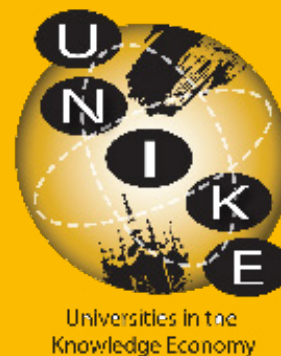


UNIKE Notes on Doctoral Education No. 6

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# EXPERIENCES OF COLLABORATION IN DOCTORAL EDUCATION

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## THE UNIKE PROJECT

The UNIKE project (an initial Training Network funded by EU FP7 – Marie Curie Actions) trains a networked group of critical researchers who are examining the changing roles of universities in the global knowledge economies of Europe and the Asia-Pacific Rim. The UNIKE project aims to generate potential research leaders who are equipped to develop doctoral education in their own institutions and internationally.

Many governments have embraced international agendas for university reform (put forward by the European Union, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, World Economic Forum, UNESCO and the World Bank) on the understanding that the future lies in the development of an ideas-driven competitive global knowledge economy. By arguing that the two ways to compete successfully in this economy are through transfer of research findings into innovative products and through a higher education system that can attract international trade and produce a highly skilled population, universities are placed at the centre of strategies to prosper in this new economic regime. The European approach to competing in the global knowledge economy is to create a European Research Area (ERA), a European Higher Education Area (EHEA), and a Europe of Knowledge. Other kinds of strategies have formed in other world regions. These strategies have to be understood within a geographic shift in emerging centres of power from Europe to the Asia Pacific, and particularly East Asia.

The UNIKE project aims to generate new perspectives on the transformation of an institution central to policy projections of the future.

The project explores these issues through regular workshops, which are designed to cover different aspects of the debate. Each UNIKE workshop has a part dedicated to Aspects of Doctoral Education, covering the following topics:

- History of policy debates about doctoral education
- Secondments: Working for/researching in other organisations
- Academic freedom
- Governance narratives and the figure of the doctoral student
- Mobility and doctoral training
- Partners' own practices of doctoral education

From each of these events, a UNIKE Note on Doctoral Education will be generated. The current Note outlines the presentations and discussions that took place at the second UNIKE workshop, held at the University of Bristol on 24-26 February 2014. The main theme of the workshop was ranking and governance and included lectures, panel discussions and meetings with students to discuss their research proposals.

The main intended audience for this Note is composed of UNIKE fellows, full and associated partners and their networks, and other institutions and individuals who are interested in the subject.

## INTRODUCTION

This is the last issue of the series *UNIKE Notes on Doctoral Education* and aims to act as a reflective note on the UNIKE project. It is not based on workshop presentations like the rest, but rather, it is the result of a series of evaluations conducted within the UNIKE project seeking to understand the experiences of collaborative work in an ITN programme. It provides, in this sense, a floor level view of what it was like to work on such a project.

The ITN programme was set up by the European Commission as a flagship model for doctoral education. It was designed to reflect a shift from the so-called 'Mode 1' of knowledge production (the apprenticeship model) to the so-called 'Mode 2' of knowledge production – a more collaborative, interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral way of practicing doctoral education. Accordingly, the three emblematic features of the ITN are 'international', 'interdisciplinary' and 'inter-sectoral'. One of the other aims of the ITN is to strengthen doctoral education in Europe by setting up a dialogue between universities and thus enable them to learn from each other.

This Note looks at the UNIKE ITN in particular and seeks to understand how the people involved experienced this ITN project: the benefits that they reaped, but also the challenges that they encountered and how they addressed them. The content is based on three evaluations that were conducted at the final UNIKE conference in Copenhagen in June 2016: one with the PhD fellows, one with their supervisors, and one with the ad-

ministrators from each partner institution. The aim of these evaluations was to gain deeper insights into how the programme was operationalised and reflect on the actual experiences of working in an ITN.

Overall, the UNIKE consortium partners saw this project as both an opportunity and a challenge. Both supervisors and fellows attended most workshops and summer/winter schools and had a willingness to learn from each other. The sustained participation in these events enabled a continuous learning process and developed a strong sense of community among members.

All universities had different requirements – among others, the evaluations also sought to investigate the extent to which the people involved in UNIKE were able to take elements of their collaborative experience into their own institutions. One example of this was the fact that most partners were able to involve other PhD fellows from their own institutions in the workshops and summer schools that they organised, which sometimes resulted in joint publications and further collaborations between UNIKE fellows and fellows from the partners' local institutions.

The following sections discuss some of the issues raised by participants in the evaluations, as they attempted to operationalise the features of the ITN and negotiated their own spaces between a trans-national programme and their local environments.

## PHD FELLOWS: EVALUATION FACILITATED BY MARESI NERAD

One challenge of organising a European PhD programme was the reconciliation of EU rules with national and institutional rules. This was, for instance, the case with the allocation of ECTS points. It emerged that, whereas all the partner institutions agreed that a PhD is 270 ECTS, the universities varied in how they distributed these to different parts of the doctoral programme. In particular, they varied in how many ECTS were required from the taught courses.

It was suggested in the evaluation that fellows had to engage in a lot of negotiation work between their ITN requirements and the requirements of their respective host universities. This negotiation was made a lot easier in places where the host institution had had more experience in dealing with international students. Even in this situation, it was often the case that the institutions were more familiar with international students at Bachelor's and Master's levels but not so much with international PhD fellows. The mediation between UNIKE and the local institution was often done through the supervisor, other PhD fellows and the administrative staff. Other similar hurdles linked to poor internationalisation were the lack of available information on regulation in English, and language issues that prevented them from integrating into their universities.

Challenges were also identified connected to travelling for conferences, training and fieldwork. For fellows coming from non-Schengen countries, obtaining visas and work permits was very expensive and time-consuming; the situation was different for Europeans who did not encounter similar issues when working and travelling within Europe.

The facilitator of the evaluation organised a keep/drop exercise prompting fellows to identify aspects of the ITN that they enjoyed and aspects that they would have liked to see changed in future ITN programmes. Below are the two lists that emerged as a result of this collective exercise.

### Things to keep:

- opportunity to network
- mobility and resources for research visits
- workshops held regularly
- international diversity
- student-centered approach
- non-academic collaborations
- external partners and visits to partner institutions
- employee status

### Things to change:

- Time-frame: if all the ITN requirements were to be met, more than three years would be needed; a time-frame of four years was suggested
- More hands-on workshops for the fellows and fewer lecture-style sessions
- Less hierarchical atmosphere
- Make the content and format of workshops flexible, enabling it to evolve in line with the progress of the PhD projects and the fellows' needs
- Foster more connections between the UNIKE community and local environments
- A more balanced presentation of the project topic, including more (disciplinary) perspectives
- Spend more time on acknowledging and explaining cultural differences

## SUPERVISORS: EVALUATION FACILITATED BY REBECCA LUND

There were significant differences between the local cultures of the partners' institutions and as a result, they interacted very differently with the format and requirements of the UNIKE project. The supervisors in the project often took on the role of mediators between UNIKE and the local environments. Rather than trying to harmonise and even out the differences between the institutions – which would have also been slightly unrealistic – the partners tried instead to understand them and organise the research programme taking into account these differences. Although time-consuming, this process was made easier by the firmly documented procedures received from the EC and the project's own operating manuals and handbooks. These were used to persuade host universities to make exceptions and do things differently for the UNIKE members, whenever it was required. This often had to do with the way in which degrees were awarded at the host universities, the kinds of contracts that were made, and the salaries that the fellows got. Generally, the EU rules would triumph but there were also many tensions over whose rules ought to be respected whenever there was a clash between EU and local regulations.

### Employment

One of the tasks that the supervisors together with the administrators had to do was manage the institutional aspects of enabling the UNIKE fellows to get an employee status, as required by the EU. Eventually, all the UNIKE fellows were employed at their respective universities, had a good salary and a designated office space. This was rarely the case with non-ITN local PhD fellows, who, in most partner countries, had a student status and were treated as such. The difference in status compared to the local fellows, together with the generous salary that the UNIKE fellows received, often created tensions among staff. The privileged conditions that the UNIKE fellows benefitted from were not shared by other members of staff, and in some contexts the fellows had a higher salary than some assistant professors. Another consequence of this differential treatment was that UNIKE fellows were often perceived as 'different' in their local environments and thus could not fully integrate. In addition, being 'international' and working on temporary contracts, they were not expected to stay at their universities and thus were not taken seriously as potential colleagues by academic staff and management. In that sense, UNIKE was considered a great programme for those who were part of it, yet had negative consequences for how fellows were able to interact with other members of their local communities.

### Secondments

One emblematic feature of the ITN – and accordingly, also of UNIKE – was the secondment. This meant that fellows would go to an associated partner in the project where they would conduct

part of their research, complete a task for the organisation and participate in the organisation's daily work life. According to the supervisors, secondments worked effectively. Fellows created good contacts and networks beyond academia. However, the negotiation process with the secondment institutions was often very time-consuming. Not all secondments proposed initially materialised as planned. Another challenging issue around secondments was the extent to which the material accessed on site was confidential. Even though UNIKE's template for the secondment agreement included clearly identifying confidential material, access issues and confidentiality were not always discussed openly at the beginning of secondments and this caused confusion.

### Benefits

Overall, there were many benefits of having this programme:

- New perspectives were gained on how doctoral education was designed and conducted in different countries.
- The UNIKE members familiarised themselves with a wide range of academic cultures different from their own.
- The UNIKE project expanded understanding of global higher education. The programme brought together an array of issues under the big umbrella topic of Universities in the Knowledge Economy and thus initiated a new (academic) conversation in this field.
- Links within the academic community but also between the academic and policy communities were strengthened as a result of the UNIKE project.
- Funding enabled fellows and partners to meet each other regularly through conferences, workshops and summer/winter schools. This is how they became familiar with each other's work and were able to work collectively towards a common goal.
- The project has managed to create a community of fellows engaged in a common pursuit, not just their own individual projects. The supportive environment created enabled them to encourage and challenge each other in a productive and friendly way.
- The focus on career guidance had important benefits for the fellows. Advice and information were exchanged within the project about which forums/conferences fellows should attend in order to gain access to networks that may be valuable for them in the future. Discussions were also held on how their CVs matched the kind of ambitions they had in terms of continuing their careers. Opportunities were considered in various sectors: research, think tanks, administration and/or policy making.
- Treating fellows as early career researchers/faculty members and not students was considered to be exemplary practice that could act as a model for other doctoral programmes.

## ADMINISTRATORS: EVALUATION FACILITATED BY LISBETH WALAKIRA

Most of the administrators were employed as administrators at their local universities, and only spent part of their time working on tasks related to UNIKE. The exception was UNIKE's Project Coordinator who worked 100% of her time with UNIKE. She engaged in a variety of tasks, from communicating with the partners and the other administrators involved in UNIKE, to managing the budget together with the university's finance officer, doing the reporting to the European Commission, as well as collaborating with the Project Coordinator.

### Collaboration between partners

The evaluation showed there has been good collaboration between the administrators in the partner universities and administrators at Aarhus University (leading the UNIKE project).

### EU rules and procedures

The administrators reported that there were IT tools, language issues, cultural clashes, and legislation procedures that they were not able to change and had to navigate in between when administrating the UNIKE project. They also identified differences in the attitudes of partner institutions towards compliance with EU rules. Some universities more easily accepted and changed procedures according to the EU rules, whereas other universities had a stronger sense of wanting to keep procedures the same as they usually did outside an EU project, as this was considered the best procedure. As one administrator put it,

*'Some universities are more adaptable and employees have a stronger flexibility of mind from an administrative point of view, and in other universities they want to do things in their own system, which doesn't work in an EU environment.'*

Language: English has been used as the common language in the project, but this is not the first language for many of the administrators working on UNIKE and there have therefore been situations where the communication in the project has not been as efficient as the administrators would wish for.

### Contracts

Administrators experienced a mis-match about the work contracts for fellows. There has generally been a mis-match in work contracts between how PhD fellows' work contracts are made at the each partner university and the requirements for work contracts according to the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions under the European Commission. For example in the UK, PhD fellows are considered to be 'students' and not 'employees'. If

categorised as students, the PhD fellows in UNIKE would not have an actual contract, yet this was a requirement according to the Marie Curie Actions. The partner universities where this was a challenge, therefore, had to invent a new category for the PhD fellows in UNIKE. It was pointed out by one administrator that in the call for the PhD fellowships the word 'fellow' was used. However, a 'fellow' in the Portuguese education system refers to a specific contract that does not entail social security and limits the right for unemployment benefit and pension schemes. Therefore, the university had to change the work contracts from being a fellowship to an employment contract in order for the PhD fellows to have better rights to social security and yet at the same time have the contracts approved by the EU.

### Continuity

There were problems when the administrators who worked on preparing the ITN application were not the same people as the administrators who worked on the actual project. The process of separating project application from project administration meant that a lot of contacts and information was lost. There have been challenges in situations when a new contact person or administrator took over the position from someone else at a partner institution. There has not always been an optimal handover.

### Financial report

The financial reporting has been fairly uncomplicated compared to other projects due to the fact that UNIKE, as a Marie Skłodowska-Curie project, adheres to the EU rules.

The UNIKE project used the rule that money spent at each university only had to adhere to local rules; that is, whatever documentation was required at the local university, was also required in UNIKE. This made it easier for the administrators to handle the funds, as they only had to abide by the local rules, which they already knew.

### Curriculum issues

Some partner institutions had a mandatory curriculum for the first year of the doctoral programme. Here, there was a mis-match because the fellows also had specific tasks and activities within the UNIKE project. The issue was resolved by giving UNIKE fellows accreditation for their participation in the UNIKE activities in order to comply with the requirements of the local regulations. The partner universities had different requirements for the number of ECTS points that their PhD fellows had to

acquire as a part of their PhD training. However, the supervisors had taken this into account in the planning of UNIKE workshops, summer and winter schools. The challenge has been that some countries demand that the PhD fellows take certain courses, leaving the fellows less time to do the mandatory UNIKE courses.

### **National benefits**

In some cases, the university did not provide international students with information about unemployment benefits. There have been some mis-matches between the expectations that the university should inform fellows about their rights to unemployment benefits, or whether it was the role of the workers' union to do that.

### **International students**

One administrator spent a lot of time in visa and resident permit procedures. One partner institution was not ready for international students: there were language barriers at the faculty, as forms, information, and support services were all in the local language. Another partner found that emails with important information (e.g. about holidays) were sent to international students only in the local language.

One administrator succeeded in changing the work culture at the faculty to make sure communication between the administrative staff and the PhD fellows was in English, thus improving the preparedness of the host university for other international students. The administrator said,

'Right at the beginning [of the UNIKE project] we were not ready as a faculty for international students; we have exchange students but it's not really the same ball game (...) so we really changed the culture in our services (...) and this project has actually helped pave the way for the next project.'