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PhD projects in an industry environment

Over the last years, all over Europe, different schemes have been developed to promote the collaboration of universities and industries. Especially, PhD projects attract political attention to foster the exchange of academia and practice. Some national examples for established programmes stem from Denmark: “The Industry PhD Programm” ; from Norway: „Industrial Ph.D. scheme“ ; from Sweden: “Industry PhD Project“ ; or from Germany: „PhD in industry“. Additionally, networks are created to further increase the visibility of such initiatives, for example: the „Young European biotech network“ (France, Germany, Ireland, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom); or the „Hipeac Industrial PhD Internship“.

In Luxembourg, until today, such an institutionalised initiative has not yet been taken. As Luxembourg’s voice of young researchers, we, LuxDoc a.s.b.l., take the chance to comment on the potentials and risks of such collaborations.

In general, opening up the options of conducting research for PhD candidates can be considered as valuable addition to the existing system. Doing PhD research in Luxembourg is currently possible in mainly two ways: being enrolled at the University of Luxembourg and being funded by the University’s budget, the FNR, or privately; being enrolled at a foreign university but working in Luxembourg, mainly at one of the CRPs. Adding the third option “enrolled at uni.lu, working contract in industry” seems to be a promising way to foster innovation and increase the attractiveness and visibility of Luxembourg as research location—including the increased attractiveness for foreign (applied) researchers.

Project duration

Many companies have a strong research and development (R&D) department and heritage. It can be valuable to contribute to and gain from such an environment.

Nonetheless, project durations in industry and research might differ. Hence, ensuring that the PhD candidate meets the scientific as well as the company’s demands with respect to time is an important aspect. This includes that the PhD candidate needs to have a sufficient amount of time to conduct the research: the PhD project has to be the main task of the candidate; this has to be clearly defined in the working contract.

Supervision

Supervision is one of the most crucial aspects for a successful PhD project. Therefore, it is important to ensure the quality of interaction among the PhD candidate and his or her supervisor(s).

In a university-industry collaboration setting, the need for clear structured supervision is even more important. The relationship between the supervisor from academia and the supervisor from industry has to be clearly defined in the working contract. The Luxembourgish approach of a thesis supervisory committee (CET – comité d’encadrement de thèse) provides a promising framework. The CET for an university-industry collaboration should be administered like a joint-supervision project (cotutelle de thèse). It could be fruitful to increase the demand of annual meetings of the CET to half-yearly meetings because research cultures at the university and the company might differ. A higher frequency of meetings would help to surmount research obstacles and diverging viewpoints.

Ethics

Talking about university-industry collaboration immediately raises questions about the independence of research. It has to be ensured that the PhD candidate can meet the scientific requirements set for a research project, including ethical considerations (for natural science regarding human and animal experimentation (Declaration of Helsinki); for social science: anonymity, confidentiality, informed consent, privacy, right to service, voluntary participation, etc.; guidelines such as the European Charter for Researchers , issued by the European Commission and the DG Research: it covers general principles for both, the researcher and the employer/funder; Technology Transfer activities, i.e. TTO’s, such as today at the CRP-Santé). At the same time, the private partner needs to get security about issues related to patents and research property. Together, a clear guideline on publishing should be developed to ensure intellectual property. In addition, the PhD candidate has to retain scientific and intellectual freedom.

Financing

A collaboration budget should be accounted, and be bound to the aforementioned aspects. For example, the company covers the PhD candidate’s salary, because s/he is doing research “for” the company, and the university commits itself to increase the working groups’ budget of the university supervisor by 50 per cent of the annual PhD salary. We emphatically condemn personal remuneration of supervisors due to ethical considerations.

The committee of LuxDoc a.s.b.l.
Tom Becker, Pascale Esch, Fabian Faller,
Anne Franziskus, Annick Leick, Hella Niemiets,
Conny Reichling, Aravind Tallam, Christophe Trefois, Lucie Waltzer