

The European University Institute's Exit Survey

Andreas C. Frijdal
Director
European University Institute

Our first survey was organized in 1986 with the objective of establishing an alumni organization of European University Institute (EUI) PhDs. Since then we have organized exit surveys on a regular basis and with increasing frequency. Not only has frequency changed—currently we launch one every three years—but also the survey's objectives. From an inventory of our alumni network, it has slowly become a major instrument to improve content, structure, and the quality of our doctoral education. Today, it plays a key role in attracting top PhD candidates based on our placement record in top universities.

Our first survey was a basic questionnaire with information on career and position occupied in the years after leaving the EUI, but soon we elaborated the list of questions to include feedback on the program and quality of the supervision received at the EUI. What was lacking was a comparative dimension, since Europe, with the exception of the UK, was at that time a desert with regards to doctoral statistics—not only as regards the alumni careers of PhDs but also as regards total numbers, completion rates, and time-to-degree. As a result the 2006 survey was based on a new questionnaire developed in cooperation with a large, nation-wide project covering American graduate education, set up by the Center of Innovative Research in Graduate Education (CIRGE), which organizes five and 10 year exit surveys in various disciplines funded by the Carnegie Foundation and the National Science Foundation. This allows us to put our survey in the context of the American data.

At that time the Institute—at least in Europe—was the vanguard of this exercise. In this respect, the Institute took an active role in developing a report which was published by the European University Association in cooperation with UK-GRAD (now VITAE). One of the main conclusions of the European University Institute's Association working group on career developments was that the survey should become a regular instrument in order to evaluate and improve doctoral programs. Another recommendation of the working group was that a frequency of five years seems to be more appropriate than 10 years. To keep the surveys operational it is very important that an active link is kept with the PhD students at the start of their career. That link is preferably in the hands of the departments—in other words, it would be advisable that within the departments an effort be made to follow up on the development of the students during the first five years after leaving the Institute in order to obtain detailed information about this period. In fact, the department is the first contact for students starting their careers, since frequent requests for reference letters will be addressed to the department or its academic staff.

The increased frequency of surveys was facilitated by the introduction of the Internet. Where our first survey was based on stamped, addressed envelopes, today various programs like QuestionPro and SurveyMonkey make a real difference. So much so that we had to revise our questionnaire, shorten it considerably, because of “survey fatigue” among the contacted subjects.

Based on responses of most of the surveys carried out in the US, as well as from our own survey it was very clear that students did not consider themselves well prepared for the labor market, both in the academic and private sectors. In the light of these results, the Institute has taken active steps to organize a career development group which, based on the first results of the

last survey, tackles the areas for which we knew there was a good chance of our students starting their careers.

A program was set up which consists of three elements:

- a) Training of **teaching skills** (such as is already in place in quite a number of British universities)
- b) Development of all other **generic academic skills** (such as research training, ethics and research, etc.)
- c) Teaching opportunities: a network in cooperation with our Alumni Association, offering **teaching opportunities** across Europe.

Another important part of preparing researchers for their future careers, also organized in cooperation with the Alumni Association, is our **career events** at the beginning of each academic year when alumni who are employed in the sectors to which most of our students go (international organizations; NGOs; international law and consultancy firms) inform and prepare the students better for careers in these areas.