Publication-based Doctorate Is Problematic as a Standard Procedure

Ziemann and Oestmann in their article point out an interesting new approach to gaining a doctoral degree. It aims at higher quality while “the motivation to embark on research” in students is taken for granted. However, for the overwhelming majority of students, their university education serves to provide them with the professional training needed to work in a practical, curative professional environment. This is based on a scientific understanding of evidence and information processing that needs to be taught during the undergraduate degree course, in addition to the facts. For this, and for efficiency review, a bachelor’s or master’s thesis may be sufficient.

A doctoral thesis that does justice to the demands and challenges of research should be reserved for colleagues aiming at making a career in that area. Therefore, it is problematic to make publication-based doctoral degrees the standard procedure. In addition, the presented numbers of publications per doctoral candidate do not appear to present sufficient evidence of an improvement in quality. The authors themselves associate impact factors only to a limited extent with the publications. Some question marks therefore remain.

In Reply:

Göbel and Gortner have focused on the aspect of comments and suggestions for improvements from publishers and peer reviewers, which can be interpreted as external services if the authors follow them. This is a surprising, but conclusive, perspective on the topic of peer reviews, whose purpose is quality assurance. Should the peer reviews also be published and the reviewers named? How transparent should the peer review process be? Plagiarized copy is not a central problem in the life sciences, but plagiarized ideas are. This is also true for the other direction—from author to peer reviewer.

The various problems associated with the impact factor are obvious—until further notice, decisions on the value of publications will not be able to be made on the basis of individual parameters, but only according to individual assessment by committees with vast scientific experience, such as doctoral committees. Their decisions will not always be flawless either. Developing better instruments for comparing quality is an urgent task in which we would very much like to support both colleagues.

Stief’s comments relate to the role of first authorship. We cannot agree with the assumption that publications by doctoral candidates cannot be first-class because they were written by “beginners”; this is proved incorrect every day. Excellent tuition is essential. At the Charité University Hospital the responsible supervisor always has at least obtained a habilitation or is the head of a junior research group. At the Charité the conflict about first authorship between doctoral and postdoctoral candidates (as second supervisors) has found a solution in that for the habilitation thesis, last authorship is equal to first authorship.

We share Seidenstücker’s view that for a large proportion of medical students, research is not at the center. However, we believe that an early decision against research and in favor of the MD of US provenance would deprive the life sciences of enormous potential. A scientific involvement with medicine, however, proves more and more necessary. We would therefore like to further develop the robust basic concept of the medical doctoral degree. This process certainly throws up new questions continuously. Furthermore, at the Charité, the monography is still an option for medical and dental candidates.

Conflict of interest statement

The author declares that no conflict of interest exists.

REFERENCES


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