who is not only an advanced researcher but also someone who can simultaneously handle the role of expert, mentor, coach, manager, evaluator and even career guidance counsellor. On top of this, doctoral education is a process that involves knowledge acquisition (through education) and knowledge generation (through research). Hence, it is essential that education and research be mutually reinforced. To this end, the role of the doctoral supervisor is key in both education and research.

Therefore, by professionalizing the skill-set of doctoral supervisors, we will endow them with the tools necessary to ensure that PhD students make a smooth transition from being good learners in their specialized topic to being capable of contributing to advancing science and contributing to society as researchers. Consequently, the supervisory skillset required by doctoral supervisors is by nature very broad. It involves a number of transferrable and soft skills above and beyond the technical aspects that supervisor-researchers are already acquainted with. Thus, it seems necessary to develop supervisors' expertise in terms of the complete set of transferrable and soft skills involved in supervision, as well as in the recognition of the acquisition of such knowledge, skills and competences so that PhD supervisors can transparently reflect this skillset in their CVs when moving between universities.

This much more sophisticated figure of the PhD supervisor requires a degree of professionalization in order to provide effective supervision. We understand the professionalization of PhD supervisors not only as a training endeavor, but also involving three elements: firstly, raising supervisors' awareness of the multifaceted role required by the current knowledge society; secondly, training them to acquire and develop the skills to perform the new role; and thirdly, providing them with ideas to allow them to self-manage and continue learning and generating their own PhD supervision tools as the needs of society continue to shape their role (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The context and content of PhD supervision professionalization.



This training should help supervisors to effectively perform the relevant tasks of their new role. The most representative of these tasks include:

- ✦ selecting the most adequate candidates;
- ✦ building a professional relationship with doctoral candidates;
- ✦ directing doctoral candidates in their research projects;
- ✦ backing them in their personal and professional development;
- ✦ providing support throughout the doctoral process and in the completion of the thesis report and defense;
- ✦ evaluating the work and results of doctoral researchers;
- ✦ promoting the diffusion of knowledge generated during the doctoral process.

Until now, the skills necessary to perform these tasks have not been included in the training of supervisors. As set out in the EU's 'New Skills Agenda for Europe' (COM (2016) 381), "higher education institutions need to ensure that they equip graduates with relevant and up-to-date-skills," and it recognizes that "it is teachers and trainers who have most impact on learners' performance." It is precisely this key role of educational personnel that is highlighted as the first point in the 'Pursuing Modernization Efforts' section of the New Skills Agenda.

In this landscape, several initiatives for the establishment of supervisor training programs have emerged at different universities of continental Europe during the last decade. They are mainly inspired by those that have been developed in the UK and Australia since the 20th century. To date, training and development initiatives of this type are very inconsistent throughout Europe, and recognition efforts are next to non-existent in this regard. This state of affairs needs to be redressed, as the preparation of future doctors by professional supervisors is key for Europe as a leading knowledge society.

## **Towards the organization of the TTT**

Within the European context described above, it became clear that there were already many initiatives for PhD supervisory training, but a more systematic approach to this task would be needed. An important initiative in this regard was the focus given by the EUA-CDE (European University Association, Council for Doctoral Education) in its 2016 annual workshop (Delft), which centered precisely on doctoral supervision, practices and responsibilities. This event allowed individual universities to present their experiences, and highlighted the need for more concerted efforts and practices. The

URV was one of the participating universities in this event, and host to the following EUA-CDE annual meeting. This created the opportunity to apply some of the ideas posed in the workshop and provide a space for further targeted discussion on the topic.

In this regard, we planned an informal follow-up meeting for experts with an interest and expertise in PhD supervisory training, the *Tarragona think tank on PhD supervisory training: challenges and good practices*, held on June 15, 2016, at Rovira i Virgili University (URV, Tarragona).

The objective of the think tank meeting was to share the experiences of universities that provide supervisor training through the testimony of people from those institutions, and to assess the feasibility of setting up a group of experts on the professionalization of PhD supervisors. Overall, our aim was to make a significant and lasting impact upon doctoral education in Europe by professionalizing the role of doctoral supervisors. Participants got a clear overview of how doctoral supervision is undertaken across the EU and why and how the role of the supervisor requires professionalization in order to meet the needs of contemporary society.

The participants shared ideas and experiences, lessons learned in specific cases, determinants of good practice, and identified a broad range of factors that lead to successful doctoral supervision. We compiled the latest developments in supervisor training experiences, concepts and practices.

The meeting was organized in two parts: The first part consisted of the description of individual best practice cases, including the characteristics of PhD supervisory training currently in place in each institution. Important highlights included how each of the programs came about: the stakeholders in the original initiatives, support that was needed, successes and challenges along the way, measures of the impact of supervisor training, etc. The second part of the meeting consisted of a moderated interactive session to reflect upon developments and think about the (hopefully common) future of PhD supervisory training, with the objective of setting an agenda for reaching a shared idea of an ideal scenario about the direction that supervisory education should take in the future in European universities.

This book is the first tangible outcome of this concerted effort.

This publication, thus, intends to present a sample of the topics dealt with at the Tarragona think tank on PhD supervisory training, reflecting its main ideas, structure and contents. It is made up of the following sections: The first part, *Scenarios for Doctorates and Doctoral Supervision* shows the general context of change in the situation of doctors in Europe, and highlights the issues relevant for doctoral supervisory training in the UK, one of the countries that pioneered these initiatives in the form of university procedures and culture. The second part of the book, *Sharing Best Practices*, describes the state of development of doctoral supervisory training in

four selected institutions: the University of Pau (France), the University of Surrey (UK), the University of Cantabria (Spain) and Rovira i Virgili University (Spain). Finally, the third part, *The Present and Future of PhD Supervisory Training: Outputs of the TTT*, includes the conclusions of the interactive session that took place during the think tank meeting, in which the topics addressed were challenges, impact assessment and the ideal future.

Looking forward, we hope this book and other outcomes of this event can help establish the basis for the development of a network or alliance among the participating organizations and stimulate an ongoing effort aimed at bringing the professionalization of doctoral supervisors to the forefront of education policy at the university level. In summary, we hope that this contribution can help materialize ideas into actions.