

EUA-CDE ONLINE SESSIONS REPORT

The new balance. Insights from EUA-CDE online sessions on doctoral education and the coronavirus crisis

3-12 June 2020 | Online

The EUA Council for Doctoral Education (EUA-CDE) organised a series of [online sessions](#) on the implications of the current coronavirus crisis on doctoral education. The sessions took place from 3-12 June and each session gathered between 50 and 80 representatives of [EUA-CDE member universities](#). The following topics were discussed:

- Online assessment and doctoral dissertation defence
- Online skills training and supervision
- Supporting doctoral candidates' mental health and well-being
- The effect on collaborations and funding of doctoral education

In the following pages, we summarise some of the main results of the sessions. They offer an insight into some initial experiences and can serve as a reflection on the current situation and an account of activities developed as a response to it.

Bringing doctoral training and supervision into cyberspace

Doctoral schools aim at providing the best possible support for early-career researchers and are in this regard meeting places between early-career researchers, supervisors, and institutions.

Enabling encounters is an important aim of doctoral schools. A situation demanding fewer physical encounters, as in the coronavirus pandemic, becomes a challenge. Alternative models of encounters are needed, making use of technologies that are currently available. A strong move toward online training and supervision is the result.

The session revealed that universities were able to transition swiftly to online trainings for doctoral candidates. An increased use of digitalisation that may have taken a decade to develop, needed to happen within days or weeks. Some universities had established online activities to develop the skills of their doctoral candidates prior to the crisis and could transition immediately, while other institutions with less previous experience were quick to adapt to the new situation, even though this included a significant amount of work in a state of exception. However, the level of difficulty could go up, depending on the kind of training that needed to be replaced. It was much easier to organise the transformation of an offline lecture into an online webinar, than to replace training that needed direct access to a laboratory or focused on the development of non-verbal communication skills. So sometimes, it was less about the "how" than the "what".

Participants considered the advantages of this move to online supervision and greater flexibility. As physical presence is not required, early-career researchers who live at a distance from the university, have work or family obligations or are in any other situation that reduces their flexibility can participate remotely. Collaborations (whether international, intersectoral or inter-institutional) are easier to organise when everybody can participate from their own location. It is also easier for doctoral candidates to choose a specific training from an institution abroad which is not offered in the own university. Online sessions can

be much easier planned than on-site activities that may need to be limited or cancelled due to the coronavirus. To some degree, peer-to-peer interactions, too, which are themselves an important part of doctoral training, can take part online. For example, co-writing workshops were organised, where doctoral candidates met regularly at a certain time to discuss their work, which helped structure the day. After meeting with colleagues, they could better focus on writing the thesis.

However, this move could also include some disadvantages. Training in doctoral education happens much less in frontal classroom settings than through inter-personal exchange. Peer learning and mutual exchanges between early-career researchers became a particular challenge. Even when some alternative activities (as described above) took place, there were limitations.

Participants noted that a holistic training experience that includes direct interactions is not as successfully achieved as they would be in an on-site setting. Interactions depend on the technical opportunities of some software and are to some degree inflexible. This can also be said for supervision. Engaging in online supervision has not been easy for both supervisors and doctoral candidates, and the challenges increase with the size of the groups. Participants sometimes turned off their camera and microphone, making interaction nearly impossible. Efforts to make keeping the camera on mandatory can be useful. However, they failed in some institutions due to legal safeguards, but also because early-career researchers reported technical difficulties or claimed that the use of cameras caused mental distress.

Supporting doctoral candidates' mental health and well-being

In the last couple of years, the issue of mental health and well-being of doctoral candidates has been increasingly discussed in the area of doctoral education. Now, with the current pandemic situation, the topic has become even more relevant. When working from home is made mandatory or strongly advised by health authorities, issues like anxiety, isolation and lack of concentration can come to the fore. Early-career researchers may find their sense of loneliness deepening, and at the same time, the fear of the economic future and the risk of joblessness and poverty are real. For many early-career researchers the future may not look as bright compared to pre Covid-19. Fears concerning their own health, or the health of family and friends, can make the situation worse. Thus, the mental health and well-being of early-career researchers, as well as supervisors and staff, need to be given special attention.

Some recent findings may help us understand this particular challenge. In April, some weeks after the lockdown announcement, the UK Students Mental Research Network (SMaRteN) and Vitae launched [a survey](#) with the aim of analysing the impact of Covid-19 on doctoral candidates and postdoctoral researchers. During the online session with the EUA-CDE membership, these results were used as an empirical basis for further discussion.

According to the study, three-quarters of respondents showed low levels of mental wellbeing, and four in five experienced some level of mental distress. Those respondents working in arts and humanities were reportedly facing higher levels of mental health difficulties and anxiety than those working in the sciences. Doctoral researchers, women and non-UK citizens experienced an increased pressure and more anxiety issues, compared with the rest of the sector. In addition, two-thirds of the participants were very worried about the future in general, while a little over two-thirds (70%) were worried about their future economic situation. The authors of the study made the important point that doctoral candidates and postdoctoral researchers who received support from their university and whose supervisors suggested that they keep in touch with their peers and colleagues, experienced lower levels of anxiety and loneliness.

In the course of this online session, EUA-CDE members spoke of developments in the area of online supervision and training. Universities quickly developed or improved the offer of online activities to keep supporting doctoral candidates and staff well-being. Many provided doctoral candidates with relevant information and engaged in enhancing a sense of community in order to allow them to better cope with the effects of the lockdown. This included the creation of blogs and social media activities, and the production of newsletters and guidelines with tips on how to do research or work remotely, manage anxiety and deal with sleep disorders. Furthermore, a considerable number of EUA-CDE member universities found that policies implemented over the last years were useful in maintaining the mental well-being of their staff.

The virtual spaces developed in the context of online training sessions were also useful in addressing mental health and well-being. During the online session, useful information was collected from attendees about the main concerns and problems encountered during these exceptional circumstances. Additionally, many provided solutions tailored to the specific needs of staff and doctoral candidates. EUA-CDE members who attended this online session highlighted that good supervision was the key to minimising the risk of mental health difficulties for doctoral candidates. In order to assist supervisors in the transition to online supervision (a new way of working for many), various doctoral schools across our network provided institutional support to supervisors, encouraging them to discuss feedback with other colleagues before virtual meetings with doctoral candidates and to establish informal spaces of communication with other supervisors in the same institution.

As pressures often came from deadlines that were too tight, universities also introduced a certain degree of flexibility for the submission of research projects or doctoral dissertation theses. However, this was easier in situations where universities could decide about deadlines unilaterally, but not where broader regulations needed to be changed. In addition, extension of deadlines did not mean that funding was extended.

Ensuring funding during the pandemic

As the spread of Covid-19 prompted restrictive measures in almost all European universities, many doctoral candidates had to interrupt their doctoral research, with serious consequences for their economic situation. The interruption of laboratory work and the inaccessibility of libraries heavily impacted the continuation of the research plan, which in turn led to the need to extend grants for doctoral candidates.

During this online session, EUA-CDE members addressed the following questions: What is the current funding situation of doctoral candidates in Europe? What has been the attitude of funding agencies to interruptions of doctoral research due to Covid-19? Are there any external partners unable to continue existing or future collaboration in doctoral projects because of their own economic difficulties?

The discussions during this session revealed that the situation is quite heterogeneous across European countries in terms of funding of doctoral training and research. In countries like Georgia and Portugal, national funding agencies, aware of the fact that the research work would face delays due to the restrictive measures, granted funding extensions to early-career researchers for a short amount of time to allow them to continue their research project.

In some countries, notably in Italy, the Ministry of Education provided funding extension of two months to all doctoral candidates expected to finalise their doctoral degree by the end of this year.

EUA-CDE members also discussed the frameworks put in place by different streams to address the coronavirus pandemic. On the European level, discussion focused on the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) actions. Participants indicated that deadline extensions for the MSCA projects have been provided to the fellows, but without additional funding for early-career researchers.

On the national and regional level, funders behaved differently. While some provided certain funding extensions, others did not. Given this unequal treatment of early-career researchers, several universities used their own resources to fill the gap. By doing this, they could avoid creating a “second class” of early-career researchers that did not receive financial support to continue their projects during the lockdown period.

One concern that came up during the discussion was the funding by and collaboration with non-university partners such as the public sectors, NGOs and private companies. While there has been some concern that the economic crisis will cause companies to terminate collaborations, this has not been observed yet. Despite the difficult economic situation of many private companies, they are still willing to pay scholarships and to continue financing existing doctoral projects. However, only time will tell if this will change or not.

Not only individual early-career researchers or research projects are confronted by deviations from the original budget. Institutional planning, too, has encountered some challenges. EUA-CDE member representatives emphasised the importance of ensuring a certain flexibility in institutional planning to be able to reallocate the available funds at a later stage.

The effect of Covid-19 on collaborations in doctoral education

In the course of this online session, participants explored how the current global crisis affected international collaboration in doctoral education.

Undoubtedly, international doctoral education collaboration has been significantly hampered by the lockdown. Co-tutelle agreements have had to be postponed and activities requiring international travel have had to be cancelled.

The closure of national borders has made it impossible for doctoral candidates and early-career researchers to participate in person in summer schools, conduct research visiting periods abroad or attend international conferences. Though many doctoral schools have organised some online replacement activities, there is a general concern that early-career researchers will be deprived of networking opportunities as long as this situation persists.

In addition, embassies and ministries shut down and, in some cases, this has led to the delay or interruption of bureaucratic procedures enabling collaboration between institutions.

Most participants stressed that the effect on doctoral research in Europe will mostly be perceived in the coming year, when a new group of early-career researchers head to European universities. While it is clear that it will not be possible to reach the same mobility levels as prior to the crisis, the number of mobile early-career researchers in the next years will considerably depend on the funding situation in their home countries, travel restrictions and their willingness to live abroad in these exceptional times.

To conclude, there is the general perception inside our community that virtual mobility is becoming more relevant in the future due to the continuous development of technology and the changes prompted by the current situation, but there is also an agreement that traditional mobility should be maintained as well.

Effect on doctoral dissertation defences

One important area where several previously discussed factors come together is the area of the dissertation defence. Usually organised as a public on-site activity within a university, it has been greatly affected by the coronavirus crisis, now taking place at home or in cyberspace. Organising defences online sometimes includes changes of the underlying legal frameworks, as doctoral defences serve as an assessment of the success of doctoral training and is regulated in its form and outcomes. This also influences the technical questions, as interferences (as, for instance, the so-called ZOOM-bombing) can be particularly damaging.

In addition, changes in doctoral dissertation defences lead to more fundamental reflection on the meaning of the doctoral degree. As the main contribution of a doctoral candidate to research and as a proof of the success of research training, the dissertation plays a central role. The dissertation defence is the symbolic closure of the research process and, at the same time, the last formal assessment. Therefore, it is also worth reflecting on how an online format changes the overall meaning and experience of the defence.

On the question of legal frameworks, the majority of the EUA-CDE member representatives mentioned that previous regulations already allowed doctoral schools to organise online doctoral dissertation defences. However, this is not everywhere the case. In several countries, including Spain and France, national regulations were adopted during the lockdown period in order to allow doctoral candidates to virtually defend their doctoral dissertations. In this regard, Covid-19 has had a direct influence on legal frameworks, as the changes will persist after the pandemic. However, sometimes the challenges lie in the detail and implementation of these frameworks. Some EUA-CDE members reported the difficulty of complying with administrative procedures (signature of legal documents, for example) when containment measures were still in place in many countries.

The technical implementation of a virtual defence seems to be less of a problem. Universities could rely on technical solutions they use for other areas of doctoral schools. Many participants pointed out that they could also rely on experiences collected pre-pandemic. While doctoral candidates and their examiners have usually been present together in a room, there were cases where a supervisor or external expert participated virtually. So there have been previous experiences on dealing with such situations.

The solemnity of a public defence, where the doctoral diploma is delivered to doctoral candidates in front of the audience and their family, is missing in a virtual defence. In these exceptional circumstances, the so-called “rite de passage” for doctoral candidates, most of whom invested years in their research project, goes virtual. This is certainly one reason why, in many cases, early-career researchers consider whether to proceed with an online dissertation or rather postpone the activity until on-site activities become possible. However, participants also spoke of activities (like organising a celebration at home) that could make this moment “special”, even if online.

Conclusion

All the participants of these sessions agreed that there are some activities that cannot be transferred to digital platforms, and they expressed the need to return to a certain degree of normality. At the same time, they highlighted the potential of digital tools to provide a valuable complement to face-to-face training. In this regard, there was little doubt that the current situation will have a long-term influence on doctoral education, leading to a form of “blended” doctoral education. But the changes may not only affect the way training is provided or the organisation of online doctoral dissertation defences. With the move towards online training and assessment, it becomes easier to have examiners and supervisors from different parts of the world, so that the doctorate is no longer bound to one specific institution and doctoral education becomes more global. This can influence the whole period of the doctorate and may even lead to a more global doctorate.

Finally, there was the perception that a lot will depend on developments in the next months or even years. The Covid-19 pandemic is still ongoing, and there will be time and the necessity to collect experiences and learn from them. In this regard and in the subsequent evaluation, participants expressed an interest in following this discussion in the near future.