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Report underlines growing importance of collaborative doctoral programmes between universities and industry

More than half of doctorate or PhD holders in Europe now move into careers outside of academia, many going to work in business, public service and the service sector. At the same time, Europe's universities are increasingly looking to develop stronger research links with the business sector (not only large research-intensive companies but also small and medium-sized companies). A new report released today (4 June) by the European University Association (EUA) underlines within this context that collaborative doctoral (PhD) programmes, established between universities and industry, are becoming increasingly important across Europe. EUA's new study "Collaborative Doctoral Education: University-Industry Partnerships for Enhancing Knowledge Exchange" is based on a major 2-year project (DOC-CAREERS) funded by the European Commission-DG Research, and involving 33 universities, 31 companies, and 18 other stakeholder organisations, from 20 different countries across Europe. It will be presented today at a two-day meeting of the EUA Council for Doctoral Education taking place at the University of Lausanne (4/5 June).

Dr. John H. Smith, EUA Deputy Secretary General said: "the new report reflects the values, opportunities and challenges of university-industry dialogue in doctoral education and the widening employment prospects offered to doctorate holders in Europe."

The EUA report highlights that both universities and business consider collaborative doctoral programmes as important channels for supporting both innovation and recruitment efforts.

From the industry perspective, participation in such programmes is particularly valued as it provides companies with access to a highly skilled workforce and cutting-edge academic research. At the same time, such PhD programmes are one way to enable universities to establish long-term sustainable collaborations with business, and help build awareness of the added value that university research can bring to industry and society at large.

Universities highlighted that such programmes should help to improve recognition of the PhD qualification and ultimately increase the number of doctoral candidates enrolling in these degrees. Collaborative doctoral programmes also give doctoral students crucial exposure to non-university environments, and are seen as an excellent way to improve the ability of young researchers to relate abstract thinking to practical applications.

EUA's new study demonstrates that companies – both large and small and medium size companies (SME) - have high expectations of PhD holders. They expect them to be excellent in research but also highly aware of the business environment, market regulations such as those affecting intellectual property rights. As a consequence, there has been growing recognition within universities of the need to raise awareness of the skills known as 'transferable skills' amongst doctoral candidates in addition to their core research skills. In particular, the report underlines that industry values PhD holders with strong communication, negotiation and management skills, in addition to a capacity for complex problem solving, and experience of working in international environments.

EUA's work also demonstrates, however, certain differences between the expectations of SMEs and those of large R+ D focussed ones. SME's tended to place more importance on 'soft skills' to complement candidates core research capabilities, while for larger companies, the value in hiring a doctoral candidate usually lies in the first instance in their deep knowledge of a relevant subject area.

The DOC-CAREERS project also sought to outline to universities and industry some of the necessary preconditions for setting up successful collaborative doctoral programmes. This is particularly important, as in most cases the stakeholders (PhD candidate, university and company) set out with very different objectives and expectations from such partnerships. The report stresses the need to

establish mutual trust and 'solve differences' at the beginning of any collaboration. Regardless of how well organised a PhD programme may be, success will depend on the 'personal component', the ability to solve problems, establish trust, and develop relationships.

Amongst the recommendations, the report encourages universities to establish sound institutional tracking of the professional paths of their doctorate graduates, to inform curricula and career opportunities for doctorate candidates and holders. It also highlights that the committed support of governments to such programmes will be essential in developing university-industry collaboration and specifically in doctoral education, in particular for developing relations with SMEs who do not have the same resources to manage collaborations as larger R+D focussed companies.

The report concludes that companies and universities should contribute more to providing more support and evidence of possible employment destinations to doctoral candidates.

Dr. Lidia Borrell-Damian, author of the report, concluded that "the evidence collected during DOC-CAREERS has demonstrated that universities and enterprises do indeed share many views on the opportunities, challenges and barriers associated with collaborative doctoral programmes. There are no 'one-size-fits-all solutions' and successful approaches must be based on mutual trust and understanding".

A full version of the report is available from the EUA website: www.eua.be

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The European University Association, as the representative organisation of both the European universities and the national rectors' conferences, is the main voice of the higher education community in Europe. EUA's mission is to promote the development of a coherent system of European higher education and research.

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Notes to editors

To find out more background information about the DOC-CAREERS project, please consult the project-website: <http://www.eua.be/research/doctoral-programmes/doc-careers/>