



EUA-CDE ANNUAL MEETING



Plenary session

TIME TO DEGREE: LESSONS FROM A STUDY ON DOCTORAL DROPOUT



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Observatory of Research and Scientific Careers

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OBSERVATORY OF RESEARCH AND SCIENTIFIC CAREERS

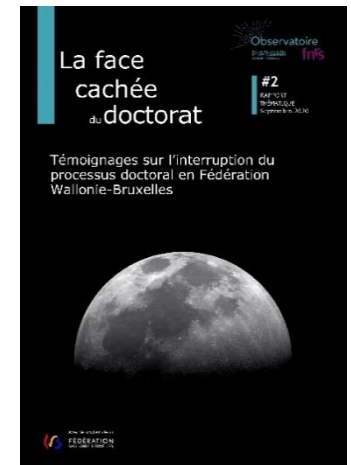
- Created in 2018, funded by the Federation Wallonia-Brussels
- Track and analyse the careers of researchers from the six French-speaking universities in Belgium, and develop knowledge on the doctoral and postdoctoral process



STUDY ON DOCTORAL DROPOUT

Data & Methods

- Qualitative study
- Semi-structural interviews with 12 former PhD candidates and 18 supervisors (December 2018 – March 2019)
- Diversity in fields of research
- All PhD candidates interviewed were funded
 - Time of interruption: 2 to 5 years after starting the programme



TIME TO DEGREE: LESSONS FROM A STUDY ON DOCTORAL DROPOUT

Tacit mutual expectations about “autonomy” and “support”

- PhD candidate works “autonomously” with supervisor to “support”
 - When should we consider that it is legitimate for PhD candidates to ask for help?
 - To what extent might supervision be perceived as excessively controlling, or as insufficiently engaged?

“My role is basically to let the students be autonomous. As soon as they ask for help, I try to make myself available to meet them within a week or two. I do not seek them out myself, since this is all part of them learning to be autonomous. Except of course if I haven’t heard from them at all for a while, I will then get in touch to see how they are getting on, but I do not “police” them.” (Supervisor)

“I thought there would be much more support. It’s true that research is also about being autonomous, but I hadn’t realised to what extent back then.” (PhD candidate)

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Doctoral degree: a demanding and uncertain process

- Conflict between the time available to do the research and the uncertainty of the scientific process, and pressure to finish on time and doing something correct

*“With research, you create a **hypothetical working plan but it remains uncertain by the very nature of research**. It wouldn’t make sense to work in any other way. This is becoming harder and harder for students to accept, as though we should be selling them something that is guaranteed to work. **The trend is towards immediacy and guaranteed success.**” (Supervisor)*

*“**It was so vague...**the research didn’t really make sense, it wasn’t clear to me where I was going with it. **[My supervisor] didn’t have any expertise in my subject** and was at the same level as me most of the time, so I carried on working without knowing if it was any good, and without having much faith in what I was doing. He sometimes said I understood it better than he did.” (PhD candidate)*

The end of doctoral funding

- Lack of time to complete
- How to combine completion with private life?
 - Family responsibilities, rent to pay...

*“At the end of my fellowship, I launched a final study to finish and then defend my thesis, [I was] unemployed. I was a utopian: “I do a study, I write and it will go fast”. I saw myself writing my thesis in 3 months (laughs). **Then very quickly, reality hits... Financially, it was not manageable.** The idea was to finish the manipulations and then find a job and write my thesis at the same time but it was not possible. A month or two later, I cried my eyes out and gave up.” (PhD candidate)*

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Time to degree depends on the supervisors

- Different types of considering time among supervisors

“I am very attached to the principle of a thesis in 4 years. [...] I gradually give them a structure knowing that it takes time to get their bearings. I try to make them aware from the outset because after four years, there is no more funding and I am against the principle of making a thesis on unemployment. All work deserves pay.” (Supervisor)

“Theses are rarely finished in 4 years, the average is rather 4.5 years. When the funding ends, we look for a supplement but sometimes the doctoral candidate spends a few months on unemployment to finish. I always put a little pressure to meet the deadlines, that’s plan A. But if it’s really not feasible, we move on to plan B.” (Supervisor)

“I prefer that we take more time to make a good thesis than to finish it in time at any cost [...]. We constantly try to choose a subject and adapt it according to the time available, but there are incompressible things. 3.5 years, 4 years to finish a thesis, that’s borderline indecency.” (Supervisor)

DISCUSSION

Is there enough time for the doctorate?

- The doctorate is an evolving process that is uncertain
 - But framed within a defined length of time that has to be considered as a part of the process

- To increase the chances to complete (on time)
 - Need for more dialogue between PhD candidate and supervisor
 - Reduce ambiguities, tacit expectations
 - Find a good balance for both
 - Better deal with uncertainty
 - Activate “external” resources (e.g. thesis committee) or the support mechanisms that exists within universities

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION

Contact information, reports and social medias



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