



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 Germany, fully supporting them to tap the potential of technology transfer and bridging the perceived divide between academia and industry. On the contrary, other 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 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 SuperProfDoc ⁽¹⁾, which has received funding from the European Commission, investigates one of these pioneer experiences in Italy. It brings about the case of the International Doctoral School in Human Capital Formation and Labour Relations co-promoted by University of Bergamo (Italy) and by ADAPT (an independent non-for-profit research organization in the field of industrial and labor relations). The Doctoral School provides agreements with employers and other actors of the world of work (such as trade unions and employer’s associations) to fund industrial PhDs based on apprenticeship contracts and grants.

One of the most distinctive elements of this program is linked to supervision practice. PhD students are assigned two supervisors each by the Doctoral School: on the one hand, a tenured professor from the university and on the other hand a workplace supervisor. Indeed, the academic course provided to PhD students is based on the alternation between periods of work at firm’s premises and training/lectures at the University. The alignment of research agendas, activities and goals between the two contexts (workplace and University) in which the doctoral student is involved represents a strategic factor for the successful completion of industrial PhDs (see Salimi, N., R. Bekkers, and K. Frenken. 2016). 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 an integrated doctoral supervision that creates the conditions to ensure a continuous feedback loop (assessing students outcomes, activities planning, modifications...) between the public (the university awarding the PhD title) and the private sector (the firm funding the PhD grant/apprenticeship contract).

The paper analysis adopts the perspective of workplace supervisors, on which the literature reports

(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).

only scarce piece of evidence. Thanks to the information elicited from semi-structured interviews conducted with five of them involved in the UniBg - ADAPT Doctoral School, it is possible to detect the benefits as well as the shortcomings ensuing the PhDs stay within a private organization, on which would be difficult to shed light only from an academic angle.

Exploratory findings reveal that:

- The presence of the student clearly brings advantages for the hosting company and is positively commented upon as “adding value”, “stimulating”, “beneficial for the supervisor”, “most enjoyable aspect of supervision is participating in doctoral students’ growth”. This hybrid training program enacts PhD students to nurture and transfer the knowledge acquired at the University towards industry, and the other way round;
- Students are seen to be the main conduit of communication between University and firms, ensuring that the collaboration between the two is kept on track. A common feeling among workplace supervisors is 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, 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, are identified as being able to plan, just from the beginning and together with the academic supervisor, a path towards shared goals that meet company’s, university’s and doctoral student’s needs, achieving a ‘triple win’ situation.

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 and capture. Yet, this is difficult to achieve in practice and this research highlights the degree or incommensurability in the mutuality of support for the PhDs as well as room for improvements. Furthermore, in the case of the International Doctoral School in Human Capital Formation and Labour Relations, the proactive engagement of the two organizations involved (University and firms), and the necessary convergence of employers’, HEI’s and PhD students’ interests, have been achieved thanks to the intermediary and coordinating role played by ADAPT (the independent non-for profit research center) that fills communication gaps and lower administrative barriers existing between companies funding PhD grants/ apprenticeship contracts and the University.

As for industrial PhDs, 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: actually, this reflects a longstanding tradition of reciprocal indifference between the public and the private sectors and the lack of trustful relationships, 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, the opposite 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 and real world experience.

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 process. 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 might be fostered by coordination mechanisms put in place either by the State or by an appointed independent intermediate organization, a one that is tasked with supplying 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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