Eurodoc Takes its First Steps: a European PhD Students’ Organisation is Born

by Raoul Tan

Most PhD student unions or postgraduate committees have been founded to represent the country's PhD students and/or young scientists at a national level. They often have extensive contacts with the government (e.g. ministry of education, science and research), national research councils, the various university boards and committees and even trade unions and the national press.

Despite all those many useful contacts, most national unions did not have much international contacts or European interest. Postgraduates interested in European affairs often acted on their own behalf or were representatives of their research school or institute, only representing a small number of PhD students.

Nowadays, the attitude of most PhD student unions is changing. Not only do we realise that many of the so called national PhD student problems are similar in other EU countries, but the European Union is also changing, making it easier than ever for young scientists to work in another European country. Moreover, the EU policy deciding on the future of European research is in fact more the young scientists' future than that of the senior scientists'.

However, to become a real European citizen or scientist, we should also be properly informed about each other. Of course we can read written information about the situation in other EU countries but such documents generally lack the point of view of PhD students, and are often not enough actualised. Only by means of a closer collaboration with other PhD student associations is it possible to achieve a proper understanding of the country's scientific situation, as seen from the PhD students' perspective.

Already last year several PhD student unions started informing each other of the academic systems existing in each EU member state, summarising the specific pros and cons and debating the student's future concerns.

While the Dutch (LAIOO) were looking for more national unions to participate in the European discussion, the Swedish PhD student union (SDOK) organised the first EU PhD student conference. Two national PhD student representatives of each EU member country were invited to attend the conference, in order to strengthen their bonds, since contacts existed previously only via the wire.

From the first day onwards it was evident that young scientists are becoming increasingly interested in Europe. At the conference, which was called Eurodoc 2001 and was held in Uppsala, Sweden (March 1-4), all unions agreed to continue their collaborations in a more official way than before, and Eurodoc was born. Eurodoc is the European postgraduate-associations’ umbrella organisation to which all national, or biggest local (in absence of an existing national union), PhD student or postgraduate unions are attached. Eurodocs represents officially, rather than informally as before, PhD students on a European level. This has two main benefits. First of all it is much easier for official organisations to communicate and discuss European issues with a European PhD student union, representing students at European level, rather than with different national unions separately. Furthermore, for a proper and continuous collaboration it is essential to have an annual conference where national representatives can discuss issues face-t-face, rather
than via telephone or email is essential. Organising such a conferences requires financial support, and also this can be easier achieved when the European collaborations of PhD associations are officially confirmed (Next year's Eurodoc conference will be held in Spain in parallel to the Spanish EU presidency next year)

The first initiative of this European collaboration, however, is not the conference, but the initiation of a European discussion in Science's Next Wave (www.nextwave.org), Which starts in September 2001. In a series of articles, representatives from each country give an overview of the country's academic system, including facts and figures. Importantly, these articles should also describe the good and bad sides of each system, and future concerns, as seen from the point of view of PhD student. This, however, is not only a way for Europe's young scientists to inform each other of the situation in the rest of Europe, but the discussions are meant to be shared with the whole scientific community, including senior scientists and politicians, who decide on the young scientists' future, the future of European research.

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More information on Eurodoc can be found (from August 2001) on www.universia.net/eurodoc.