

## PRODOK HELPS TRANSFORM DOCTORAL TRAINING AT BUSINESS SCHOOLS IN GERMAN-SPEAKING COUNTRIES

**Work in Progress: Higher Education in German Speaking Countries**



**Hermann Jahnke**

*U. of Bielefeld, Germany*



**Caren Sureth**

*U. of Paderborn, Germany*

Higher education in Germany is traditionally on a high standard. Nevertheless, during the past five or so years, driven by an effort to harmonize higher education programs and degrees throughout the European Union (EU), higher education in the three German speaking countries Germany, Austria and Switzerland has gone through an unprecedented transformation process. At the heart of this process has been the switch from the traditional five-year *Diploma* programs to the internationally more common separate Bachelor and Master programs. Following a transitional period of several years, today the dual Bachelor/Master structure is well established at least among the business schools that are affiliated with one of the over 100 universities in Germany, a country half the size of Texas but with a population of more than 80 million. The first graduates from these new programs are currently leaving schools and the usual fraction of graduates will enter the next stage of academic education.

### **New Directions in Doctoral Training at Business Schools**

Naturally, doctoral training has had to adapt to graduates' changing qualification profiles that result from these new program structures and revised curricula. An additional challenge arises out of the necessity to prepare candidates for an international academic career, an attractive option for a growing number of young researchers. For these and other reasons, the majority of business schools in German speaking countries recently launched a profound overhaul of their approach to doctoral training to keep it at its conventionally high level.

Traditionally, doctoral training in these countries involved Ph.D. students working on a research project in close contact with their advisors while acting as their research and teaching assistants. Additional classes the students might take to enhance their research skills and knowledge in their chosen scientific area depend on what students and advisors consider necessary or useful. While this traditional route is by no means closed or only chosen by a minority of doctoral candidates, many business schools nowadays offer full or part time Ph.D. programs consisting of compulsory and elective classes that are designed for fulltime Ph.D. students but are also open to research and teaching assistants. Although the structure and scope of these programs varies considerably, they typically consist of an initial phase comprising one or two years of coursework and between 6 and 15 classes. Topics range from methodological training including game theory, microeconomics, econometrics, and statistics to specialized courses in certain research areas. Additionally, students are required to take part in a research seminar or a doctoral colloquium each semester.

Having completed this program, students normally start working on their research projects.

Many of the students enrolled in such programs have no teaching commitments and can thus completely concentrate on their Ph.D., yet several of them are also traditional research and teaching assistants, or become research and teaching assistants, after finishing the program.

### **Scarce Resources at Smaller Business Schools**

A problem that a number of business schools in German speaking countries encounter when launching new doctoral programs stems from their traditionally broad approach to management and economics education at undergraduate and graduate level. There are only a few specialized programs that focus on production and operations management, logistics and so forth at the Bachelor or Master level. Instead, students are given the opportunity to specialize in certain fields in addition to their more general management education, which normally includes introductory and advanced classes in a broad range of areas from accounting, taxation, and management to micro- and macroeconomics. This breadth is often reflected in the mix of senior faculty positions. Compared with international standards the teaching load at German universities is quite high even for senior researchers, so their numbers are low. It is hence common to find just one single senior member of faculty in each of the important research and teaching areas; at least this is the case at the majority of comparatively small business schools. Sufficiently staffed departments for decision & information technologies, production and operations management etc. with a reasonable number of faculty and in turn doctoral students pursuing research in related areas, typically only exist at a handful of larger business schools. These restrictions on the supply and demand side can make it very difficult for smaller business schools to offer a sufficient number of Ph.D. courses, and even some of the larger schools find it a challenge to offer highly specialized courses.

### **ProDok**

ProDok is a program set up in fall 2009 by the German Academic Association for Business Research (Verband der Hochschullehrer für Betriebswirtschaft, or VHB) to improve this unsatisfactory situation. It started with a survey of 86 business schools in Germany, Austria and Switzerland that examined what these schools consider to be the most important aspects of doctoral training. Respondents were asked to assign 100 points on a constant sum scale to the six categories shown in Figure 1. The results provided the Association with the information it needed to develop ProDok.

Under the ProDok program the Association invites distinguished national and international researchers from different research fields to teach, either in English or in German, methodological courses or classes in their specific area. To date subjects have included accounting, finance, management, marketing, production and operations management, supply chain management, and information systems. All ProDok classes are understood to be complementary to those regularly offered by business schools and are open to Ph.D. students from any university. The program thus supports particularly the smaller business schools in round-

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## POMS 23<sup>RD</sup> ANNUAL CONFERENCE, APR 20-23, 2012



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Christopher Tang, UCLA Anderson School:  
chris.tang@anderson.ucla.edu

Program Chair

Kumar Rajaram, UCLA Anderson School:  
kumar.rajaram@anderson.ucla.edu

Chair - Scheduling Committee

Vikram Tiwari, University of Houston: vtiwari@uh.edu

Chair – Doctoral Consortium

Vinayak Deshpande, UNC-Chapel Hill:  
vinayak\_deshpande@kenan-flagler.unc.edu

Chair – Emerging Scholars Program

Jack Kanet, University of Dayton  
kanet@udayton.edu

Chair – Local Arrangements Committee

Laurence Debo: laurens.debo chicagobooth.edu

VP Meetings

Nagesh Murthy, University of Oregon:  
nmurthy@lcbmail.uoregon.edu

Executive Director

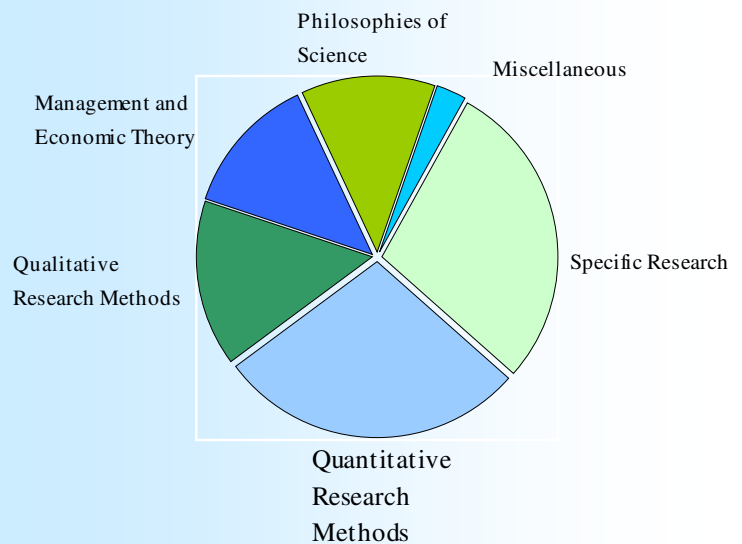
Sushil Gupta, Florida International University  
POMS@fiu.edu

#### Venue

The hotel is magnificently situated amongst worldclass shopping and dining., within walking distance of top attractions including the Navy Pier, American Girl Place, Shedd Aquarium, Millenium Park, Theater and Museum Districts.

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ing out their doctoral training, but also brings together students from different universities who work on related research areas. ProDok classes incorporate group work, active discussions, networking, and profound interaction. Moreover, the program provides Ph.D. students with a valuable opportunity to work with experienced researchers from all over the world, which strengthens the international dimension of their doctoral education. Thanks to the structure and workload of ProDok courses, students can enhance the Ph.D. programs they pursue at their home universities, incorporate successfully completed courses into their own programs and even substitute less suitable local courses.



**Figure 1:** Perceived importance of training areas (avg fraction of points assigned by respondents to each category).

Since ProDok was launched in 2009 13 classes have been held in various locations in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, each extending over three to five full days with a student workload of 180 hours. Young researchers from various German schools were invited to participate. Class size varied from less than 10 to a maximum of 20.

As for gauging the impact of the program, it is of course early days yet. Nevertheless, participants have claimed that the ProDok classes are “an excellent opportunity for scientific discourse at a very high level”. The Association is convinced that this program is a further step towards greater internationalization of German academic career paths and publication activities. Yet it also is an opportunity for experienced international researchers to meet bright and highly dedicated Ph.D. students and to enjoy the lively atmosphere in the ProDok classes. American colleagues who were invited to teach the Ph.D. courses were delighted about participants’ level of motivation and their prior knowledge in the field. In some cases discussions about promising research avenues have resulted in joint activities to collect cross-national data.

Contact us for more information: [carensureth@vhbonline.org](mailto:carensureth@vhbonline.org)