



Modern PhDs, coordination mechanisms and organizational capital: insights from the project SuperProfDoc

by Elena Prodi

Today, modern PhDs speaking at the concerns of business, public administration, organizations and more generally to the society (so-called practical, industrial or professional PhDs) are widespread across developed countries such as Denmark, UK and German, fully supporting them to tap the potential of technology transfer activities and bridging the perceived divide between academia and industry. On the contrary, others countries like Italy still face cultural and red tape-related challenges hampering the take off of industrial or professional doctorates, though a few experiences have been set up in the country over the past years.

The article “*Minding the gap in doctoral supervision for a contemporary world: a case from Italy*”, carried out within the framework of the project SuperProfDoc¹ which has received funding from the European Commission, investigates one of this pioneer experiences in Italy. It brings about the case of the International Doctoral School in Human Capital Formation and Labour Relations at the University of Bergamo (Italy), co-promoted by ADAPT and by CQIA (Teaching and Learning Quality Centre of the University of Bergamo), and addresses the pivotal role that workplace supervisors play together with the academic counterpart for the successful completion of the PhDs.

The Doctoral School provides agreements with employers and other actors of the world of work (such as trade unions) to fund industrial PhDs based on apprenticeship contracts and grants. One of the most distinctive element of this program, compared to other experiences that the SuperProfDoc research team has detected across countries, is the formal appointment by the Doctoral School itself of both academic and workplace supervisors. Indeed, the training program offered by the School envisages that the praxis of research and work activities are achieved through the alternation between work and training, assuming the alignment of research aims, objectives, processes and agendas of the two contexts in which the “shared” doctoral student is involved. For these reasons, workplace supervisors are not solely related to the student’s development as an effective practitioner, but they are conceived as an essential part of the provision of doctoral supervision to help ensure coherence between the assignments within the company and the research and training activities offered at the School.

The paper analysis adopts the perspective of workplace supervisors, on which the literature reports only scarce piece of evidence. Thanks to the insights stemming from semi-structured interviews conducted with five of them, it is possible to detect and address major shortcoming affecting

¹ *SuperProfDoc – Doctoral supervision of multi-disciplinary practice based doctorates: an appreciative inquiry into best practice in their design, development and delivery* has received funding from the European Commission under the Erasmus+ programme (KA: Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices).

doctoral supervision that from the academic angle would be difficult to outline.

Exploratory findings reveal that:

- The presence of the student clearly has advantages for the organisation and was positively commented upon as “adding value”, “stimulating”, “beneficial for the supervisor”, “most enjoyable aspect of supervision is participating in doctoral students’ growth” and bridging the common interest between academic study and practical engagement;
- The student was also seen to be the main conduit of communication in ensuring the collaboration is kept on track. For instance, a common theme from the supervisors was that academic and workplace commitments are hard to reconcile but “thanks to the balance between study and work, responsibility and dedication of doctoral students, such difficulties are easy to overcome”. When issues did emerge, for both supervisors committed to not overriding the student needs and to finding a solution for balancing the workload;
- Key characteristics of good workplace supervisors, among others, were identified as being able to plan together, from the beginning, a joint path that can meet the company’s, the university’s and doctoral student’s needs but in such a way that recognizes the different realities and notions of being that both require.

Twenty-first century challenges require to be tackled through a cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary approach in the way of working and in the process of knowledge creation. Yet, this is difficult to achieve in practice and this research highlights the degree of incommensurability in the mutuality of support for the PhDs and the room for improvements. In the case of the International Doctoral School in Human Capital Formation and Labour Relations, the proactive engagement of the parties involved and the convergence of employers, HEIs and PhDs interests have been achieved thanks to the intermediary role played by Adapt that tries to fill communication gaps and lower administrative barriers existing between workplace and the university.

In Italy, the absence of supportive policy measures and a regulatory framework within primary legal sources represents a major constraint hindering the emergence of structured and formal ties between universities and the world of work: this reflects a longstanding tradition of reciprocal indifference and the lack of trustful relationships between the public and the private sectors, which would be in fact necessary to nurture an effective collaboration especially in the field of modern doctorates. The rise of “trustful relationships” might be encouraged by starting, as an example, from allowing employers and representatives from the world of work to be part of the teaching faculty of PhD courses and Schools. This is not an option yet, since the Ministerial Decree of 8 February 2013 establishes that the teaching “faculty should be composed of tenured university professors for the accreditation of PhD courses and schools”. In fact, this could be helpful for framing new evaluation methods in the context of modern PhDs and/or enriching the research agenda with insights provided by practitioners.

Innovation is a collective societal endeavor and not the story of a single heroic leader instead: this collective dimension makes the case for bringing into play the role of the State to facilitate public-private engagement processes. Apparently, proactive engagement doesn’t come up spontaneously very often and represent a major systemic failure in which people get stuck, as it entails the pooling of resources and the convergence of interests. Successful public-private collaboration presumes then a coordination mechanism to be put in place either by the State or by an appointed independent intermediate organization, a one that is tasked to supply what today is lacking the most in the Italian industrial PhDs scenario, namely the organizational capital necessary to cultivate cooperative

efforts among relevant parties and mobilize them to overcome bureaucratic and cultural barriers towards shared goals.

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