

## Postgraduate Level and its Impact on Academic Studies and Professional Careers, Social and Job Mobility and Identity. A Study about PhD Graduates and PhD Students at UNCuyo, in the Light of a *sui generis* Paradigm

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### Abstract

The project – a priority at the Secretary of University Policies agenda – dealt with PhD. graduates and PhD. students from different courses of study belonging to Cuyo University (UNCuyo, Argentina) and Cnam (France) (Social and Human Sciences). Specifically, the sample was made up of PhD. students enrolling from 2005 onwards and PhD. graduates who had obtained their degrees from 2005 onwards. The model included not only socio-cultural factors but also psycho-social, organizational and structural factors. The latest factors were related to the influence that the labor market could have on the professional careers as well as on the possibilities for personal development. The methodology used was quantitative (statistical analysis) but mainly qualitative (lexicometric analysis, interviews). The methodology allowed us to acquire knowledge on the central issues concerning each course of study in particular (contextualized scenarios), the relation to the labor market (share representations) and the differences between what was expected and what was achieved, i.e. between the prescriptive world and the real world of the actors. A semi-structured survey was also applied. The approach was macro-micro-meso-macro. The qualitative analysis allowed a comparison among shared representations at different PhD. courses, taking into account different “nodes”, such as: University, PhD. degree, labor market, professional work, etc. The objective was to contrast emerging typologies: differences between the public and the representations according to the institutions students belong to, as well as how the courses of study articulate with the labor market. The structural background presented serious difficulties for University graduates to enter the labor market and achieve professional development (“plafond” effect -saturation of scientific market by those holding PhD. degrees).

**Keywords:** Professional career, PhD. graduates, PhD. students, Quality, Psycho-social factors (Social representations)

### 1. Theoretical Framework

This study is part of a set of continuous works concerning professional performance of different populations (university graduates, drop-outs, students who take longer to complete their studies, teachers, etc.), covering 20 years of existence of different courses of study at Universidad Nacional de Cuyo (UNCuyo).

We have worked on two core issues: identity related to professionalization in the field of formation, and professional insertion.

Professionalization has been source of long debate since the 80s (Lang, 1999). On the one hand, the effects of “overcrowding” in higher education (Bourdoncle & Demailly, 1998) has emphasized the need to consolidate certain competences and sets of knowledge essential for professional practice and its corollary, social recognition of professional groups (Bourdoncle, 1993). The professionalization of individuals (training on an existing field) or of the activities (construction and/or redefinition of new profiles of an existing profession) demands the implementation of new mechanisms. On the other hand, as regards this research, the conditions of professional practice in the working world have changed, and professional insertion as well as duration and promotion represent a complex problem with a variety of variables.

Briefly: the quick changes within the professional world demand innovative transformations in training institutions and consolidation of new competences valued by the market. All that could influence on professional and institutional identity updating.

There are many institutional efforts which have not always been accepted. In the specific field of training, the new professionals encounter various difficulties, in addition to lack of recognition. Some authors even speak of de-professionalization of those graduates on this field, and they are left behind into a process of “proletarianization” (Ozga & Lawn, 1981). There exist other problems: “semi-professional” status in a broad sense (Etzioni, 1969), the devaluation of

the graduate's image in the field of education (training) along with an ever growing weakening (burnout) (Tardiff & Lessard 1999); Maroy 2006; Aparicio, 2006a, 2006 b, 2007 a, 2007 b, 2009 a, 2009 b, 2009 c, 2013).

In general, considering the existing literature, it can be said that there is a certain tension between the area of work and the area of training, as well as between the expectations at the moment of vocational choice and the actual experience in the professional environment; also, between the "ideal" situation expected by the PhD students and the real one of the PhD graduates; between the representation of the doctors and their world experience. Is there an identity crisis as regards the deep changes in the labor market and as regards expectations? (Goffman, 1963). Is there certain overprescription in the institutions to respond to the changes in the labor market along with underprescription in the means used to such response, as it is usually said? Within this framework, the links between the personal training experience and the professional life become a source of concern in the field of training and, especially, in the studies related to humanities and social sciences.

Besides, this issue involving institutional and even disciplinary identities, as well as the identity reconstruction processes, is accompanied, as it has just been said, by actual insertion conditions, duration and professional mobility; all of them will have an impact on professional performances (Dubar 1991, 2000 a, b and c).

This research develops along two lines: actual insertion (here, effect/variable-dependent) and the conditions (core variables, sociocultural, psychosocial and institutional) associated to professional performance, which favor or prevent achievement within labor organizations (here, independent/intermediate variables): Expectations, Internality, Engagement, Social Representations on the value of education in society and related factors, such as power relationships, stereotypes, prioritized values in each micro-system, frustrations, possibilities of professional success, etc.

These two lines represent the two poles in our theoretical model, which include, at least, the four variable types already mentioned. These variables, according to our sui generis systemic approach, interact within a "self-sustained" movement (feedback) (Aparicio, 2005, 2012, 2013). Analysis shows, on the one hand, the gap between the training provided by educational institutions and that demanded by the market (disarticulation between the education and productive systems). On the other hand, the differentiated conditions of the individuals received by each institution (self- and institutional selection processes): variables which have an influence on the professional achievement levels, as far as the results of our studies are concerned. These studies not only add inputs and outputs but also, and fundamentally, human processes that appear on the base of the figures of the systems, accounting not only for the factors that have a significant impact on achievement, but also for the "underlying" reasons that make the figures in the national and, system meaningful and, more broadly, in the international framework. It is actually an integrating and holistic approach that helps analyze the mechanisms and/or factors anticipating achievement at the psycho individual level, and at the same time going through the meso-institutional/organizational level (university, labor market). This achievement, in this study, reminds us of the experience in the labor market of doctors in the framework of degree devaluation (Boudon, 1973; Lévy-Garboua, 1976, 1977; Dupray, 2005; Dupray & Moullet, 2004; Calmand & Haller, 2008; Giret, 2003; Giret, Moullet, & Thomas, 2003; Mansuy, 2004; Olivier et al., 2008).

The original approach joins explanation and comprehension; quantitative and qualitative methodology aiming at explaining and reveal conditions of achievement. As strategies, the macro-meso-micro-macro dimensions are gathered: processes and results; transversal and quasi-longitudinal (personal experiences or life, ...); diachronically and synchronically (Aparicio, 2005, 2007a and b, 2012).

### 1.1 Objectives

1. Being aware of the factors affecting professional achievement of doctors (French and Argentine) at the quantitative and qualitative levels;
2. Being aware and comparing (descriptive level) the sociological, psychosocial and institutional issues, taking into account that labor insertion is nowadays an international problem (general discomfort within training institutions at the moment of entering the labor market, and, later, labor organizations);
3. Being aware of the representations of both groups (French and Argentine) as regards valuing a job, a degree, a doctoral education, future possibilities, etc.; representations that might condition achievement possibilities;
4. Comprehending the factors inherent to identity as the outcome of one's personal history and an interactive context;
5. Providing those in charge of the educational sector (French and Argentine) with material for reflection in order to implement programs aiming at improving the quality of continuous training and, therefore, labor insertion.

## 1.2 Core questions of this research

How and where are the doctors in education positioned within the market? Which professional structures are they in? Which are the aspects defining their actual insertion in terms of achievement (objective, subjective, hierarchical position)? What do they expect as regards their PhD training? Do they regard PhD training as a lever of progress? Which are the prioritized values? Do they search for stability, reality or the benefits related to a PhD degree? How do they envision their future? How do they see their role? Which are, from their own perspective, the factors currently prioritized by the market? Is there a lack of correspondence between their training and the market demands? Which prevails in the national groups, hope or pessimism? Finally, do these doctors (French and Argentine) share specific "identities" and "interests"? What are their differences and similarities?

## 2. Methodology

The quantitative-qualitative method was applied. This study refers only to the qualitative method.

### 2.1 Participants

Consisting of doctors in education at Universidad Nacional de Cuyo (2005-2009) (UNCuyo), and doctors under training in Adult Education at Cnam (National Conservatory of Arts and Crafts) (France). Two research laboratories took part in this work. It is expected to find different profiles according to the work/professional contexts in which they are situated.

### 2.2 Materials

Quantitative and qualitative techniques were applied. We also used the "hierarchical evocation" and the lexicometric analysis techniques. The latter allowed to show which representations are part of the "nucleus" of a doctoral training in each of the national groups, and which are their most evident differences and the ways they experience their professional practice according to their expectations.

## 3. Results

They were presented in two sections: quantitative (descriptive plan, correlational and explanatory) and qualitative. As we could observe, no obvious differences are noticed between the French and Argentine groups. Doctoral training is valued by both groups; that is, although the general idea is that PhD degrees are devaluated, subjectively, doctors are quite satisfied. Along this line, they expect improvements in their future work life, thus a positive view prevails. On the contrary, other graduates on education without a PhD degree do not show the same prospect. Briefly: doctoral education is still considered an "add-on". The strongest claim against labor market lies on the lack of recognition, especially among the French doctors. Comparatively, the Argentine group has higher expectations as regards the degree. The "plafond" effect, evident in various developed countries, also appears in our research.

At the theoretical level, this research allowed to: a) show the differences and similarities shared by both groups of doctors recently inserted in the professional field: b) supervise the heuristic implications of some explanatory and comprehensive methods; c) go deeper into the relationship between higher education and occupational market from an interdisciplinary perspective, as well as into the transformations in the professional world, the new demands and their impact at the identity level. On fact, the study showed more accomplished "identities", other identities were blocked, and others were in search of some transformation.

At the applied level: those in charge of the field education and work fields rely on empirical elements which allow for the introduction of improvements where the system presents the broadest gaps.

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