

The intention of the development of doctoral studies at the MU Faculty of Education 2021+: a basis for discussion

Doctoral studies are gaining an increasingly important position within higher education. In addition to being perceived as the highest level of higher education, expectations are placed on it with regard to the preparation of highly qualified professionals for science – research, development, and innovation. Discussions on the inclination of doctoral studies towards a more educational, research or even social role of higher education have been taking place in the international and national context for a long time and are reflected in development concepts and strategies at the level of specific universities and faculties.

- The MU Faculty of Education has the ambition to enter into discussions on the topic of doctoral studies not only with its professional expertise, but also with concrete examples from its own practice. In recent years, various expert groups have been working at the Faculty (e.g. in connection with the HR Award project or the Faculty of Education MU Strategic Plan) in which doctoral studies development issues are discussed. This study is continuously innovated at the Faculty, and it is gaining a stronger background in the prepared (post)doctoral school.

The outcome of the discussions includes, among others, the submitted material, edited by the Vice-Dean for Research and Academic Affairs, which is to be discussed in parallel with the relevant parties – the Dean's Council, doctoral boards, the Faculty of Education MU Scientific Board, and others. The results of the discussions are to be reflected in the Strategic Plan of the MU Faculty of Education for the next period (2021–2028) and its annual updates.

The material outlines the context of the issue, raises selected conceptual issues of doctoral studies at the MU Faculty of Education, and analyses four basic dimensions of doctoral studies: the dimensions of (1) education, (2) research, (3) internationalisation, and (4) implementation. Instead of a conclusion, a summary of the questions open for discussion is presented.

International – National – University – Faculty context of the issue

Alongside evergreens such as quality, relevance and internationalisation, the discussion on the design and development of doctoral studies in relation to the different roles of the University appears to be crucial in **the international context**. The question, with some simplification, is to what extent doctoral studies should be understood as an “area of high scholarship in the field” versus as a “preparation for the professional conduct of research”.

As Pechar (2004, p. 320 an.), for example, observes, in Europe, doctoral studies in the Humboldtian tradition are conceived largely on the basis of an individualised “master–novice” (supervisor–doctoral student) relationship. Therefore, they have a more or less personal character and are not formalised and standardised to that extent. In contrast, in the USA (but also in the UK and parts of continental Europe), structured doctoral programmes are run where, instead of or in addition to the individual relationship between the doctoral student and the supervisor, there is a collective responsibility of the whole institution and specialised research training units. This model exhibits a stronger formalised and standardised nature. During the second half of the 20th century, the model based on the master–novice relationship was also weakened in Europe due to expansion and increasing

specialisation in higher education and research, and the growing influence of the American model can be identified (for example, cf. the shift in terminology from “Doctor” to “PhD”).

In addition to internationalisation, the main themes of the debate on doctoral studies in the **national context** are the improvement of its quality and societal relevance, but, above all, its aim and focus. It is the focus of doctoral studies that oscillates between the educational and research poles in this country today. There are many indications that the research focus is strengthening. According to the Ministry of Education, Youths and Sports’ Strategic Plan for Higher Education for 2021+, the aim is to increase the efficiency of the system in terms of both the resources spent and the time and potential of students and their supervisors, and to strengthen the motivation and efforts of all key actors in doctoral degree programmes to increase success and quality. Efforts should be made to open up doctoral studies to foreign applicants and to increase the internationalisation of the whole system. Discussion should be initiated on the amendment of the Higher Education Act, including the revision of the doctoral funding mechanism. One of the results of this change should be to increase the selectivity of doctoral studies, while, at the same time, increasing the success rate and reducing the duration of studies so that the total number of graduates each year does not fall significantly below the current level.

The strategic objectives in the context of **Masaryk University** are, in particular, to strive for excellence in the international research environment by developing interdisciplinary topics, strengthening quality scientific performance with international acclaim, introducing higher quality standards with an emphasis on the quality of scientific results of doctoral students, gaining international experience during doctoral studies, and stressing adherence to the standard duration of studies. It is also intended to improve the quality of the admission procedure for doctoral studies, to prevent academic failure, and to systematise and standardise the requirements for supervisors.

At the **MU Faculty of Education**, doctoral studies have been continuously developed in the changed social conditions since the 1990s. Along with the Charles University Faculty of Education, the MU Faculty of Education is one of the best-equipped pedagogical faculties in the Czech Republic in this respect and has an ambition for further development. The aim in the past period was to cover the main fields of study of the Faculty with doctoral studies and thus create a professional (scientific, research) background for their further development. The portfolio of doctoral disciplines/programmes and the related accreditation rights for habilitation and professor appointment procedures is quite representative at the Faculty of Education MU, although some fields are not yet covered. The Faculty of Education has rights for habilitation and professor appointment procedures in these fields: Didactics of Foreign Language, Music Education, Pedagogy, Special Education and Art Education.

Doctoral studies at the MU Faculty of Education are carried out in eight fields of study or programmes (Didactics of Foreign Language, Geography Education, Music Theory and Pedagogy, Language and Literary Communication, Social Education, Special Education, School Pedagogy, Theory of Art, and Gallery Education) and in several languages (see below). Each of the fields of study or programmes is in a specific situation. However, all of them have managed to go through the process of transforming the fields of study into programmes successfully, and in connection to that to proceed with conceptual and content adjustments. The last discipline that has not yet been converted into a degree programme is Social Education.

Conceptual issues of doctoral studies at the MU Faculty of Education

With regard to the current legislation relating to the accreditation rights for habilitation and professor appointment procedures, the aim of the Faculty of Education of MU is not to merge doctoral degree programmes into broader units, but to develop them in relative autonomy, taking into account the specificity of each of them. All existing doctoral programmes at the MU Faculty of Education are

cultivated with the ambition to maintain habilitation and professor appointment rights or to move towards them (in the fields that do not yet have them).

At the same time, however, it is necessary to consider the situation of smaller, or less staffed, doctoral programmes and to address the issues of their further development within the framework of the whole doctoral studies at the Faculty of Education MU. One of the options is to see these smaller fields as a starting platform for expansion towards fields thematically close and thus create more robust (better staffed and project-resourced) doctoral programmes and, at the same time, cover other fields in which the Faculty wants to develop with doctoral studies. Specifically, this should be the area of didactics of social sciences (integrated didactics of history, didactics of social sciences / citizenship education), and the area of didactics of mathematics and natural sciences and their applications (integrated didactics of STEM – science, technology, engineering, mathematics). Experience has shown that it is preferable to accredit doctoral studies for broader areas of education, as they are less vulnerable and fragmented, can be better staffed, allow for greater collaboration, show greater relevance, and are generally better promoted (e.g. in subsequent applications for habilitation and professor appointment rights). A recent model example is the doctoral programme Didactics of Foreign Language at the Faculty of Education MU, which has already obtained accreditation rights for habilitation and professor appointment procedures.

In terms of research profiling, the doctoral studies at the MU Faculty of Education emphasise the interconnection of the Faculty's research topics (plans and projects) with doctoral students' thesis research and the consideration of the perspective of international applicability of the results. At the Faculty of Education, research is carried out in three main thematic areas: (1) educational systems, (2) curriculum in school education, (3) inclusive education and social inclusion, with the addition of field-specific research topics of individual departments. In connection with this, the research and internationalisation dimension of doctoral studies is emphasised at the Faculty of Education.

The implementation and visibility of research and its outputs is also supported. In this area, the Faculty has developed a strategy to support publishing and research. In addition to internationally applicable outputs, degree programmes accredited in a foreign language and cooperation on the implementation of doctoral studies with experts from abroad should also contribute to a better international reputation of the Faculty. In addition to the international dimension of doctoral studies, its interdisciplinary component is also supported. As the main tool for promoting the interdisciplinarity of doctoral studies at the MU Faculty of Education, the (post)doctoral school is being established. It should contribute to the better interconnection of individual doctoral programmes and to the creation of a wider community of doctoral students and postdoctoral fellows at the MU Faculty of Education.

Regarding the implementation of the doctoral studies, the requirements for doctoral students at the MU Faculty of Education have been encapsulated (standardised) in the Dean's Directive No. 5/2019, which includes requirements for publication, teaching, research, and presentation activities, as well as requirements for internationalisation and the doctoral thesis.

The promotion of science and research is perceived as a priority by the Faculty of Education and is given appropriate attention. In spring 2019, the Faculty of Education started preparations for the HR Excellence in Research Award. The aim is to create an attractive and high-quality environment for researchers. In the course of the survey concerning doctoral studies, suggestions were obtained that can be used for their further development.

The four dimensions of doctoral studies: current status and opportunities for improvement

A. The educational (content) dimension

Current status

The educational dimension refers to the content covered by the doctoral programme that its graduates are expected to master in depth. Doctoral programmes at the MU Faculty of Education are designed as disciplinary programmes (i.e. developed within specific disciplines), with more or less significant interdisciplinary overlaps.

In terms of the structure of educational content, individual doctoral programmes include:

- a) one or more compulsory (core) courses covering the foundation of the discipline,
- b) typically two compulsory methodology courses (the first is situated at the beginning of the study and is designed as an introduction to the methodology of research work, the second follows and is focused on a discipline-specific methodology),
- c) a group of selective courses allowing thematic profiling according to the focus of the specific doctoral thesis,
- d) compulsory foreign language courses (typically English) with a focus on academic purposes.

The above-mentioned curricular structure seems to be functional. However, the activities for the development of transferable competences of doctoral students require strengthening. In this context, the question of the professional outcome of doctoral studies and the profile of the doctoral graduate is raised. At the MU Faculty of Education, the professional outcome of the doctorate in an academic environment is – mostly traditionally – envisaged. In addition to this, however, there could be considerable potential for a professional doctorate in pedagogy/didactics in a non-academic environment. This could be the preparation of highly qualified and specialised professionals for conceptual roles in the education sector (e.g. curriculum design or innovation in education) or for non-academic positions in the education and research structure of universities (e.g. in the field of education quality management, accreditation, management and evaluation of science, etc.).

Opportunities for improvement

A fundamental challenge in this area is the discussion on the modification of the above-mentioned curricular concept, based on a modular system that would allow better sharing of courses across different doctoral programmes. This should lead to a better differentiation between the core curriculum and the profiling curriculum. In addition, the cross-curriculum should be strengthened – this should cut across doctoral programmes and include opportunities to develop key or transferable knowledge and skills needed for research and teaching (soft skills, publishing skills, presentation skills, critical thinking, etc.), both in and out of academia. A particular challenge is to unify the approach to foreign language teaching and to intensify the development of productive language skills.

The target group for courses, seminars or workshops focusing on these skills should be all early-career researchers – i.e. postdocs as well as doctoral students. This would enhance peer learning, interdisciplinary collaboration, knowledge transfer, etc. The platform for the implementation of these activities should be the Faculty of Education MU (post)doctoral school (see below).

Another challenge is to develop the concept of a doctorate in pedagogy/didactics for highly qualified non-academic positions in the field of education and training as well as in higher education and science.

B. The research dimension

Current status

In recent years, doctoral studies have been increasingly associated with the research role of universities. One of the priorities of the Faculty of Education MU is to strengthen the research-oriented concept of doctoral studies, but, at the same time, not to abandon the commitment to mediate “high scholarship” in the field.

It is the duty of students to carry out their own research, which culminates in a doctoral thesis. Doctoral students are supported by their supervisors and advisors in the planning and execution of their research and receive support in general and field-specific methodology as appropriate and possible.

Doctoral students are expected to present the results of their research at national and international conferences (according to the Dean’s Directive No. 5/2019, this includes 4 presentations at conferences, of which at least 2 at conferences held in the Czech Republic (or Slovakia) and at least 2 at conferences held outside the Czech Republic in a language other than Czech). In addition, at least 4 publications are required during the study period, of which at least 1 study published in a journal or proceedings in the WoS or SCOPUS database and 1 study in a peer-reviewed journal (the remaining ones can be in the form of books, book chapters, journal articles or contributions in proceedings).

Opportunities for improvement

Greater emphasis should be placed on linking doctoral thesis topics to the profiling research themes and goals of the Faculty. This should be facilitated by a clear and continuously updated presentation of research topics on the Faculty’s website. In addition, research linkages between doctoral students within and across disciplines should be more strongly encouraged. This should increase the potential for interdisciplinary research.

In the context of efforts to improve the quality of publication outputs, the MU Faculty of Education strives to set up a motivating and supportive environment for doctoral students. To this end, the Strategy for Supporting Publishing and Research at the MU Faculty of Education has been developed, but it targets primarily more experienced authors. Therefore, it should be adapted so that doctoral students can make more use of it. Doctoral students should continue to be motivated and supported to participate in scientific projects (IGA, GAMU / GA ČR (Czech Science Foundation), TA CR (The Technology Agency of the Czech Republic) and to produce high-quality creative and publication output in reputable journals or monographs. In connection with this, it is necessary to focus on further preparation of doctoral students in the field of publication skills (in Czech and foreign languages) and on publishing results in open sources. Here, more use should be made of MU’s open science/open access activities. Attractive financial rewards for excellent publication or other scientific results – e.g. within scholarship programmes – should be a motivational tool for achieving quality publication outputs.

C) The internationalisation dimension

Current status

At the MU Faculty of Education, 6 foreign language programmes are now newly accredited (6 in English, 1 in German). However, at the moment (autumn 2020), only 4 foreign students are studying at the Faculty of Education, and only one of them is enrolled in a foreign language programme. The reason for the low number of doctoral students in foreign language programmes is the fact that these studies are subject to payment of a tuition fee.

The international dimension of doctoral studies is further defined by the requirement to complete a foreign internship at an academic or research institution, for a total extent of at least seven weeks (Dean's Directive No. 5/2019). In addition, the international dimension of doctoral studies is developed by the requirement to publish and present in foreign languages, as mentioned above.

Opportunities for improvement

The internationalisation dimension of doctoral studies is undoubtedly one of the areas to be strengthened. This should be done primarily by encouraging the establishment of professional cooperation with foreign institutions dealing with similar research topics as the MU Faculty of Education doctoral students. Such collaborations should then be strengthened in the form of stays and requested lectures by foreign experts and researchers at the MU Faculty of Education. At the same time, researchers—supervisors and consultants should be sent to a greater extent for internships at foreign institutions.

The key aspect in this area should be the internationalisation of existing degree programmes conducted in Czech. This would mean including more compulsory courses in a foreign language (preferably English) and lectures by foreign guests in the curriculum (e.g. semester-long online block teaching). Special support should be given to doctoral thesis projects with an international dimension (e.g. comparative research carried out by doctoral students from different countries). In creative activities, the orientation towards the international environment should be a priority (supporting publications with an international impact).

Another important point in promoting internationalisation should concern administrative and organisational facilities. All study regulations should be translated into English. The language skills of administrative staff should be enhanced so that they are able to carry out all administrative tasks in English independently and are able to provide support to international students.

The international experience of degree programme supervisors, supervisors, consultants and senior administrative staff should also be enhanced (internships and study stays abroad, summer schools, or international conferences focused on doctoral studies and science management).

In addition to the above, it is important to strengthen the promotion of foreign-language doctoral programmes at the Faculty of Education MU among the target group of potential applicants from abroad. A prerequisite for the successful promotion of doctoral studies abroad is the existence of quality websites in English and other promotion tools. At the same time, it will be necessary to provide foreign students with access to all key documents related to doctoral studies in English. As foreign language programmes for foreign students are subject to payment of a tuition fee, it is necessary to set clear and transparent rules for this funding, codified in a Dean's directive.

D) Implementation dimension

Current status

The implementation dimension refers to the forms in which doctoral studies educational, research, internationalisation, and other activities take place. At the MU Faculty of Education, doctoral studies are implemented on the basis of an accredited curriculum, which is complemented by the cross-cutting offer of the gradually developing (post)doctoral school. The MU Study and Examination Regulations define the requirements for individual doctoral studies actors and the related rules. These are specified in the Dean's Directive No. 5/2019. The implementation of doctoral studies is further supported by selected scholarship programmes.

The overarching goal is to create conditions for doctoral studies to be carried out in a high-quality and efficient manner. Following the quality and development, the degree programmes will be evaluated annually by the doctoral board, which will propose a development plan for the next period. At the same time, periodic evaluation of doctoral programmes is planned as part of the evaluation of research (within the framework of Methodology 17+ and MU's internal institutional evaluation).

Opportunities for improvement

One of the priorities should be to motivate learners to perform at a high level and to complete their studies on time and within the standard study period. Learners who do not perform adequately in the long term may then have their scholarships reduced or withdrawn (by decision of the doctoral board and at the suggestion of the supervisor), or, in extreme cases, may have their studies terminated for failure to meet the conditions set out in the individual study plan. The scholarship for talented doctoral students serves as a tool for rewarding the excellent performance of students; in addition, doctoral students should be given the opportunity to apply for other forms of scholarship support. Involving doctoral students in projects is part of the conditions for ensuring their success. Working on projects usually represents another possible source of financial support for them.

The emerging platform of the (post-)doctoral school, which aims to identify areas of support for early-career researchers and to propose adequate instruments, including their implementation, can also contribute to strengthening the professional integration of doctoral students. It aims to further strengthen the Faculty community of early-career researchers (doctoral students and postdocs) across degree programmes. The purpose of the (post)doctoral school is to offer a space for peer sharing (and networking) and to promote the natural integration of doctoral students and postdocs among experienced researchers. This should help to improve the conditions for successful doctoral studies and a successful career start after graduation.

The (post)doctoral school aims to support research, pedagogical, professional, and personal development. Its specific tools or activities should be mainly methodological workshops, requested professional lectures, Faculty-wide doctoral conferences, a mentoring system, information support through the website, Facebook and regular newsletters, and other specific activities.

Open questions instead of a conclusion

- How best to approach the intention to accredit integrated social science didactics and integrated STEM didactics? Would it be appropriate to use one of the existing doctoral programmes of the Faculty to do so?

- Does it seem desirable to consider a different professional outcome of a doctorate in pedagogy/didactics other than academic? If so, what types of professional outcome and what graduate profiles can be considered relevant and sustainable?

- What stance to take on the current trend to incline doctoral studies rather unilaterally towards a research role, losing sight of their potential for the educational and social role of the University?

- How to appropriately balance the conception of doctoral studies in an individualised “master–novice” model with an approach that places more emphasis on the collective responsibility towards doctoral students from the Faculty level as a whole? What roles should the emerging (post)doctoral school play in this context?

References

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