Evaluation of Faculty of Social Science

Student representative group of PhDs in Social Science

Introduction

The PhD programme of the faculty of social science experience especially a big change this year because of the beginning of the new doctoral school of social sciences. This evaluation is focused on the past structure of the PhD study before the doctoral school, their transition, as well as the new measures of the school, which are implemented during the winter semester 2020/2021.

It is important to note that in comparison to other faculties the development of the school the student union of the PhDs was included. The collaboration between students and faculty was pretty successful. We, the *student representative group of PhDs in Social Science,* appreciate that the faculty see students as an important partner from which corporation both sides can profit. In comparison to other faculties and universities it is unfortunately not the standard.

Satisfaction of studies and students life

There are many different realities of PhD students in the faculty of social science. The first group are the students who are employed directly on the faculty in the positions as pre-doc, or as project assistants. These people are highly connected to the university, have a good network, have access to all important information and most of the time have better support from the professors. The second, biggest group of PhD students are those making their PhD outside of the University, are focused mainly on their PhD thesis, don't have a good social network and have also not good access to important information. This group of students get less support from the faculty, they are mostly dependent on themselves. The third, last group is made from students which are interested to study on the faculty. These students are in some cases already enrolled in the programme but they have big struggles to get through the entry barriers. For example, finding a supervisor, writing a good expose, getting through the faculty public presentation (which means entry into regular study) are examples of these barriers. If we claim that the second group of people get almost no support from the faculty, the third group of people gets no support at all. They are mostly lost and usually stop the study after some semester of trying to get access.

In relation to these different groups of students their students' life is different. The first group of students whose are close to the university have mostly no big troubles in relation to their

study. They get good support and are satisfied with their situation. Most of them are happy to get exclusive, in some way better positions. But despite these better positions, the group of students are overwhelmed, especially with their work for the projects in which they are employed. In most of the cases they usually work more on project work than on their own thesis. This is problematic as project work is not foreseeable and these PhD students have rather less time for their own work. They also are pushed from their supervisors to publish, do workshops etc. which is positive on the hand for their own scientific career, but on the other hand it takes all personal resources away and gives no space for developing spontaneous ideas such as side projects with other students or be slower and take more time to increase the quality of the dissertation. In total the first group of students get big support from the university, but also have to deal with big expectations and high workload with little amount of time, which is perceived in most of the cases as stressful.

However, most students of the first group are satisfied with their above mentioned situation, The reality of the students of the "second category" who are not close to the university are different. This group has a small number of students who are actually satisfied with being free, independent and that they can work individually, however, most of the students also struggled with this situation. There is no big support (in terms of supervision, funding and career opportunities) and less networking connections to the university. This situation is even worse for the students of the third group of students, which want to get into the study but which need a bigger support to do so. For example workshops on how to write a research proposal, how to get through the public presentation, how to get into the students' networks or even how to find a supervisor would be for this group of students very helpful.

The faculty has started to reflect this situation and tries to fix some of these issues with the doctoral school. For example, at the beginning of every study year the school tries to connect the 'cohortes' and create a supporting network within the school so that the entry to the study is more easy and structured. This idea is embedded in the programmes with activities like a kick off meeting at the beginning of the study, by different PhD clubs, mentoring programs etc. Also the other issues should be fixed in the doctoral school. All members of the school should be close to the university, so that the opportunities and support, which the first group of students already get is also available for everybody within the school.

However these innovative steps don't solve the systemic problems of the second and third group of students. It is important to note that the access to the school is only possible for students, who have a supervisor (professor) who is employed at the faculty of social sciences at the University of Vienna. For students who's supervisor is an external supervisor doesn't have access to the school at all. This seems to be a big problem especially on the PhD level because it is hard to find a supervisor who works specifically on a topic(s) that the

PhD student is also interested in working for many years. From this point the doctoral school did not manage to solve some systemic problems of all students. Despite the great innovations, it can cause a bigger gap between the students of first category, which are closer to the university and second category who do not in fact.

Courses that are offered

The University of Vienna is the oldest and biggest university in German speaking countries. Especially the big size and big number of students makes it possible to offer a very broad variety of courses on the faculty of social science. This broad offer of courses in our faculty, however, also brings some structural barriers. For the students, it is often difficult to find 'partners'/colleagues who they could exchange or cooperate with because of a similar research topic despite the relatively big size of the faculty. Especially on the PhD level are the research projects mostly so specific that only a few students work and can speak with a 'consultation partner'. However, the faculty tries through different kinds of courses like the research colloquium to connect the students and exchange their experiences although most of these courses are not really directly useful for the topic of the dissertation. The courses give in most cases an opportunity to learn new topics and perspectives and also to reflect on some general issues. How to structure the dissertation project, what are the methodological and theoretical differences in comparison to other students or which problems the other students have to deal with could be named as examples. In other words the courses in most cases do not meet the expectations of the students and also are not seen as useful in order to progress on their dissertation. On a lighter note, these courses bring some additional value and are considered as useful in general.

It is also important to note that for many (especially international) students, the low number of courses in the faculty taught in English is seen as a big problem. There are not enough courses offered in English and students who don´t speak German generally have less opportunities to attend courses but also to network with other PhD students. This seems to be especially on the PhD level problematic, where most communication happens on an international level.

The above mentioned issues with the courses the faculty tries to fix them with the doctoral school. For example, the communication within the doctoral school will be mainly in English. The students within the school also have the opportunity to participate in developing the course programme. They can, for example, invite guest lectures, organize workshops or PhD clubs etc. However, all of these developments are again exclusive for the members of the school. Students who could not be part of the doctoral school are confronted with the same problems described before.

Organisation of Studies Programs

The study at the University of Vienna is generally very flexible. Students have freedom to choose courses which they like and which are relevant for their own goals/aims. There are recommended guidelines which courses should be taken at a period of their study so the students' support does not get lost. A big institutional support for the PhD students in the last years was the graduate center, which offered practical workshops for all students and since this winter term 2020/2021 is integrated into the new doctoral school. This seems to be problematic because all activities of the doctoral school are connected to the activities of the graduate center. As described above they will primarily focus on the members of the school, which makes the gap between the students of the doctoral school and the regular PhD students bigger.

The gap between students who are close to the university and the ones who don´t seems to be problematic also from some other organisational points. Students, who are employed at the university, will receive better support in organisation, in the development of their careers and in research, and have also access to some more opportunities such as organizing lectures, participation on different projects etc. In general it could be said that these students have better connections, get better support than others. The new doctoral school tries to solve this problem as it gives in a relatively transparent way every student the opportunity to participate in the school and so be closer to the university. But, in fact, the capacity of the school is limited, so that particular problems can be solved.

The power of networking, as well as the hierarchy power of university professors seems to be relevant also in other topics. For example within the faculty public presentation is the doctoral project form a committee of professors allowed or rejected. There are a big number of students especially of the second and third group which perhaps that the estimation of the doctoral project is more or less related to the sympathy of the professors. Good connected students who are supervisioned by the members of the committees are generally more successful as the students whose supervisors are not members of the committee.

On a positive note, the administration is a good and an important contact person for the students, but their workload is most of the time too with administrative work. The problem seems to be that in comparison to other study programmes the doctorate of social sciences does not mandate his own student service spot (StudienServiceStelle).

Research Support and Foundations

Prior to the doctoral school of social science, there were not many opportunities to get financial support for own research. This affects the study but also in general the scientific career. Regarding supervisors, big issues occurred especially in terms of supervision or support while working on the PhD project. There is only a low number of supervisors (rather

new and young professors) who meet their students regularly, while most supervisors the PhD student has to do the planning of the meetings. The meetings with the supervisors are in most cases inconsistent and irregular (in some cases the "supervision" happens only once every year). The standards of supervision are not equal and in most cases low quality. Regarding funding: Small monetary support was available in the form of different scholarships but it was not easy to get.

Also these troubles were also reflected and considered in the development of the new doctoral school. Members of the doctoral school (students as well as supervisors) are asked to keep a good quality of supervision that should result in regular meetings, writing progress papers, achieving milestones etc. Students within the school also get individual monetary support of 750€ every year for the doctoral projects. They generally have better access to different kinds of (new) prizes and scholarships. Specially monetary support is also awarded with the sowi:doc fellowship programme which gives every year to four students an full time paid position at the university to work on their research project for a duration of three years. However, again, this great support is exclusively available for students within the doctoral school.

Summary

Overall the faculty of social sciences is making big innovative steps towards international standards and international competition. They try to reflect their weaknesses and fix them with the establishment of the (new) doctoral school. Students within the school will definitely receive bigger support and are included in university of study. All of these innovations are making the faculty of social science a lucrative place for PhD students. However, despite these great innovations there are still unsolved systemic issues especially for the second group of students which could be not part of a doctoral school and which will not get any good support from the university. That shouldn't be ignored. The students of this "second category" have to go a harder way, they get less recognition for their research and less opportunities to start a scientific career. We, as a student representative group, see these circumstances as not equitably, especially because we recognize the social function of the students of the second category. They are making an important bridge between science and society, between science and praxis. We try to support this second group of students, however, also our resources are limited and the support is not enough. We recommend that the faculty do a greater support also for this kind of students and not focus just on the first group.