

Background:

Adequate, sustainable and specific funding – that comprises not only studentships (or salaries) for the early-career researchers (ECR), but also other research resources, such as equipment, facilities and support services – is critical for the quality of doctoral education (DE) (EUA, 2010). Among others, funding improves the experience, well-being and satisfaction of ECRs (Sverdlik, Hall, McAlpine, & Hubbard, 2018), and studentship awarding “increases degree completion, placement in a post-doctoral or academic research position, research productivity and impact, and network size” (Graddy-Reed et al., 2021, p.1). However, DE has been challenged by the academic research dilemma of balancing the need to meet the funding criteria with orientation towards societal problems and academic freedom values (Akker & Spaapen, 2017).

Research questions:

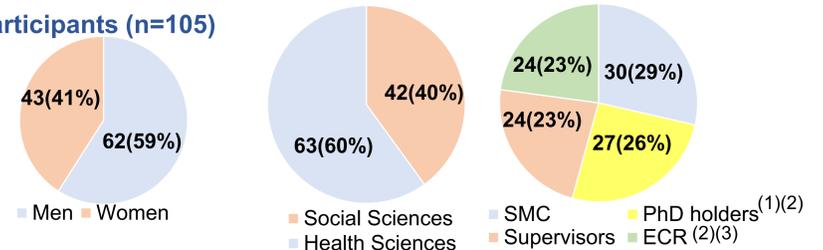
This work presents partial results of the research project “Processes and Outcomes of Doctoral Education in Social and Health Sciences”, and aims to answer to the following **research questions**:

- **How do members of scientific or monitoring commissions of PhD programmes (SMC), supervisors, PhD holders, and early-career researchers (ECR) perceive the role of research funding in DE in Social and Health Sciences?**
- **How can we enhance the positive impact of funding on DE in Social and Health Sciences?**

Methods:

- **Qualitative study**, in one of the largest universities of Portugal.
- **Data collection: 25 online focus groups** (June 2020 - January 2021) using the Zoom platform: 7 FG with SMC; 6 with supervisors; 6 with PhD holders; and 6 with ERC.
- **Data analysis: thematic analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Participants (n=105)



(1) Who concluded their PhD from 2012 on; (2) with diversified professional experience, some with a more academic or research-intensive profile and others with professional experience beyond higher education; (3) enrolled in the 2nd or subsequent years of the PhD

Results:

Research funding may contribute to the quality and success of DE in Social and Health Sciences, and to the well-being of ECR

Funded **research centres** and research **projects** provide an appropriate research context: critical mass, networks, facilities, and resources.

Studentships:

- **Worthy** (research work should be remunerated); and **gratifying** (project validation);
- May condition the **decision to enrol** in the PhD, and foster **PhD completion**;
- Supervisors feel more **legitimacy to demand effort and responsibility**;
- Some supervisors and/or PhD programmes **prefer scholarship holders**;
- Increased **availability** and **tranquillity** (due to exclusivity), which may allow more **ambitious research projects**, promote the **integration in research teams**, the **quality** of the research work, and further **career development**.

By fostering mobility, **mobility grants** allow access to **resources, benchmarking**, are **enriching**, increase **networks and partnerships**, may increase the number and quality of **publications**, and promote the development of an **international career**.

Funding for **research materials and research-related activities** (e.g. software, reagents, travel expenses to participate in conferences) is also critical.

Funded by stipends (studentships), and often through resources of the research centres, research project budgets or student fees.

Funding for **recruitment of researchers** provides **career development opportunities for PhD holders**.

Research funding weaknesses may negatively impact DE in Social and Health Sciences

Research funding:

- **Scarce, unstable, uncertain, bureaucratic**. Some participants criticized the **unequal distribution by scientific area**;
- Some participants considered that **funding criteria** are **unstable, unclear** or **inadequate** and **constrain academic freedom**;
- **Quality monitoring** and **strategic management** (e.g.: definition of priority themes) were considered **insufficient** by some participants.

Studentships:

- **Exclusivity** may **increase feelings of isolation**;
- Insufficient funding opportunities for **practicing professionals attending the PhD** (non exclusive studentships; tuition fees funding; social grants);
- **Project studentships** may hinder **autonomy**.

In some contexts, funding for **research resources and research-related activities** is **unavailable, unadvertised**, or too **bureaucratic**.

Precariousness and **lack of research/academic career opportunities** for PhD holders may **hinder the attractiveness of DE** for top undergraduate students.

Conclusion:

This work shed light over some **tensions** regarding:

- Standardization level and adequacy of **research funding criteria** (e.g.: criteria based on number of papers and citation-based indicators versus social impact of research);
- **Distribution equity over scientific areas** and **democratization** versus **strategic management** and **quality monitoring** of funding;
- **Need** of research funding versus **constraint on academic freedom and autonomy**;
- Advantages of **exclusivity** versus the call for more flexible research opportunities adjusted to the **needs of practicing professionals** attending the PhD.

However, it was agreed that **regardless the negative impact** of some **weaknesses**, research funding is **critical for the quality and success of DE in Health and Social Sciences** and **may contribute to the well-being of ECR**.

Overall, it was generally considered that the positive impact of research funding on DE in Social and Health Sciences could be enhanced through the **reinforcement of research funding**, comprising not only **studentships** and **mobility grants**, but also **less precarious career opportunities for PhD holders**, funding for **research centres**, **research projects**, and research **materials and research-related activities**.

Moreover, DE has been challenged by **ever-changing dynamics of knowledge creation** (e.g.: related with inter-sectorial networks, or societal needs), and by the access of **new publics** (e.g.: practicing professionals), which may demand **more flexible research funding opportunities**.

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