

Eurodoc Policy Input for European Higher Education Area: Focus on Doctoral Training and Doctoral Candidates

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Eurodoc, the European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers, is an umbrella organization of 28 [national associations](#) representing doctoral candidates and junior researchers in 25 countries of the European Union and the Council of Europe. Eurodoc was established in 2002 and is based in Brussels. For more information, please look at our [Mission and Vision](#) statement.

The Aim

This policy input provides the perspective of early career researchers on the key policy issues in the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) debate and contributes to the future development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) to link it more closely with the European Research Area (ERA)¹.

The gaps in the Bologna Process debate: a focus on doctoral training

BFUG and Ministerial Conferences / Communiqués are drivers for the implementation of the Bologna Process and development of the EHEA. The Draft Rome Communiqué² draws a vision of an inclusive, innovative and interconnected EHEA able to develop a sustainable, cohesive and peaceful Europe. This vision will, however, be hard to attain without recognising the uniqueness of the third cycle, and without recognizing doctoral candidates as early stage researchers ([level R1](#)) forming a separate group of stakeholders and learners alongside students and staff.

Inclusive, Innovative, and Interconnected EHEA: Key Policy Issues

1) Ensure sufficient focus on the third cycle of higher education in policy debates, to strengthen the EHEA vision for European cooperation in doctoral training.

We believe that doctoral training as the third cycle should acquire more attention in the BFUG and needs to be reevaluated within the Bologna Process, considering the latest transformations in the systems of higher education and science, new trends in university performance and research policies. These include reforms to research assessment, Open Science, research ethics and integrity, mental health, career development and graduate tracking of doctoral candidates. Thus, the third cycle should be addressed in Ministerial Communiqués and Bologna Process implementation reports more directly and with consistent reference to all its priorities. This will ultimately support a Europe-wide dialogue about the future development of doctoral training.

The Bologna Process recognises three cycles in higher education, wherein the third cycle (EQF level 8) rests on the advancement of knowledge through original research³ and thereby differs fundamentally from the first and second cycles.

¹ [Eurodoc Contribution to the European Research Area](#) (Eurodoc, 2017)

² [Draft 6 of the Rome Ministerial Communiqué](#), 10 September 2020

³ [Bergen Communiqué](#) (Bergen, 19-20 May 2005)

Previously, the third 'doctoral' cycle represented a key focus in BFUG and during Ministerial Conferences, as discussed in Ministerial Communications from [2003](#), [2005](#), [2007](#), [2009](#) and [2012](#) (see Annex 1). During this period, European doctoral training advanced considerably⁴. Yet, doctoral training and doctoral candidates were not discussed extensively in the last three Ministerial Communiqués ([2015](#), [2018](#), 2020), with either only brief mentioning of doctoral candidates or their inclusion only within general expressions like "students", "staff", "higher education", "learning", or "research". Doctoral candidates, as early stage researchers, should not be classified solely as students given that they perform research in a professional manner.

Using such reductive terms limits the vision for developing doctoral training in EHEA. Student-centered learning, broadly discussed in recent communications and highly relevant for first and second cycle students, does not reflect the essence of the third cycle. Likewise, research-based training is absent in recent EHEA Ministerial Communiqués and other Bologna Process documents.

In addition, important policy priorities addressed in the Draft 6 Rome Communiqué and annexes, such as microcredentials and transversal skills, digital skills, and graduate tracking, need to be comprehensively evaluated in terms of their value for the third cycle.

Eurodoc also advocates for increased attention on- and equal opportunities for all minority groups and underprivileged doctoral candidates, as well as other vulnerable individuals like refugees and displaced doctoral candidates. We hope that the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees will also support doctoral candidates and postdoctoral researchers at risk.

2) Establish research-oriented quality assurance as a central requirement for innovative training at the doctoral level.

Quality assurance and doctoral education have been stable elements of the Bologna Process since the 2003 Ministerial meeting in Berlin. As stated in a 2013 EUA report⁵, "Quality assurance has been mostly related to universities' teaching mission and the main focus has been on the first two cycles, while doctoral education has been closely linked to research". However, the specific issues concerning the quality of doctoral training are not sufficiently discussed at the European level and dedicated recommendations for evaluation or accreditation of doctoral programmes would promote the recognition of the value of doctorate (e.g. recognising interdisciplinarity in research).

Adequate and separate quality assurance is one of the key principles for innovative doctoral training, as stated by the European Commission⁶:

"The accountability procedures must be established on the research base of doctoral education and for that reason, they should be developed separately from the quality assurance in the first and second cycle. The goal of quality assurance in doctoral education should be to enhance the quality of the research environment as well as

⁴ [Trends 2015: Learning and Teaching in European Universities](#) (EUA, 2015)

⁵ [Quality Assurance in Doctoral Education – results of the ARDE project](#) (EUA, 2013)

⁶ [Innovative Principles for Doctoral Training](#) (EC, 2011)

promoting transparent and accountable procedures for topics such as admission, supervision, awarding the doctorate degree and career development. It is important to stress that this is not about the quality assurance of the PhD itself rather the process or life cycle, from recruitment to graduation”.

The quality of doctoral programs should be ensured through the implementation of the other key European initiatives for doctoral training: Salzburg Principles⁷, Salzburg Recommendations⁸ and Taking Salzburg Forward⁹. Additionally, EHEA member countries should encourage the development of innovative, flexible, inclusive and relevant doctoral training, that is influenced by societal needs, dynamic global challenges and also considering the Sustainable Development Goals.

Quality standards in the third cycle should also encourage the inclusion of transferable skills training^{10,11} in current and future doctoral programmes, which are of the utmost importance for early career researchers and warrant increased recognition¹². The most significant issues facing early career researchers are (1) the need for career development¹³, especially for the non-academic labor market; (2) a lack of awareness of Open Science¹⁴ practices, as well as research ethics and integrity; and (3) raising mental health¹⁵ issues, especially for doctoral candidates. To address these concerns, doctoral schools should publicise and promote different career paths based on past and contemporary evidence¹⁶, provide career management services appropriate for early career researchers, and ensure them sufficient mental health support. Furthermore, doctoral candidates need supportive infrastructure, including data stewards to assist them in practicing Open Science. Doctoral schools must also bolster doctoral training with courses to foster further engagement with Open Science activities, and to help doctoral candidates gain a comprehensive understanding of research integrity.

In addition, Ministers for Education in EHEA are encouraged to discuss and agree the common fundamentals (i.e. ‘guidelines’) for doctoral supervision, including the provision of necessary training for supervisors¹⁷, and by offering joint, double or group supervision¹⁸. Supervision remains one of the core elements of the doctoral process and requires the engagement and support of the institution, specific supervisory arrangements and review methods, as well as confidential and structured feedback mechanisms¹⁹. Ministerial focus on the quality of supervision in future Communications would help to prioritise this issue at national and institutional levels.

⁷ [Salzburg Principles](#) (Bologna Seminar, 2005)

⁸ [Salzburg II Recommendations](#) (EUA, 2010)

⁹ [Doctoral Education - Taking Salzburg Forward: Implementation and new challenges](#) (EUA, 2016)

¹⁰ [Identifying Transferable Skills and Competences to Enhance Early-Career Researchers Employability and Competitiveness](#) (Eurodoc, 2018), [Skills Infographics](#) (Eurodoc, 2018)

¹¹ [Good practice recommendations for integration of transferable skills training in PhD programmes](#) (EU project DocEnhance, 2020)

¹² [Declaration on Sustainable Researcher Careers](#) (MCAA/Eurodoc, 2019)

¹³ [A balancing act](#) (Eurodoc, 2018)

¹⁴ [Open science for early-career researchers](#) (Eurodoc, 2018)

¹⁵ [Early-career researchers and mental health](#) (Eurodoc, 2018)

¹⁶ [Tracking the careers of doctorate holders: EUA-CDE Thematic Peer Group Report](#) (EUA, 2020)

¹⁷ [The Quality of Doctoral Training and Employability of Doctorate Holders: The Views of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers](#) (Eurodoc, 2015)

¹⁸ [Handbook for Supervisors of Doctoral Candidates](#) (SuperProfDoc Project, 2017)

¹⁹ [Supervision and Training Charter for Early Stage Researchers](#) (Eurodoc, 2004)

3) Recognise doctoral candidates as researchers, and as an autonomous group of professionals to participate in governance.

Ministers responsible for higher education in the 2005 Bergen Communiqué recognised doctoral candidates as *“participants in third cycle programmes both as students and as early stage researchers”*²⁰. Further, the European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers²¹ states that:

“All researchers engaged in a research career should be recognised as professionals and be treated accordingly. This should commence at the beginning of their careers, namely at postgraduate level, and should include all levels, regardless of their classification at national level (e.g. employee, postgraduate student, doctoral candidate, postdoctoral fellow, civil servants)”.

Likewise, Salzburg Principles also defined *“doctoral candidates as early stage researchers”*, which *“should be recognized as professionals – with commensurate rights - who make a key contribution to the creation of new knowledge”*²². The role of doctoral candidates as early career researchers is uncontested²³.

Nevertheless, doctoral candidates have various legal statuses, ranging from students to full employees, both across and within European countries. Consequently, doctoral candidates still hold the student or hybrid status in many EHEA countries, and are thereby not fully recognised as researchers nor possessing adequate working conditions²⁴. Eurodoc therefore encourages the Ministers responsible for higher education to recognise the professional status of doctoral candidates, providing continual professionalisation of those undertaking a doctorate.

Moreover, student representation in higher education governance is among the fundamental values of EHEA. Thus, doctoral candidates recognised as early stage researchers should be guaranteed participation in university governance and the policy making process. EHEA member countries should ensure structural support to organizations representing doctoral candidates' and junior researchers' representation at national and institutional level.

Given its interest in- and advocacy for doctoral training in EHEA, Eurodoc would gratefully welcome inclusion in BFUG as a consultative member to support the work done by the group for the third cycle in Europe. We aim to ensure equivalent representation of doctoral candidates to that available for ISCED level 6 and 7 students, to be independent from the representation of other staff, and should have a similar mandate, legitimisation and level of expertise.

Eurodoc is a well-recognised representative stakeholder of doctoral candidates in Europe²⁵ and our members, comprising national associations of doctoral candidates and/or junior researchers, are recognised as the major stakeholders at the national level. These organizations are best placed to voice the views of doctoral candidates and postdoctoral

²⁰ [Bergen Communiqué](#) (Bergen, 19-20 May 2005)

²¹ [European Charter and Code for Researchers](#) (EC, 2005)

²² [Salzburg Principles](#) (Bologna Seminar, 2005)

²³ [Doctoral education in Europe today: approaches and institutional structures](#) (EUA-CDE, 2019)

²⁴ [Doctorates across Europe](#) (Eurodoc, ongoing project)

²⁵ [Representing early-career researchers](#) (Eurodoc, 2018)

researchers in different European nations and at the European level. No other organisation can claim the same degree of representation as Eurodoc, particularly for the continent's doctoral candidates. Additionally, Eurodoc is involved in numerous expert bodies and working committees at the European level, including membership in the European Commission Expert Group on Graduate Tracking²⁶. Ultimately, the voice of early career researchers can serve to contribute to European policies in higher education and research.

4) Foster inter-sectoral, inter-institutional and international mobility of doctoral candidates and international collaboration.

All types of mobility should be valued and recognised for doctoral candidates, including geographical (international), inter-sectoral, inter-institutional and virtual mobilities (e.g. conferences, webinars, discussion forums). Likewise, international collaboration must also be supported, as well as access to digital research infrastructures, their services, and virtual campuses. Mobility policies for doctoral candidates should encourage and facilitate mobility of all kinds, particularly those that ensure equitable social provisions (e.g. considering the challenges related to pension schemes for mobile researchers²⁷). Eurodoc encourages the collection of mobility data in EHEA that extends to doctoral candidates.

Intensive and international collaboration in higher education and research is ultimately the core mission of the European University Initiative. With expansive opportunities for mobility of all kinds, Eurodoc envisions that European doctorates²⁸ can become an essential part of European universities.

Conclusion

Doctoral training is an integral component of both the higher education and research systems, and represents a unique, intersectional domain in both EHEA and ERA. We believe that doctoral training as the third cycle deserves more policy focus in the future vision of the EHEA.

Given that the BFUG represents the foremost platform for Europe-wide, high-level dialogue about the future development of the third cycle, we believe that Eurodoc can support the group in meeting this challenge by conveying the unified perspective and needs of doctoral candidates. Providing Ministerial decisions and communications with a clearer, more defined focus on doctoral training would build not only a stronger EHEA but also promote a stronger connection between EHEA and ERA.

The voice of Eurodoc, the European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers, as a representative European stakeholder for the third cycle needs further consideration within EHEA. Eurodoc respectfully presents itself as a willing and worthwhile contributor to ongoing policy debates as a BFUG consultative member, as requested in [2018](#) and [2020](#).

²⁶ [Commission Expert Group on Graduate Tracking](#) (including Eurodoc, [ESU](#) and [ETUCE](#) as members)

²⁷ For instance [RESAVER](#) - a multi-employer occupational pension solution for researchers in Europe

²⁸ [Trends V: Universities shaping the European Higher Education Area](#) (EUA, 2007)

Annex 1

**Quotes of “Doctoral training” and “doctoral candidates” in EHEA Ministerial
Communique 2003-2020**

[Berlin Communiqué. Realising the European Higher Education Area Communiqué of the Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education](#) (Berlin on 19 September 2003)

Ministers consider it necessary to go beyond the present focus on two main cycles of higher education to include the doctoral level as the third cycle in the Bologna Process. They emphasise the **importance of research and research training**²⁹ and the promotion of interdisciplinarity in maintaining and improving the quality of higher education and in enhancing the competitiveness of European higher education more generally. Ministers call for **increased mobility at the doctoral and postdoctoral levels** and encourage the institutions concerned to increase their cooperation in doctoral studies and the training of young researchers.

[...] initiatives have been taken by Higher Education Institutions in various European countries to pool their academic resources and cultural traditions in order to promote the development of integrated study programmes and joint degrees at first, second and **third level**.

[...] Finally, Ministers state that **networks at doctoral level should be given support to stimulate the development of excellence and to become one of the hallmarks of the European Higher Education Area**.

[Bergen Communiqué. The European Higher Education Area - Achieving the Goals Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education](#) (Bergen, 19-20 May 2005)

[...] To achieve these objectives, **doctoral level qualifications** need to be **fully aligned with the EHEA overarching framework for qualifications using the outcomes-based approach. The core component of doctoral training is the advancement of knowledge through original research**. Considering the **need for structured doctoral programmes and the need for transparent supervision and assessment**, we note that the normal workload of the third cycle in most countries would correspond to 3-4 years full time. We urge universities to ensure that their **doctoral programmes promote interdisciplinary training and the development of transferable skills**, thus meeting the needs of the wider employment market. We need to achieve an overall increase in the numbers of doctoral candidates taking up research careers within the EHEA. We consider **participants in third cycle programmes both as students and as early stage researchers**. We charge the Bologna Follow-up Group with inviting the European University Association, together with other interested partners, to prepare a report³⁰ under the responsibility of the Follow-up

²⁹ Underlined by Eurodoc.

³⁰ [Doctoral Programmes in Europe's universities: achievements and challenges. Report prepared for european universities and Ministers of higher education](#) (EUA, 2007).

Group on the further development of the **basic principles for doctoral programmes**, to be presented to Ministers in 2007. Overregulation of doctoral programmes must be avoided.

[...] In particular, we shall look for progress in:

- the awarding and recognition of joint degrees, including at the **doctorate level**;

[London Communiqué. Towards the European Higher Education Area: responding to challenges in a globalised world](#) (London, 18 May 2007)

[...] there has been an **increase in the number of structured doctoral programmes**.

Doctoral candidates

2.15 Closer alignment of the EHEA with the European Research Area (ERA) remains an important objective. We recognise the value of developing and maintaining a wide variety of doctoral programmes linked to the overarching qualifications framework for the EHEA, whilst avoiding overregulation. At the same time, we appreciate that **enhancing provision in the third cycle and improving the status, career prospects and funding for early stage researchers are essential preconditions for meeting Europe's objectives of strengthening research capacity and improving the quality and competitiveness of European higher education**.

2.16 We therefore invite our HEIs to **reinforce their efforts to embed doctoral programmes in institutional strategies and policies, and to develop appropriate career paths and opportunities for doctoral candidates and early stage researchers**.

2.17 We invite EUA to continue to support the sharing of experience among HEIs on the range of innovative doctoral programmes that are emerging across Europe as well as on other crucial issues such as transparent access arrangements, supervision and assessment procedures, the development of transferable skills and ways of enhancing employability. We will look for appropriate opportunities to encourage greater exchange of information on funding and other issues between our Governments as well as with other research funding bodies.

[Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué. The Bologna Process 2020 - The European Higher Education Area in the new decade 2009](#) (Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué, 28-29 April 2009)

[...] 15. Higher education should be based at all levels on state of the art research and development thus fostering innovation and creativity in society. We recognise the potential of higher education programmes, including those based on applied science, to foster innovation. Consequently, the number of people with research competences should increase. **Doctoral programmes should provide high quality disciplinary research and increasingly be complemented by inter-disciplinary and inter-sectoral programmes**. Moreover, public authorities and institutions of higher education will make the **career development of early stage researchers more attractive**.

[Budapest-Vienna Declaration on the European Higher Education Area](#) (Budapest-Vienna, 11-12 March 2010)

Not mentioned

[Bucharest Communiqué Making the Most of Our Potential: Consolidating the European Higher Education Area](#) (Bucharest, 26-27 April 2012)

Our societies need higher education institutions to contribute innovatively to sustainable development and therefore, higher education must ensure a stronger link between research, teaching and learning at all levels. Study programmes must reflect changing research priorities and emerging disciplines, and research should underpin teaching and learning. In this respect, we will sustain a diversity of doctoral programmes. **Taking into account the “Salzburg II recommendations”(2) and the Principles for Innovative Doctoral Training (3) we will explore how to promote quality, transparency, employability and mobility in the third cycle, as the education and training of doctoral candidates has a particular role in bridging the EHEA and the European Research Area (ERA).** Next to doctoral training, high quality second cycle programmes are a necessary precondition for the success of linking teaching, learning and research. Keeping wide diversity and simultaneously increasing readability, we might also explore further possible common principles for master programmes in the EHEA, taking account of previous work.

[...] A common understanding of the levels of our qualifications frameworks is essential to recognition for both academic and professional purposes [...] We further commit to referencing first, second and **third cycle** qualifications against EQF levels 6, 7 and 8 respectively, or against equivalent levels for countries not bound by the EQF.

[...] **At the European level, in preparation of the Ministerial Conference in 2015 and together with relevant stakeholders, we will:**

- **Promote quality, transparency, employability and mobility in the third cycle, while also building additional bridges between the EHEA and the ERA;**

[Yerevan Communiqué](#) (Yerevan, 14-15 May 2015)

Not mentioned

[Paris Communiqué](#) (Paris, 25 May 2018)

Not mentioned

[Draft 6 Rome Communiqué 2020](#) (to be adopted by the Ministerial Conference on 19th November 2020)

[...] We acknowledge the **importance and the benefits of physical mobility** for students, **doctoral candidates** and staff [...].