

Mark Smith describes the opening salvos of a new competitive skirmish – recruiting, managing and developing the best doctoral students in business and management

The battle for doctoral talent



The business world has long been familiar with the “war for talent”, a term coined at the turn of the century by consultancy McKinsey & Co to capture the rising competition for talented employees. Indeed, business schools are familiar with the on-going series of battles for top talent among both emerging and experienced academics as they seek to develop and reinforce their faculty.

There is, however, another series of minor battles also occurring – the annual battles for the best potential doctoral students in business and management.

While not (yet) a war, this competitive market is key as schools seek to fill programmes that serve a variety of purposes for themselves and their missions.

In May 2017 EFMD and Grenoble Ecole de Management, a French business school, organised and hosted a conference for programme directors, heads of doctoral schools and other professionals working in doctoral education in order to consider the challenges business schools face in recruiting, managing and developing doctoral talent. This short article was inspired by the speakers and participants who came to Grenoble.

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Why compete for doctoral talent?

Doctoral programmes are resource-intensive activities that are unlikely to become a source of revenue; in fact they demand considerable investment and commitment from schools. As such, it is a major commitment to open and maintain doctoral activities.

Yet, at another level, such programmes are a key activity for developing and sustaining the reputation of business schools among both stakeholders and, increasingly, for rankings.

Further, among academics, doctoral work is intrinsically rewarding and a rich doctoral programme can be considered an additional lever for recruiting and retaining experienced academics.

Doctoral researchers themselves may also be a means for business school development. The best doctoral students can provide a boost for publications, data collection and increased capacity in pedagogic and research activities. Through engaged research projects among stakeholders, doctoral students can also open up new networks, creating innovative connections for business schools.

Attracting doctoral talent

However, attracting talent in this competitive, hi-tech age is not easy. In addition to direct competitors, business schools are also competing for the brightest minds against other large organisations with attractive graduate programmes and generous terms and conditions in a diminishing pool of traditional talent.

Janine Leschke, Head of the Doctoral School on Organisation and Management Studies, Copenhagen Business School (CBS), Denmark, emphasises the benefits of attractive programmes and school reputation to address this competition:

“At CBS we exploit our national and international networks to recruit doctoral students. When the research institutes or individuals have a good reputation that brings good-quality applicants. We also have the advantage of offering programmes in English and a good selection of PhD courses on relevant theories and methods”.

Nevertheless, schools not only need to go beyond their borders but also expand their networks to meet the challenges of generational and technological gaps. A co-ordinated social media strategy can offer new opportunities to connect with potential talent but it requires engagement from faculty who may sometimes be reluctant to contribute.

It is important that schools use their faculty in order to exploit their networks and provide content – for example, media-friendly research results – to attract talent who tend to rely on new forms of media for information and to form their opinions on schools.

In this way, social media may allow schools to develop and expand their communities of stakeholders from which doctoral students may emerge while exposing potential talent to the richness of their academic environments.



Managing doctoral talent

The development of talent is an inherent part of any good doctoral programme and something potential students will assess. The combination of courses, opportunities to work with experienced researchers and possibilities to develop individual research project can increase the attraction. However, talent development is much more than the relatively narrow range of research skills required to become future faculty.

Future employers seek graduates with a range of skills including the potential to demonstrate impact and leadership. Doctoral programmes thus need to integrate training plans that go beyond research methods.

Emma Parry, Director of Doctoral programmes at Cranfield School of Management, UK, underlines the importance of expanding this offer:

“Over the last few years Cranfield has taken a longer-term perspective in terms of thinking about attracting the best students but also thinking about the longer-term impact of the research through the development of Impact and Dissemination Plans. Then students leave not only with a doctorate but also a plan of how to use the research findings to create real impact on practice”.





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Developing doctoral talent

A revised perspective on talent at the doctoral level also opens up opportunities beyond those traditionally provided by the academic career track. Business school networks should be able to provide more possibilities for doctoral graduates in a variety of sectors and therefore expand their own impact – addressing that perennial problem of business school relevance and impact.

Indeed, doctoral students could be reconceptualised as a means to promote relevance through networks and projects engaging with a full range of stakeholders and also providing opportunities for future graduates. Here co-funded academic-industrial doctoral programmes provide a framework for engagement at both the institutional and individual level, although they are underdeveloped in business and management compared to engineering and the hard sciences.

Business schools may also need to accept that doctoral graduates are not necessarily destined for the academic career track and their futures as business leaders, entrepreneurs or policy experts require schools to equip them with the relevant skills, career pathways and networks.

Indeed, academics who can integrate their experiences from other sectors with academic rigour could have an important impact inside and outside the business school sector. Business school academics seek to engage with the “real world” but do not necessarily value the skills required to do so – doctoral students need these skills, need to appreciate their value and may welcome the opportunities.

Programme directors are key drivers for developing doctoral talent. This may include offering flexible start dates and pathways for their doctoral students while still trying to keep them on track with their studies. Such policies include respect and understanding for the diversity of doctoral students by gender, ethnicity and nationality as talent increasingly comes from a wide range of backgrounds.

It is at the level of the supervisor where real action may be required. Just as human resource managers rely on line managers to put organisational policies into place, programme directors need to rely on supervisors in the development of their doctoral talent.

At Grenoble Ecole de Management Valerie Sabatier, Director of Doctoral Programs, has co-developed a prize-winning serious game to train supervisors.

“We created the online serious game – supervisor.com – in order to help supervisors. Using in-house expertise in doctoral programmes and gamification we have developed a tool to aide supervisors nurture doctoral talent on their way to completion and navigate what can sometime be a lonely activity”.

The training and development of supervisors offers a lever to increase the quality of the supervision experience and aide academics manage the doctoral journey of their students.





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The community of professionals working with doctoral programmes should be rightly proud that their graduates learn perhaps the most valuable of all skills – they learn how to think. The next stage of development is that graduates leave equipped and inspired to enter all sectors and organisations in order to demonstrate the potential value and impact for society of a doctorate in business and management

Innovation and the future of doctoral talent

In order to respond to these shifting demands for talent, doctoral programmes need to innovate and adapt. Yet doctoral studies have not necessarily been at the forefront of innovations – resistance to new forms of doctorates remains. In order to develop their relevance and retain their standards, developments in doctoral qualifications require the confidence of communities both inside and outside academia.

There is a tension between demands for fit-for-purpose doctoral programmes and legitimate concerns that innovations may lead to lower standards or a lack of recognition. Thus it is up to accrediting organisations, business schools and programme directors to provide relevant programmes that develop the required competences for doctoral graduates without diminishing the elite position of the doctorate in the educational hierarchy.

The community of professionals working with doctoral programmes should be rightly proud that their graduates learn perhaps the most valuable of all skills – they learn how to think. The next stage of development is that graduates leave equipped and inspired to enter all sectors and organisations in order to demonstrate the potential value and impact for society of a doctorate in business and management.

A graduate holding a doctoral degree has a passport to do anything they wish. The role of business schools and their doctoral programmes should be to open the eyes of their graduates to the potential opportunities and provide the skills and competencies for their talent to have an impact.

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About the Author

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