

Report on the situation of CSC PhDs in UU

--- “Researching” for a better research life!

The number of Chinese bursary PhDs has grown tremendously in the past five years. In 2010, there were only 17 CSC (China Scholarship Council) funded PhDs in Utrecht University. Now the number has exceeded one hundred. As bursary PhDs whose status are different from employed PhDs, we have experienced some awkward situations related to the identity of bursary PhDs, specifically about accommodation, working hours, reimbursement, etc. As international PhDs who are new to this environment, we are also facing some communication problems such as the language barrier in the university information sharing system. This report is based on a survey distributed among CSC funded PhDs in Utrecht University, and our observations and experience as CSC PhDs ourselves. With this report, we are appealing for the serious consideration on the identity of Chinese bursary PhDs from the university side, and a better communication environment for internationals.

1. Identity related issues

According to a recent survey distributed among CSC funded PhDs in Utrecht University by China-Utrecht Scholar Association (CUSA). It is surprising that more than 80% of CSC PhDs do not know their identities here. As an old Chinese adage mentioned: “you cannot have a firm stand without a decent name, and far-reaching goal cannot be achieved without a firm stand.” Hereby, we are appealing for a proper identity and firm stand of CSC PhDs for the sake of their better involvement into the university and academic accomplishments in the present and future.

As mentioned in the UU website: “you are considered a guest, when you are a PhD candidate whose stay is financed by a 3rd party”. But which category in terms of rights and benefits should guests belong to? Student or employee, or neither of them? The vagueness of identity for external funded PhD candidates in UU has affected the research as well as the living of CSC PhDs. Such vagueness leaves an undesirable grey area, in which CSC PhDs find themselves puzzled and unprotected. A brief overview of CSC PhDs’ situation in our university is summarized in this report from four aspects: accommodation, working hours, extra auxiliary work and reimbursement. Comparisons are made regarding those four aspects with the regular students in UU and employed PhDs.

1.1 Accommodation

According to the survey, 81.8% CSC PhDs spend more than €400 on their accommodation per month (1/3 of their scholarship 1200 euro), and most of them live in a single room with shared facilities. 39.4% of them have to pay even more than €500 per month, which is a great burden given their limited living allowances.

One of the important sources of accommodations is the campus housing system - SSH (Stichting Studenten Huisvesting). Described by the housing regulation of Utrecht University in agreement with SSH, all PhD candidates (including CSC PhDs) are considered as staff, not as students. Therefore, they are not allowed to choose the accommodations available for regular students in the SSH system. Additionally, without a student identity demonstrated by a DUO account or student card, most CSC PhDs cannot apply for the regular accommodations offered by SSH for students between age 16-27, although their annual income is less than €34,911 (the maximal income threshold required by SSH for this type of accommodation).

Their experience with local social housing is not pleasant either. Some of them got rejected when they are applying for social housing offered by agencies due to the lack of an official income statement with tax record. For those who are lucky enough to cross this fence, the long waiting time to finally get the accommodation is unaffordable (at least 6 months for comparatively expensive places, and 1-3 years in general cases even for places in remote area outside Utrecht).

CSC PhDs in Utrecht have to suffer from the high mediation fee, exhausting searching procedure and unguaranteed living period, in order to find a place to live, which will take at least 1/3 of their total stipends anyway.

1.2 Working hours

“All researchers engaged in a research career should be recognized as professionals and be treated accordingly” – quoted from the *European Charter for Researchers*. As an entailment of the general spirit, they are entitled to enjoy the working conditions offered for their research work. As one part of the working conditions, the policy on working hours is always crucial.

69.7% of the CSC PhDs participating in the CUSA survey claim the existing ignorance of the exact agreement on working hours. Unlike the employed AiO PhDs,

whose working hours are well illustrated in the contract, CSC PhDs find themselves completely blinded on this issue. None of them get year-end bonuses for extra working hours. Many problems entail the unclear definition of working hours for CSC PhDs. For instance, how can holiday time be guaranteed without an ascertainable definition of working hours? Furthermore, how can extra working hours be defined without even knowing “extra to what”?

1.3 Extra auxiliary work

Teaching or assisting in class, as well as supervising master/bachelor experimental studies, are considered essential means for the structuring and dissemination of knowledge. The experience of teaching is very valuable for researchers’ career paths as all can imagine. Not considered as the regular PhD employment contract, such extra auxiliary work is not part of the CSC-UU contract. However, we still believe that we should also enjoy the equal opportunities to participate in such work and get reasonable rewards.

The current situation is: some CSC PhDs are blocked from the teaching opportunities because the employers are not 100% sure how to make an adequate payment to the bursary PhDs. Even their supervisors are willing to offer the opportunity of teaching to them, they cannot take the work in a regular procedure. Some CSC PhDs are doing the extra auxiliary work without being paid.

According to the latest Dutch VISA policy for “wetenschappelijk onderzoeker” (scientific researcher), CSC PhDs who hold this type of ID are prohibited to obtain paid jobs in Netherlands, not even for research related jobs. This policy makes it difficult for CSC PhDs to get fair rewards for the extra work they have done outside the range of their PhD projects. It has brought the core issues on table: compatible rewards to the valuable contribution of time and efforts, and open opportunities to get professional trainings (e.g. teaching) for all PhDs.

1.4 Reimbursement

Last but not least, the reimbursement system is also important to facilitate the research performance of PhD candidates. A great improvement in reimbursing CSC PhDs has been observed in the recent two years. According to our survey, 63.6% of CSC PhDs have independent reimbursement account (WBS number), and 66.7% of them are reimbursed for their VISA application fees. We are thankful to the positive changes at

the university level, but still not all CSC PhDs are well treated, especially in some faculties which do not have much experience in hosting CSC PhDs. Among the participants of the survey, 36.4% of them are not provided with an independent WBS number or not even aware of the reimbursement system. 21.2% of the PhDs in the survey attribute the main reason of less participation in academic conferences to the lack of travel funding.

Employed PhDs are reimbursed from the project funding, and students (research master for example) are funded by their graduate schools. What would be the standard for CSC PhDs? Reimbursement of research and travel expenses is essentially related to the right of researchers and the opportunities for them in academia. Therefore, we believe every PhD researcher should have access to the reimbursement system and be informed with a definite standard.

In summary, the identity of CSC PhDs in our university is so confusing! As part of the university, we are equally willing to take our responsibility and work load as other PhD candidates, but we are not entitled with a right name to do so, unfortunately. Should we belong to staff, or students, or something else with a clear definition and category? If we are staff, then the benefits of staff should also apply to us. If we are better considered as students, we expect to share the legitimate rights of being students. If neither of these two are applicable to us, we appeal for a clear and unambiguous identity, along with manifest corresponding regulations and welfare from the university side.

We work here in Utrecht with love and attachment to the university, but WHO ARE WE? This question has been hovering around this group since the first CSC-UU student arrived here six years ago, and now the answer is still unspecified. Our wish is simple and explicit – a clear identification, which can bring us the feeling of belonging and bounding to our HOME university – Utrecht University.

2. Communication issues and information sharing

As international PhDs studying in Utrecht University, we are plagued by not only the typical problems related to the identity of bursary PhDs aforementioned but also some general issues. Two problems stand out: communication problems encountered by international PhDs in the new environment, and inefficient information sharing due to language barriers. Given the survey performed among specific group of people, we

have to admit that this is not a full picture of all the international PhDs in UU. However, the problems faced by Chinese PhDs may also to a certain extent reflect the situations of internationals.

2.1 Communication issues

The problem of communication haunts international PhDs since they are enrolled in the university from the very beginning. Registration system, for instance, relates not only to the admission but also to the future development of PhDs. However, this registration system is not well demonstrated. According to the survey, around 49% Chinese Bursary PhDs are not fully clear about the course registration system, relevant websites of graduate schools, or teaching obligations, etc. It is believed a standardized and systematic handbook from the university level for international PhDs will be helpful besides the fragment information offered by the secretariats. Such handbooks also need to contain information regarding the interest of specific types of PhDs, not merely for local staff.

The lack of communication is reflected in many other aspects. Surprisingly, 79% of bursary Chinese PhDs, in this survey, are not aware of the existence and the function of PhD advisors which play a fundamental role of handling possible issues between PhDs and supervisors. 100% bursary PhDs have no knowledge of the legal assistance within University available for them; 94% have not been informed about the existence of social legal assistance from the government. A handbook including those practical issues will not only benefit the international PhDs, but also reduce the work load of the secretariats.

2.2 Information sharing

Another obvious issue is the language use in information sharing online and daily contacts. For instance, most of the information sharing in Intranet is still Dutch. Besides, not all newsletters and group emails are available in English in some faculties. Our survey has shown that half of Chinese PhDs think that they cannot get sufficient English information from their working institutes. Language use in information sharing is not only important for performing academic work but also crucial for the better involvement of internationals into the institutes. As a top prestigious university in the world, Utrecht University is expected to offer a more friendly and understandable inter-communication online system accessible to its own international members, as well as a better information sharing platform to the whole

world.

3. Conclusion

Based on the survey results and observations on the situation of Chinese PhDs, we propose two first-step solutions:

- a. We appeal for a clear definition on the identity of bursary Chinese PhDs. What is more, a uniform regulation on the bursary Chinese PhDs from the university level, with minor variations across faculties is suggested.
- b. There is still some room for the university to improve on the communication and distribution of practical information. Before the new Chinese Bursary PhDs officially start their work in the university, an orientation session on the relative information would be valuable.

The well being of Chinese bursary PhDs, as an important component of the international community of the university, needs to be taken good care of. By approaching to these issues, the university can also step forward to a better involvement of internationals and a fruitful achievement in internationalization.

Please help us, help the one hundred and fifty CSC-UU PhDs' voice to be heard! Please support us, support your colleagues to find their identity and rights here! Not just for us, not just for external funded PhD candidates, but also for every one of you, who are working in the same environment (on the same campus, in the same air), and for a fair treatment to ALL of us!

CUSA

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