

PhD Dissertations in History, 2010-2018: A Historiographic Survey

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Abstract

This contribution serves as an introduction and framework for the specific analyzes included in this dossier on the doctoral theses concluded in Portugal, from 2010 to 2018, in the various historiographic subdomains. In addition to explaining the methodological approach and the criteria used in this historiographic survey, it also seeks to elucidate the institutional conditions that made possible the dynamism of doctoral training in History in the last 10 years. Despite this positive evolution, attention is drawn to a declining trend in the number of theses carried out in the final 2 years of the period under analysis.

Keywords

PhD theses; Graduate education; History; Historiography

Resumo

Esta contribuição serve de introdução e enquadramento das análises específicas que se incluem neste dossier sobre as teses de doutoramento realizadas em Portugal, no período de 2010 a 2018, nos diversos subdomínios historiográficos. Para além de explicitar a metodologia de abordagem e os critérios utilizados neste *survey* historiográfico, procura também elucidar sobre as condições institucionais que tornaram possível o dinamismo da formação de doutoramento em História nos últimos 10 anos. Apesar de tal evolução positiva, chama-se a atenção para uma tendência de declínio do número de teses realizadas nos 2 anos finais do período em análise.

Palavras-chave

Teses de doutoramento; Formação pós-graduada; História; Historiografia

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Since its foundation, *e-jph* has included among its editorial aims the goal of contributing to the knowledge and critical assessment of the academic production of Portuguese university institutions. In this sense, it is worth mentioning the surveys published in the early years of *e-jph* (2003-2006) on master's degrees and PhD dissertations in various historiographic domains (medieval, modern, the period of the overseas expansion and the discoveries, contemporary), as well as the critical evaluation of the work developed by research units in History and by academic and scientific associations operating in this area. The articles included in this special dossier are linked to this concern with a deeper and more critical appraisal of the developments that this field of knowledge has enjoyed in the last ten years, specifically with regard to the successful completion of PhD dissertations. In acknowledging the importance of the innovative impact of such dissertations on the advancement of historical knowledge, we seek to enhance understanding of the most relevant contributions produced by Portuguese universities in recent years.

We began by collecting the lists of doctoral theses compiled by the statistical services of the Ministry of Higher Education—RENATES. National Register of Theses and Dissertations (<https://renates2.dgeec.mec.pt/>). The result of our efforts is the inventory of PhD dissertations in History completed from 2010 to 2018, which reproduces the data contained in this official database and to which relevant missing information has been added relating to the English translation of titles, abstracts, and keywords. In the cases where such information did not exist, the history of this item was flagged as being “not available” or as containing “no information about the supervisor.”

The standardized information for each doctoral dissertation includes the following fields:

author, title, doctoral program, university(ies), year, abstract, supervisor(s), year of completion, abstract, keywords, and, where available, a link to the university repository from which theses can be accessed in full.

The 825 theses in total recorded for this period (2010-2018) were distributed across thematic areas that follow the conventional divisions of History into large chronological periods, and to which were also added the areas of Archaeology, Heritage Studies, and Art History, given the specificity and autonomy of these areas of historical knowledge, both at the level of departmental organization and at the level of the doctoral programs offered to potential students. In making this distribution, priority was given to the designation of the doctoral program under the scope of which the theses were written. When this indication did not

exist, we opted to classify the theses according to what appeared to be the most appropriate or nearest category for the corresponding contents. Those situations in which there was an initial doubt, especially in the case of theses whose contents spanned various chronological periods, were resolved on a case-by-case basis, working together with the authors whom we had invited to comment on the results obtained in each major thematic or chronological area. The eight subareas considered are: Archaeology; Ancient History; Medieval History; Early Modern History; Modern History (19th); Contemporary History (20th); Heritage Studies; Art History. The lists of theses, distributed according to these eight subareas, are presented in the files attached to the comments of each author that we invited to collaborate on this dossier³.

The global distribution of the 825 PhD theses according to their thematic areas and the universities where they were written is presented in the following table.

University	Archaeology	Ancient History	Medieval History	Early Modern History	Modern History (19 th)	Contemporary History (20 th)	Heritage Studies	Art History	Total
ISCTE-IUL	—	—	—	2	2	27	1	—	32
U. Aberta	—	—	1	2	—	2	2	1	8
U. Açores	—	—	—	—	3	2	—	—	5
U. Algarve	11	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	12
U. Autónoma	1	—	—	—	1	1	—	1	4
U. Católica Portuguesa	—	—	1	4	4	5	18	10	42
U. Coimbra	15	7	3	8	16	35	28	11	123
U. Évora	7	—	5	6	7	7	12	5	49
U. Lisboa	14	6	8	29	29	33	20	24	163
U. Lusíada	—	—	—	4	—	—	1	5	10
U. Lusófona	—	—	—	—	—	—	35	—	35
U. Madeira	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1	2
U. Minho	4	—	—	16	2	3	2	—	27
U. Nova Lisboa	9	4	9	29	16	43	15	46	171

³ The English translation of titles and abstracts of the PhD theses corresponds to the original texts provided by the authors of dissertations.

U. Porto	11	—	9	12	11	27	13	29	112
U. Portucalense	1	—	—	—	4	1	1	—	7
U. Trás-os-Montes Alto Douro	18	—	—	—	1	—	4	—	23
Total	91	17	36	113	96	186	152	134	825

Table 1: PhD dissertations completed in Portuguese universities, 2010-2018

Source: RENATES. National Register of Theses and Dissertations (<https://renates2.dgeec.mec.pt/>)

The breakdown of the global data reveals that the five subareas traditionally classified as History were responsible for 448 completed theses. This number amounts to little more than half of the total, although the clear preference for historical periods closer to the present time should be emphasized, especially the twentieth century. The other three subareas—Art History, Archaeology, and Heritage Studies—accounted for 377 theses. The vitality of Heritage Studies is particularly notable, especially since it is the most recently institutionalized of all the disciplinary fields. One possible explanation for this result may lie in the more professional orientation provided by these three areas of postgraduate training. It is very likely that factors such as employability and the possibility of career advancement outside the academic world have contributed to the growing interest of doctoral students in this sub-domain.

It should be noted that the figures quoted in the table are undoubtedly lower than the actual number of theses that can be classified under the broad field of History. Indeed, those theses that were completed in other university departments or under the scope of doctoral programs that are related with sociology, economics, and political science (to mention the most obvious cases) and which have interdisciplinary links with social history, economic history, or political history are not covered here. Nor indeed are the theses relating to the history of science and the history of literature that were also written in different institutional contexts.

It is equally important to bear in mind that this survey does not include theses completed at foreign university institutions on topics relating to the History of Portugal and its colonial dominions, and which are clearly of great relevance in the case of theses completed at Brazilian universities. In any case, it can be said that the aforementioned RENATES database indicates that there were 53 theses completed at foreign universities and registered in Portugal. These cases relate to very different situations, as they include not only

Portuguese students who obtained a doctorate outside Portugal, but also foreigners who, at some point in their studies and for whatever reason, needed to have their doctorate registered in Portuguese institutions. Although these data are not sufficient to reliably assess the extent of the internationalization of the new historiography, they nonetheless point to some interesting trends. As far as the main fields of study are concerned, theses dealing with the most recent contemporary history are in the forefront, followed by modern history and archaeology. As to the countries where the degree was obtained, Spain is in the leading position followed by the United Kingdom.

The overall total of 825 PhD dissertations highlights the great dynamism of this disciplinary field in Portugal in the last ten years. The explanation for such vitality is, however, quite a complex one. Important factors include the increase in the number of doctoral programs created by Portuguese universities and the social perception of the advantages of investing in postgraduate education, which has been stimulated by public incentives since the mid-1990s. The institutional source of financial support is the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT, *Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia*, <https://www.fct.pt/index.phtml.en>), a state agency that is dependent on the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, and such funding is provided through annual competitive calls for the award of doctoral scholarships in any academic field of study. The scholarships have a maximum duration of four years, a period that has proved to be insufficient for most PhD students in History to complete their theses.

In order to test the impact of public support on the evolution of the number of theses defended in front of an examination jury, the data available on the FCT website about the PhD scholarships awarded between 1994 and 2015 were collected (<https://www.fct.pt/estatisticas/bolsas/>) and compared with the years when these same degrees were completed. However, it is important to note that the figures relating to History and Archaeology scholarships have been incorporated, without any form of disaggregation, into the broad area of Humanities, which also includes other academic fields of study (such as Literary Studies, Linguistics, Philosophy, Ethics, and Religion). These same figures do not include scholarships awarded in Art History, whose funding is allocated to the area of the Arts. Since we have no evidence to suggest that the shares of the various domains within the Humanities have changed significantly, it seems reasonable to use these values as a trend indicator.

Data available in the area of the Humanities for the period 1994-2015 show that the number of scholarships awarded has risen significantly since 2004, although the peak was

reached between 2007 and 2009, with around 30% more scholarships being awarded in 2007 compared to 2006. In 2010, a downward trend began, reaching values in 2015 that were close to those recorded at the beginning of the 21st century. Data from the last two calls (2017 and 2018) show that this decrease in the study of the Humanities has continued, with 2018 witnessing a further fall of around 30% compared to 2017. This means a decrease in scholarships granted from 94 to 66 in the broader area of the Humanities, and a reduction in the specific fields of History & Archaeology and Art History from 54 to 40 scholarships. In other words, there has been a decline that places the public funding of the Humanities at levels similar to those of 1997.

The chronology of the completion of PhD dissertations in History suggests a positive correlation with the data relating to public investment in doctoral scholarships. In fact, if five to six years are added to the date when the scholarships were awarded, the 2007-2009 peaks in investment are matched by the upward trend in the completion of theses between 2012 and 2016. Conversely, the reduction in the number of scholarships awarded after these years may explain the downward trend in PhD theses completed after 2017.

2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	Total
78	72	96	110	105	103	104	88	70	825

Table 2: PhD dissertations in History completed in 2010-2018

These data allow us to conclude that there is a decisive impact of public funding on PhDs obtained in the Humanities, while suggesting a rather pessimistic view about the future of this area of knowledge, which includes the broad field of History. It is well known that it is difficult to raise alternative private sector funding for research and development in these areas of knowledge. Therefore, unless this trend is reversed, the results presented in this survey may correspond to a golden, though exceptional, period in the production of PhD dissertations in History. This is all the more worrying because it is clear that the moderate tendency towards a growth in public investment in doctoral scholarships in recent years has not been matched by a similar growth in the area of Humanities, let alone in the various fields of History.

We invited experts from each of the eight subareas considered here to briefly comment on the observable developments in the previously prepared lists of PhD dissertations. We chose professors from different Portuguese universities, with significant experience of supervising PhD dissertations and proven research careers. The list of topics

suggested for analysis was broad and not, in any way, a closed one: the evolution in the number of theses, the vitality of each of the subareas, the most frequently found chronological focus, the relevance of the preferred thematic areas, and their relationship with the current research agenda in Portuguese and international historiography. We thank everyone for their willingness to contribute and for the quality and perceptiveness of the comments that they presented.

Finally, we would like to thank Elsa Vila, a young student and researcher in this broad area of History, who collected and systematized all the information available in the files attached to the comments below.

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