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Scuola di Dottorato ~ Doctoral School  
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## Integrate the traditional doctoral track with specific activities to support the transition to the non-academic labour market – strategies and obstacles

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Preparing doctoral holders for the non-academic labour market has become increasingly important, but are we training PhD candidates enough for this? Are universities and supervisors aware about the importance of career development?

In 2011 the regional government allocated a considerable budget<sup>1</sup> to the universities of Piedmont for a pilot project aiming to "*integrate the traditional doctoral track with specific activities to support the transition to the non-academic labour market*". The regional project indicated the general framework, but it was up to the Doctoral School to find the right way to implement it.

To ensure the complementarity of research and transferable skills training, a mixed steering committee was appointed: 4 representatives from the private sector and 4 from the university, including a professor, staff from the doctoral school and a colleague of the technology transfer office.

Each candidate in the project had to elaborate an individual training plan together with an academic and an industrial supervisor; the content was flexible but it had to be focused on a professional career and it had to include:



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- courses on transferable skills, some were organised by the doctoral school but each student had also a specific budget to attend them all over the world;
- an experience in a firm (min 2 - max 6 months);
- 16 hours coaching run by external experts for skills balance and career guidance.

The intention of the steering committee was to give the participants free hand in designing the individual plan, so it took us a while to understand that PhD candidates were having a hard time to identify good courses consistent with their professionalising target, while their supervisors were afraid that this initiative - especially the internship - could divert them from their research work.

In order to face this issues, together with colleagues of the TT office we compiled a catalogue of "good initiatives" that could suit our students; nevertheless we also realized that it was essential to support both candidates and supervisors in drafting the individual plan, understanding the hiccups and finding solutions together, so staff of the doctoral school met the candidates every three months to monitor their path and enhance their awareness about the importance of combining high levels of hard skills with transferable skills training.

External coaches turned out to be valuable allies. They met four times with each PhD candidate and they also reported regularly to the steering committee about the students' qualification for the labour market and gave advice about how to improve their training.

This pilot project proved also that most companies still do not know what a PhD is and which skills a PhD holder has. It was hard to organize valid internships for our students, able to provide competencies at a doctoral level.

Moreover, not long after the kick off, the representatives of the private sector in the steering committee lost interest in the everyday management of the project, so we agreed



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that the whole steering committee would have met twice a year to monitor the work progress but it was the administrative staff, together with the Director of the School, who ran the training project.

This experience ended in 2013, having involved 93 PhD candidates. It was a milestone for the Doctoral School to change the approach towards the career development support.

First of all we realized that supervisors' commitment towards the goals of such projects is essential, so we had to operate to raise the awareness among both candidates and supervisors that the doctorate shall prepare graduates for a wide range of careers, also outside the university; at the same time we become more conscious that the School had work together with the academic staff in re-designing the doctoral tracks including transferable skills training.

The internship should have been the hub of the matter in this project, but it proved to be too expensive for some candidates to reconcile the research activity with the professionalising experience, particularly when it comes during the last year of the doctorate. Notwithstanding this, we are conscious that we have to engage more and more in collaborative activities, to give the doctoral candidates the opportunity to enhance their training and to prove to the future employers the potentialities of PhD holders and overcome some stereotypes.

Last but not least, the key for the success of the initiative has been the team running it: it included some academics (i.e. the Director of the Doctoral School and some experienced supervisors), some personnel working in the doctorate and some with technology transfer. We spent a great deal of hours planning, whilst always remaining both flexible and ready to change our ways.

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