

Defining Doctoral Candidate and Doctoral Training

This paper sets out how and why Eurodoc defines **Doctoral Candidates** as **professionals**.

The status of Doctoral Candidates is an often debated topic revolving around the question: are they students or researchers? The answer to this question has important implications for how Doctoral Candidates are trained and, crucially, how they contribute to advancing European competitiveness and innovation capacity. Therefore, to begin addressing the question, it is useful to consider how the term "students" has been used:

- As "receivers" or "users" of the services from higher education institutions (HEIs). These services include knowledge provision, awareness raising, training in critical judgment and analysis. In this context, the term "student" is associated with a legal status.
- As representing an "attitude". Here, the term "student" is the expression of a specific state in which the individual actively engages in the learning process. The emphasis is placed on the curiosity for knowledge.

Whilst the latter definition would apply to all individuals at different times in their lives, Eurodoc argues that **Doctoral Candidates should not be defined as "students"**, especially when it is understood in the context of the first definition.

A Doctoral Candidate is recruited for elaborating a *research project* and is expected to provide new knowledge and/or understanding of a specific issue. Doctoral Candidates are assigned to the position in recognition of their higher education qualification with the explicit understanding that they are capable of fulfilling the job requirements and (if necessary) acquiring further relevant skills within the appropriate time-frame.¹

¹ See Work Programme Structuring the European Research Area Human Resources and Mobility Marie Curie Actions, edition September 2004, page 41.

Creativity, innovation, research, development and methodology are the pillars of this profession. This is explicitly recognised by the “European Charter for Researchers” and the “Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers” (Charter & Code), which have been widely endorsed throughout Europe and beyond.²

Put simply, a **Doctoral Candidate is more than a student; she/he is a researcher³ at an early stage of her/his career.**

It follows that, as the Salzburg principles have underlined, “**Doctoral candidates as early stage researchers should be recognised as professionals – with commensurate rights – who make a key contribution to the creation of new knowledge**”.⁴ **These commensurate rights include, inter alia, access to training and funding that would ensure timely completion of doctoral research on a full-time equivalent basis.**

In this context, training refers to research (work) experience with “early stage” highlighting the career development perspective of the doctoral period.⁵ Thus, a real work experience must have clear and transparent recruitment processes based on properly defined skills, knowledge and scientific potential in order to access the employment contract a doctoral period should provide. This recruitment stage is crucial for both the quality of research in Europe/Member States and the clear understanding of the specific status of a Doctoral Candidate as an *Early Stage Researcher*.

To ensure that Doctoral Candidates contribute to the on-going efforts to increase European competitiveness, their full recognition as professionals (i.e. a contract-based collaboration, providing efficient training and ensuring social security during and after the doctorate) is essential. To this end, **Eurodoc recommends** the full implementation of the Charter & Code and **the definition of Doctoral Candidates as Early Stage Researchers with the associated work-related benefits and responsibilities in both recruitment and employment.**

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² <http://ec.europa.eu/euraxess/index.cfm/rights/index>.

³ To cite a national example, the German Rectors’ Conference states that the doctorate is not to be understood as a third phase of studies, but that Doctoral Candidates are junior researchers who render an essential and innovative contribution to scientific advances in knowledge and to the future viability of the scientific system with their thesis (http://www.hrk.de/95_6828.php).

⁴ http://www.eua.be/eua/jsp/en/upload/Salzburg_Report_final.1129817011146.pdf

⁵ A paper on the topic of career choices for PhD candidates are in development by Eurodoc. The reader is also referred to Eurodoc’s paper ERA 4 ‘Intersectoral boundary spanning’.