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DISCUSSION PAPER



'Excellence-driven mobility in Europe through graduate programs

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Analysis of the situation

In the knowledge based economy, mobility of high potential researchers is playing a central role

In 2000, the European Council defined the Lisbon strategy aimed at making Europe “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustaining economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion” (European Lisbon Council). The conclusions of the European Lisbon Council also underlined the importance of student mobility to achieve such an objective and required implementing the European teaching and research area. This is why several mobility programs such as “Education and formation 2010” or the “Action plan for mobility” (adopted in December 2000) have been implemented.

Mobility fluxes of PhD students reflect both the map of excellence in research and the map of barriers and incentives to mobility, as the best students apply to the best places and most promising fields if allowed to. The comparison with the US or the UK is clear, their worldwide renowned universities and their abilities to produce researches at the frontier of knowledge strongly benefit from the attractiveness of the Anglo-Saxon research and teaching system.

However, top-down construction of large student exchange networks is a complex, bureaucratic endeavour which typically involves *a priori* decisions on how resources should be allocated between countries and institutions. This type of system is neither very quick to adapt to the emergence of new research fields nor able to reward excellence and innovation in teaching at an efficient pace.

Europe benefits from three assets that should enable it to face the global competition among developed countries

Research training in Europe can benefit from the Union. Different European countries have different and complementary fields of excellence, thus there is a clear benefit for the EU in sending good students to train in the best places for their chosen discipline.

The right evaluation machinery is almost in place:

- After two decades of an increasing student and researcher mobility within the borders of the Union, bilateral experiences have accumulated and comparative data are available;
- In 2005, the Commission, the Parliament and the Council of Ministers created in 2005 the European Research Council, the first pan-European funding body set up to support investigator-driven frontier research through high quality peer review, the establishment of international benchmarks of success, and the provision of up-to-date information on who is succeeding and why. For the first time a usable map of strong fields per field, country and institutions through its evaluations of individual researchers will be available;
- Such a map constitutes a solid foundation for an independent evaluation of graduate programs, which could be implemented as early as next year at no major additional cost.

Bottom-up solutions have emerged. Excellent, innovative PhD programs exist in a few places in Europe. In the same time, many more institutions are trying to improve their attractiveness to students by setting up bilateral exchange agreements with European partners, motivating them to strive for excellence would help shape the construction of the European Research Area (ERA).

For all these reasons, Europe should give top priority to three measures:

Implementing a light EU machinery that will support graduate student mobility based on excellence and an independent and regular evaluation, conducted by the European Research Council. Academic excellence of students and graduate programs should be the main driver of mobility. The best students in a given field should be sent to the institutions best able to provide them with excellent training in that field. Moreover, to ensure the efficiency of this “excellence-driven mobility program”, the evaluation should be implemented through an independent assessment of two types of quality:

- □The quality of research performed in host institutions, complemented by checks on the use of good accepted teaching practices and evaluation of alumni early careers;
- □The quality of research training delivered by PhD programs and/or host institutions at regular intervals, based on a set of criteria to be carefully defined.

Fostering diversity and providing a clear visibility to the programs supported. The meaning of “graduate program” should be kept flexible to favor diversity and adaptation to local conditions and field-specific requirements. Program size and span may vary from large-scale programs spanning several countries and institutions to specialized programs limited to a very good department of a small university. No specific scheme should be favoured for reasons other than academic excellence. This diversity, though, should be counterbalanced by a European label, offering a strong and meaningful visibility to these programs.

Providing timely support for the best. The best graduate programs should be labelled for a limited duration and receive EU resources (PhD stipends, access to infrastructures) accordingly and programs should be funded according to their size and level of excellence. Moreover, a fraction of the funding may be earmarked to encourage short-term mobility of professors from the best programs to inseminate other locations in Europe

With this simple mechanism, based on existing institutions and processes, the EU could quickly set-up a virtuous innovation-evaluation-selection loop for graduate research training in Europe. Indeed, this system would encourage simultaneously local initiative and collaboration between EU countries, without adding an organizational layer; optimize in the short term the match between supply and demand for excellent training, within each discipline, over the entire EU territory and help raise the quality of PhD students over time and, ultimately, of their teachers, in each discipline, to the highest European standards.

Finally, the top expertise of these EU PhD’s would irradiate throughout Europe when they moved on to take positions in both universities and companies, favoring frontier research, innovation and growth.

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