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Report on the Doctorate 2008

Overview of the Doctorate in Switzerland

A comprehensive version of the report is available in German and French at:

www.crus.ch/dms.php?id=8724 (German)

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Organisation and Education

In order to achieve common goals regarding the doctorate, Swiss universities regulate and organise their doctoral programmes in keeping with their individual profiles and under consideration of the particularities in a given discipline. Swiss universities are committed to excellence in research and promote the diversity resulting from research. They have thus rejected extending the Bologna model to the doctoral level (Bologna III) – generally considered to be a “harmonisation” of the doctorate. The core element of a doctoral programme continues to be the development of academic competence by means of a personal and original contribution to research (according to the Joint Position Paper by the Swiss universities on the Doctorate, CRUS 2009¹).

Put in simple terms, the **traditional doctorate** differs from the so-called **structured doctorate** which may take on various forms. There are institutional differences as well as differences among the disciplines – for example, overarching structures exist in the area of mathematics and natural sciences, whereas the humanities and social sciences tend to structure their doctorates according to theme or the programme's framework which is limited in time.

A **tendency towards creating different types of structured doctoral programmes** can be observed. The traditional doctoral programme will, however, retain its more or less important position, with the exception of individual institutions which exclusively offer a structured doctoral programme. It is currently impossible to evaluate the number of doctoral students enrolled in the different types of programmes – although it is highly likely that a significant number of doctoral students will continue to earn their degree via the traditional route.

The structured doctoral programme is often based on **co-operation between institutions**. However, individual institutions or their divisions also further develop their programmes.

The institutional structures are inherently linked to the question of **educational components**: on the one hand, knowledge and skills are acquired through the process of *learning by doing* as well as through contact with a doctoral supervisor. On the other hand, structured doctoral programmes include various types of educational offers: courses, colloquia, workshops, etc. Candidates must generally perform such coursework in a given order or according to given modalities. Doctoral candidates in a traditional programme also have access to similar educational offers, although requirements will vary from person to person and according to institution, discipline and theme. It should be noted that the different educational offers may be compulsory or not for doctoral students.

The structured doctoral programme defines itself according to institutional factors and educational components, but also by regulations concerning entry to the doctorate and the framework conditions of the programme.

¹ See the annexe.

Entering a doctoral programme

Swiss universities seek to win promising students from Switzerland and abroad for their doctoral programmes. The individual universities have the responsibility and the competence to determine recruitment processes and stipulate admission requirements for their programmes. All universities, however, share the common objectives of raising the visibility and attractiveness of Switzerland as a place of higher education and research and guaranteeing the quality of recruiting methods (Joint Position Paper).

In 2008/2009, the number of new doctoral students was roughly 5,000 – the numbers have been rising continuously over the past few years. Differences amongst the disciplines can be observed, and nearly half of all new doctoral candidates have earned their previous degree (qualification for university entrance) at a foreign university.

Entry to a doctoral programme is determined by the requirements for the programme, but also by recruitment and selection processes at the universities. Both aspects are particularly associated with the structured doctoral programmes.

As a general rule, a **Master's degree from an accredited university is the main requirement for entry to a doctoral programme**. Certain institutions and disciplines will also call for students to fulfil other requirements, especially for structured doctoral programmes. Some institutions generally accept their candidates on a provisional basis only on the understanding that further conditions be met in the following months. Other institutions will conditionally accept candidates who do not completely meet the necessary requirements. This is generally the case with students who have a Master's degree in one field and want to earn a doctoral degree in another, related discipline. Such interdisciplinary doctorates are gaining in significance.

Recruitment and selection are often effected **by the doctoral supervisor**, but – particularly in the case of the structured doctorate – **frequently through a decision by a committee**. In addition, there are the traditional recruitment and selection processes (doctoral candidates contact future supervisors or are recruited by the supervisors) and there are calls for candidates. The latter have become more common and have an acknowledged merit, but recruitment and selection by future supervisors who “discover” promising students have retained their value, especially in the humanities and social sciences.

Recruiting promising students for the doctorate takes various routes. It must also be noted that the size and type of the institution determines the marketing activities chosen and that informal features are significant. The call for an international orientation in doctoral programmes creates obstacles when put into practice. One example is the difficulties institutions face when comparing and assessing candidates from unknown universities.

Framework conditions of the doctorate

The universities guarantee that all doctoral programmes meet the same demands on excellence and uphold the same standards of high quality. Suitable conditions must be created to achieve this goal, e.g. supervision and guidance, educational offers, etc. (Joint Position Paper).

The doctorate is characterised by framework conditions that determine and influence the course of the programme. Many of these features are currently an issue of debate in Switzerland and the rest of Europe.

The **status** of doctoral candidates can be considered to be **hybrid**: doctoral students conduct independent research, but they are also still students, still learners. In addition, the status of doctoral students depends on **how their studies are financed or remunerated**, but also on whether they work as assistants or not. Switzerland has various means of financing the doctorate – employment in a research project, working as an assistant at a university, or receiving grants – and various sources provide funding for research – the institutions themselves have funds as do their governing authorities (the canton or the federal government), and there are subsidies (contributions from the federal government), funds from research promotion by the Swiss National Science Foundation SNFS and the Swiss innovation promotion agency CTI, programmes in the European Union as well as third-party funding. The source of financing influences the context of research for doctoral candidates, thus affecting how students progress. There are no reliable data available to demonstrate how many doctoral candidates receive what kind of financial support. Nevertheless, it is clear that the majority of doctoral candidates are employed at an institute at a university.

Working conditions and **commitments outside the doctoral thesis** are key factors in how well candidates move forward in their doctoral programme. These, again, are influenced by how the doctorate is financed. Doctoral candidates generally have commitments apart from their own research work or their thesis – for example as teaching, research or administrative assistants, but also as employees outside the university or as parents.

Supervising doctoral students is generally done by means of the traditional **model: doctoral supervisor and doctoral student**. At the same time, **new models for supervising students** are being developed, such as co-direction or supervision by several people. Structuring the doctorate with milestones – steps and intermediate goals – is another possible component in supervising students. Corresponding regulations already exist in structured doctoral programmes, and traditional doctoral programmes generally observe similar practices. Universities and faculties have also introduced formalised requirements and contracts to regulate the rights and duties of doctoral students. The forms supervision actually takes will differ from discipline to discipline.

The **duration** of a doctorate is determined by factors such as financing, age and how well the candidates are supervised. Once again, there are clear differences among the various disciplines.

Earning a doctoral degree

The Swiss universities award a uniform/single doctoral degree which attests that the candidate has achieved the common objectives according to the conditions decreed by the Swiss universities. The doctoral degree grants graduates the right to bear the title Dr [...] which corresponds to the English usage PhD. The universities take traditions such as Dr. phil. or Dr. ès lettres into consideration when deciding upon the exact title (Joint Position Paper).

The number of **doctoral degrees awarded** has risen continuously in the past few years, with 3,200 new graduates in 2007. There is also a growing number of doctoral students who have earned their previous degree (university entrance qualification) at a foreign university.

Organising the doctoral degree lies in the responsibility of the individual universities. The doctoral degree is acquired in four stages:

- obligatory work apart from the thesis (if any), e.g. attending classes;
- submitting the doctoral thesis to be assessed by a jury;
- the doctoral examinations, colloquia and/or public defence of the thesis;
- publishing the thesis.

Differences between institutions, disciplines and linguistic regions lie mainly in the areas of preliminary requirements and the examination phase, for example: whether or not an external member is included in the jury. Despite procedural differences, the doctoral programmes culminate in a **uniform/single doctoral degree**. The decision to **award the title** generally lies in the **competence of the individual faculties**.

It is important to note that the doctorate in **medicine** is presently a topic of pointed debate as the current title *Dr. med.* does not correspond to the research doctorate described above (Joint Position Paper).

After the doctorate

The doctorate prepares candidates for research-based activities at universities or other institutions (society, economy, administration, etc.) and qualifies graduates to take on diverse high-level responsibilities and functions. In addition, the doctorate promotes transferable skills and knowledge, including project management, presentation techniques and language and communication skills (Joint Position Paper).

Earning a doctoral degree qualifies graduates to **enter the workforce at a university or a non-academic institution**. Although the doctorate is an essential requirement for a career in research, the majority of graduates take on work outside the university and/or research.

The so-called **transferable skills** play a crucial role in today's job market. While there are varying opinions as to how best acquire these skills – whether they should be specifically included in the programme or dealt with outside the university setting – there is a consensus on the fact that transferable skills are not simply acquired in class but mainly through conducting independent research. Certain educational offers now focus on making students aware of these skills and making the skills visible.

The value of a **doctorate is often underestimated in the general employment market**. There are ongoing efforts in Switzerland and Europe to raise the standing of the doctorate. Aside from underlining the importance of transferable skills, universities offer other measures to facilitate entry into the workforce, for example career centres or mentoring programmes; these measures do not, however, represent a comprehensive preparation.

Embarking on an academic career is also a **difficult** endeavour. Many institutional initiatives are based on encouraging an academic career or facilitating planning. The subject of “academic career planning” is as such the topic of intense debate in policies concerning higher education.

Excellence through Research

Joint Position Paper by the Swiss Universities on the Doctorate

Version from 6 November 2009

1 Objectives of the Doctorate

All Swiss universities share the same objectives regarding the doctorate. These objectives are in line with the position of European countries within the Bologna framework. They reflect the significance of the doctorate with regard to research, development and innovation as well as with regard to its place in the European knowledge society.

The doctorate lies at the interface between teaching and research whereas the Bachelor and Master levels focus primarily on teaching. The purpose of the doctorate is to:

- develop academic competence, i.e. the ability to carry out independent academic work;
- acquire subject-specific (disciplinary and interdisciplinary), methodological and transversal (project management, presentation techniques, language and communication, etc.) knowledge and skills;
- promote academic interaction and networks with doctoral candidates as well as with other researchers and academics in Switzerland and abroad.

The doctorate prepares candidates for research-based professions at universities or other institutions (public sector, business, administration) and enables them to take on diverse high-level responsibilities and functions.

2 Organising the Doctorate

The doctorate is a specific task of university-level education and research. Gaining academic competence via a personal and original contribution to research is the main part of a doctoral degree; the work always takes place in a research setting.

In order to reach common objectives, **each Swiss university organises and plans the doctorate** in keeping with the institution's profile and under consideration of the particularities within a certain discipline.² The universities guarantee that all doctoral degrees meet the same demands of excellence and achieve the same high quality by creating the necessary conditions (guidance, educational offers, etc.)

Swiss universities promote excellence through research and the diversity resulting from it. They reject extending the Bologna Model to the doctoral level (Bologna III) – regarded as a “harmonisation” of the doctorate.

² See also the common declaration (in German) by CRUS, ÖRK and HRK on The Future of the Dissertation in Europe from 27 March 2004 as well as the SUK Guidelines to Renew Education from 4 December 2003 (version from 1 February 2006). For the international context, see the London Communiqué (2007) and the concluding remarks from the Bologna seminars in Nice (2006) and Salzburg (2005).

3 The Doctorate: Degree and Title

Swiss universities grant a uniform/single doctoral degree. It attests that a candidate has achieved the common objectives according to conditions set by the universities.

The doctoral degree grants candidates the right to use the title *Dr [...]*, which corresponds to the English usage *PhD*.³ The universities take into consideration various traditions such as *Dr. phil.* and *Dr. ès lettres* when deciding upon the title.⁴

4 Recruiting Students for the Doctorate

Swiss universities endeavour to engage promising students from Switzerland and abroad for the doctorate. Future doctoral candidates are identified already at the Bachelor and Master's level and qualified students are at the same time recruited from other universities in Switzerland and abroad. Recruiting students from abroad remains a particularly challenging task.

Appropriate marketing measures and admission requirements for the doctoral degree lie within the jurisdiction of the individual universities. Nonetheless, Swiss universities have a shared interest to enhance the visibility and appeal of Swiss institutes of higher learning and research (how can we acquire the best students?) and to guarantee the quality of recruiting methods (how do we evaluate and compare students, particularly when they are not from partner institutes?).

Admission to the doctorate lies in the autonomous responsibility of the universities and is decided case-by-case on the basis of individual qualifications. There is no right to be admitted to doctoral studies.

The doctorate has been designed on the basis of university Master's studies. In case of proven scientific qualifications, access is also possible with a Master's degree from other types of higher education institutions.

5 Joint Measures at Swiss Universities

Swiss universities participate in an active exchange⁵ in order to identify questions and challenges that universities face either individually or collectively; possible solutions are then sought. When necessary, the universities draw up recommendations within the framework of CRUS. In certain cases, CRUS will also formulate directives but is careful not to bureaucratise the doctoral degree when doing so.

³ The traditional title of *Dr.med.* can be granted – with modalities, which are in the responsibility of the universities, – to holders of a “Master of Medicine” having submitted a written thesis based on a research activity of at least one year (or the equivalent) and which may possibly expand upon the Master's thesis. The title *Dr.med.* does not correspond to the level of qualification of a PhD. Propositions for the definition of the content, objective and designation of the doctoral degree corresponding to the level of PhD in the domain of medicine are being deliberated at the present.

⁴ Should a harmonisation of the doctoral title become required, measures would not necessarily go as far as did harmonisation at the Bachelor and Master levels (use of international designations such as *of Theology, of Science, of Arts*, etc. is complemented by the name of the institution attended as well as – in some cases – academic orientation).

⁵ Such forums include the Swiss-wide university networks (Bologna, Quality, Equal Opportunity, etc.).