

# Challenges in Postgraduate Studies: Assessments by Doctoral Students in a Swedish University

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## Abstract

The success of research students largely depends on their relationship with supervisors. If the students encounter lot of problems it may impinge on their academic potentials. This study examines the challenges facing doctoral students and how they have coped over time. How supervisor-student relationship could be improved is discussed. The data originated from personal interviews that involved doctoral students at one of the universities in southern Sweden and were analysed using qualitative content analysis. The challenges faced by international doctoral students include less access to sources of information and cultural shock. It was inadequate guidance and mentoring for the indigenous students. For the female respondents it was challenges associated with confidence in presenting research works to the scientific community and confidence regarding having what it takes to complete doctoral studies. It was inadequate guidance for the male. The coping strategies used by the respondents include seeking for help from colleagues and asking for more support from supervisors as well as learning the Swedish language. The findings will contribute to the knowledge regarding how to improve supervisor-student relationship to help increase successes in doctoral education.

**Keywords:** supervision, higher education, conflict management, content analysis

## 1. Introduction

The relationship between supervisor and student plays an important role in successful completion of doctoral studies (Ives and Rowley, 2005). In the past supervisor-student relationship has been relatively formal and supervisors have more control of the doctoral degree process (Hemer, 2012). Presently, it is more of a mentor and collaborative type of relationship (Manathunga, 2007; Wisker et al., 2007). Supervision may focus on the tasks that need to be undertaken by the doctoral student, i.e. problem-oriented; or directed to the interpersonal processes in the relationship between supervisor and the student, i.e. process-oriented (Emilsson and Johnsson, 2007; Goode, 2010). The supervision that emphasizes more on the person and guidance are often perceived as been more supportive to the student (Murphy, 2009) but there is no one supervisory style that is effective for all students (Wright et al., 2007). Although the production of a thesis is a key component of supervisory practice the professional development of the student is also important (Grant, 2003). In order to be successful in doctoral studies students are often advised to prioritize intellectual over personal needs and should not choose a friend as a supervisor (Manderson, 1996). Although the power dynamic between supervisor and student might make friendship difficult (Ives and Rowley, 2005) friendship in the early stages of doctoral studies might cause difficulties in supervision after several years some supervisors may not escape it (Lee, 2008).

Several published studies have identified some barriers in postgraduate education. For example, Grant and Graham (1999) found that inaccessibility, provision of poor feedback, not keeping to appointments and sexual harassment lead to unsatisfactory supervision. Wadesango and Machingambi (2011) studied postgraduate students' experiences with research supervisors in South Africa and found that only few students were satisfied with their supervisors and the challenges they face include lack of supervisory support and supervisor's other work load as well as poor feedback in relation to their research work. However, Heath (2002) found that most PhD students at the University of Queensland, Australia expressed satisfaction with the expertise of their supervisors. Moyer *et al.* (1999) studied professional and personal concerns and suggestions from white and non-white women doctoral students in the USA and found that the most frequent concerns were finding employment, financial stability and developing professional experience. Wisker and Robinson (2012) studied the reasons behind supervisor loss and absence and students' experiences in the UK and concluded that there is a

need to have a balance between formality and informality in supervision and the development of personal and institutional trust. Menges and Exum (1983) studied the barriers to progress of women and minority faculty in the USA and found that overt discrimination might have blocked their progress and some women and minority groups may not be very confident in their ability to handle the demands of graduate work. In their (Berg and Ferber, 1983) study of measures of success among men and women doctoral students at the University of Illinois, USA they found that the men were more likely to achieve a doctoral-level degree in a given amount of time than women. For the minority groups, barriers include racism, informal denial of access to sources of support, information and other resources (Thomas and Alderfer, 1989). Women may experience unfriendly environment (Amato, 1992).

In Sweden doctoral studies system is similar to the British and Continental system in which students work under supervisor(s) and are assessed on their thesis with an oral defence (Delamont et al., 1997; Phillips and Pugh, 1987, Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, 2012a) the main difference is that doctoral studies in Sweden include course work (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, 2012b). This implies that the success of the system depends more on the supervisor because she or he need to provide the expertise, time and support to foster in the student the skills and attitudes of research and ensure the production of a thesis of acceptable standard (Heath, 2002). People who preside and influence institutions of higher education are often not very diverse as doctoral students and are more likely to have inadequate information of how structures within academia may affect different students (Moyer *et al.*, 1999; Gainen and Boice, 1993). This implies that doctoral studies strategy that does not include the opinion of doctoral students might not be very successful because the strategy often impacts on their professional development. As more and more people from different countries, continents, cultural and traditional backgrounds gain admission for doctoral studies in Swedish universities it is important for potential supervisors to have more knowledge regarding some challenges that indigenous and international students may face during their studies. This should provide supervisors the opportunities to have more reflections about their supervisory tasks and how to improve the aspects that they are lagging behind. This could help improve supervisor-student relationship as well as successful completion of doctoral studies. The idea for this study emerged during the “course on postgraduate supervision” and “course on project work in postgraduate education” held in one of the universities in Sweden. As a young researcher looking forward to serving as a supervisor for doctoral students in the nearest future the author became keenly interested in understanding the challenges associated with supervision. The study explores challenges facing doctoral students and what could be done to improve their present situation. The study involves doctoral students at a department in a university in southern Sweden. It is hoped that the findings from the study will provide supervisors more knowledge regarding how to improve their supervisory task.

## 2. Material and Methods

The university authorities in Sweden often help to create conducive environment for promoting supervision that encourages sustainable supervisor-student relationship as well as encourage doctoral students to write theses of high quality and complete their studies on time. To achieve these each departmental heads at the university appoints a Director of Doctoral Studies whose responsibility is mainly to oversee the activities of postgraduate studies such as organizing meetings between doctoral student and her or his main supervisor for review of study plan; mediating between students and supervisors in conflict situations related to supervisory issues (see, Löff, 2009). The official length of doctoral studies is four years that ends with a thesis defended in public. To foster international networking doctoral students are often encouraged to participate in international conferences where they have opportunities to present their research work to the scientific community and get feedbacks. Doctoral students are expected to participate and pass courses amounting to between 60 to 90 European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) before defending their theses. The courses include mandatory, generic, general and specialized courses aimed at helping doctoral students in building research and pedagogic skills. The worth of the thesis is 150 to 180 ECTS depending on the subject of specialization. It is often recommended that the thesis should be a compilation of at least four articles of which the doctoral student is the first author for at least two. Prior to the defence of the thesis one of the articles must have been accepted for publication in an international peer reviewed journal (see, Löff, 2009). When the student has finished writing the thesis it is sent to three external examiners who should be professors or qualified for appointment as professors for evaluation. The examiners form the examination committee and they decide whether to award the doctoral thesis a pass grade or fail (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, 2012a). If all the examiners judge the thesis fit for public defence then the student presents her or his research work in the presence of an opponent who is an expert in the subject of the thesis, the examination committee and the general public. But if the examination committee do not find the thesis fit for defence then the student needs to address all the concerns raised by the committee.

### 2.1 Data Collection

The data collection was made by means of a semi-structured interview that was designed through group discussions and administered to doctoral students in August, 2012. The group consisted of scientists who have served as postgraduate student supervisors and those whose works were relevant to supervision in postgraduate education. After the initial group discussions some questions were drafted and were sent to each member of the group. They were asked to comment on the questions and suggest ways of improving the questions. Issues were raised which prompted further discussions with the members of the group before finalizing the questions to be included in the interview. The questions consist of closed-ended and open-ended questions.

Although there are 20 doctoral students registered at the department where the survey was conducted only 16 of the students study fulltime. Six of the students were indigenes (Swedes) and 10 internationals. Seven of the students who were available during the survey period were purposively selected. The selected students comprised of three Swedes and four internationals of which five were women and two men. The ratio of women to men interviewee reflects the dominance of women in the doctoral studies at the department. The students were informed about the survey and were asked whether they would like to participate. All the students agreed to participate in the survey. After explaining the motives regarding the interview and assuring the respondents about the confidentiality of their responses they were asked about their age, year of study, recruitment process, academic qualification, associate supervisor and where they would like to work after doctoral studies. The respondents were asked about the challenges they are facing that are affecting their professional career and the support they are getting from their supervisors. They were further asked about some advice they would like to give new doctoral students, supervisors and the university authority to help better doctoral education. The respondents who were international student were asked about the challenges they face as a student in a foreign land and how they have coped over time. They were also asked about some advice they would like to give to future international students who wish to study in Sweden. All the interviews were audio taped.

### 2.2 Data Analysis

The data were analysed using qualitative content analysis, i.e. a research method for interpreting qualitative information through classification process of coding, categorizing and identifying themes (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Polit and Beck, 2008). The analysis began by listening to the audio taped interviews several times in order to be familiar with the content of the interviews, after which the interviews were transcribed. The transcripts were read several times in order to become more familiar to the content of the transcripts. The quotations from the transcripts were summarized and labelled with codes. The codes were regrouped several times until suitable codes, categories and themes emerged (see, Hofsten *et al.*, 2010). The underlying meaning of the texts were interpreted and discussed. Although seven interviews appear not to be a large sample one should bear in mind that all the respondents have at least two supervisors which implies that each of the respondents reported their experience with many supervisors. It is also important to note that in-depth interview was applied in this study which can contribute to generating a lot of information.

According to conceptions of attribution (Kelly, 1963), i.e. all people are researchers; each individual have her or his own theory and they test their on hypothesis. An individual often test excuses than try to modify their thoughts (naïve theories, Olsson and Ljunghill, 1997). This is associated with individual's psychological theory, i.e. conscious and unconscious formed that influences an individual's life. In this study this is referred to as "personal explanatory" theory (see, Emilsson and Johnsson, 2007). It is assumed that learning process begins when the doctoral student identifies some problems associated with supervision. Then the student focuses on her or his personal explanatory theory and tries to explain reasons for the problems. In doing so the student reflects on the problems associated with supervision and the probable solution to the problems. At the end of the reflections the doctoral student develops new knowledge and personal theory regarding supervisor-student relationship and this influences the student's perceptions of challenges in doctoral studies. Thus the perceptions are built around the student's knowledge and experience (Morrison, 2004).

## 3. Results

The respondents were between the ages of 20 to 39 years. All the respondents had Master's degree prior assuming the position of a doctoral student and they have spent between two to five years in their studies. They have between one to six associate supervisors. Three of the respondents were of the opinion that they would like to work in a university environment, two prefer to work in private organization and others were not very certain. All the respondents say that they passed through the normal recruitment process, i.e. submitting an application in response to an advertised position, attending interviews and were recruited.

### 3.1 Challenges Facing Doctoral Students

#### 3.1.1 Challenges Facing All Doctoral Students

The major concerns raised by the respondents include problems associated with designing data collection methods, data analysis, writing publishable research papers and oral presentation skills. They also raised concerns regarding inaccessibility of associate supervisors and sometimes the main supervisors were relatively inaccessible:

*At the early stages of my doctoral programme I do not know much about research design and I thought that my supervisor will help me out but the supervisor is not often available. It took me nearly a year in trying to figure out how to design the research project.*

*I was told that the associate supervisors will help me in areas the main supervisor is less competent but I only know the names of the associate supervisors and have never seen them nor have contact with them.*

Other concerns raised by the respondents include problems associated with working with people they are not very compatible with and inadequate discussions regarding what each member of the research team are expected to contribute to the research project:

*The way other people in my research team approach research questions is very different from the way I do and some of the people often want me to accept their views. It is often challenging in working with people whose way of approaching research questions differ widely from mine.*

*Prior to the beginning of the research project there were no discussions concerning my expectations and the expectations of the supervisors thus I have no reference point and guide to know whether I am doing well or otherwise.*

#### 3.1.2 Challenges Specific to International Students

The respondents who belong to international student category raised concerns associated with problems in getting access to information such as how to open a bank account, obtaining personal number and how the Swedish societal system work. Other concerns raised include difficulty in learning the Swedish language when surrounded by international students and there is no very much time in learning the language. Home sick due to inadequate excitement that one use to have in her or his country of origin. Others include loneliness due to not many friends as before and could not get access to many social networks. Cultural shock especially in terms of supervisor-student relationship:

*In the country of my origin doctoral students are often more dependent on their supervisors, i.e. boss-assistant relationship; but in Sweden they appear to be more independent. The first few years I arrived in Sweden I find the supervisor-student relationship a bit strange because it is not what I am used to! Another issue is the type of thesis I am used to monograph not collection of articles! It took me sometime to comprehend how to write the introductory section of the thesis.*

### 3.2 Supports Received and Supports Needed

#### 3.2.1 Supports Students Receive from Supervisors

Most of the respondents reported that the supports they mainly get from their supervisors include reading, structuring and commenting on manuscripts to meet scientific standards. Others include relatively little support on design of data collection methods, design of research questions and mentoring regarding how to become a successful researcher:

*Presently, I have written a couple of manuscripts but my supervisor mainly assists me through reading and commenting on the manuscripts.*

*Although my supervisor helps me in the areas of research design he often encourage me to first design the research before making his own contributions.*

#### 3.2.2 Areas Students Need More Supports

Some supports the respondents say they would like to get more from their supervisors include more access to main supervisor and associate supervisors, opportunity to work with more people who have greater competence on the subject of the research project. Others were that supervisors should be more involved in research design especially at the early stages of doctoral programme, more mentoring and guidance to help reduce the tendency of deviating from the original project plan. The respondents suggested that new doctoral students should be involved in existing research projects to help them acquire experience before embarking on a new project. They were also of the opinion that doctoral students should be encouraged to spend part of their study period abroad to

help them in building professional networks:

*When I accepted the doctoral student position I thought that my supervisors were specialists in the subject of my research project only to know that I was wrong. My supervisors' subject is not very much related to the subject of my research. This implies that I have to work extremely hard to be able to succeed. In my opinion I would say that it will be nice if someone who is more competent in the topic is included in the supervisory team.*

*I will like to have contact with the associate supervisors whom I have not had contact with since I started the doctoral programme!*

### 3.3 Suggestions on How to Improve Supervisor-Student Relationship

#### 3.3.1 Advices to New Doctoral Students

The respondents reported that doctoral students will be more successful in their studies if they:

- Take time in planning data collection methods and are patient in carrying out research tasks.
- Try as much as possible to strike a balance between time spent on professional life and private life to avoid conflict of interests.
- Take some time off after completion of Master's degree before undertaking doctoral studies to know whether one really like to be a researcher.
- Develop interest in the subject of the research project.
- Try to discuss their ideas with other members of the research team to get more ideas and inspirations as well as develop the habit of asking questions.
- Strive to learn statistics because it is important in designing data collection methods and analysis.
- Try to communicate with their supervisors more often because it helps to strengthen supervisor-student relationship and trust.

*When I began my research project I have very little knowledge about the subject and my main supervisor seems to know more about the general things but the associate supervisor who is specialist in the subject was inaccessible. It took me a long time to have some knowledge about the subject, to date I am not yet grounded in the subject and the struggle continues! In my opinion I would say that if a doctoral student is not very sure that she or he knows the subject of the research project the student should be sure that the main supervisor knows more about the subject before accepting the doctoral student position.*

*Although during the early stages of my doctoral programme I like the subject of my research I was not very comfortable with statistics and writing manuscripts! I found that there is no two ways about it but to learn statistics and develop interest in writing. In my opinion I would say that to succeed the doctoral student need to be interested in the research project, statistics and writing manuscripts.*

#### 3.3.2 How a Supervisor Can Be More Successful

Some suggestions made by the respondents regarding how supervisors could be more successful in supervising doctoral students include:

- Supervisors should make themselves relatively accessible to students especially at the early stages of doctoral programme.
- Supervisors should be more transparent to students and should carry them along throughout the research design and data collection as well as monitor the activities of the students to avoid them deviating from the research project plan.
- Supervisors should not serve as supervisor for many students at the same time to enable she or he have considerable time for students.
- They should be aware that students differ. Some may need more guidance in their research project while others may need less.
- They should be interested in the subject of the research.

*My supervisor took part in some stages of the research project but appears to shy away from other stages. I have been wondering about the motive behind the supervisor's behaviour only to hear the supervisor saying "this part of the project is not very fun you can do it". When I heard the supervisor's comments I felt very discouraged and depressed about the whole research project. In my opinion I would say that supervisors should be part of every stages of the research project to guide and encourage the student.*

*At the early stages of my doctoral programme my supervisor was not paying much attention to the research project and I did not know where and how to start! When I approached the supervisor to explain my situation the reply I got was: "If you don't try you will not know". I used about one year in trying to figure out how to design*

*data collection method! In my opinion I would say that it will be nice if supervisors pay more attention to what the student does especially at the beginning of the research project/doctoral programme and guide him or her. This might help reduce the amount of time spent by students in trying to figure out how to design data collection methods.*

### 3.3.3 Improvement of Doctoral Education by University Authorities

Some of the suggestions the respondents have for the university authorities responsible for doctoral education include:

Guidelines on doctoral education should be transformed into rules because in its present form it is more or less recommendations. Some regulations regarding doctoral education are not very clear. For example, the information regarding compulsory courses and the number of papers to be published before a doctoral student defends her or his thesis seems not to be very clear:

*I do not like the compulsory courses and I think it should be revised. In its present form I do not think that the courses are very useful as it should be e.g. Philosophy of Science, and Pedagogic courses. Students do not often take basic courses before participating in these courses.*

*The doctoral education system does not provide a very good way of assessing whether supervisors and students are doing well. This implies that it is not easy to control the system. In my opinion I would say that the Director of doctoral studies should be responsible for assessing the performance of supervisors and students. This maybe achieved by interviewing them independently from time to time on issues regarding the research project.*

*Although the university has a good working environment some people continue to leave university for other sectors because of job insecurity. This may discourage people from enrolling in doctoral studies. Some adjustments need to be made to encourage more people to stay in the university system.*

### 3.4 How International Student Have Coped and Ways Their Problems Could Be Reduced

#### 3.4.1 Coping Strategies

Generally, most of the strategies international respondents have used in coping with the challenges include talking to loved ones in their home countries via telephone, making new friends in Sweden, attending student union activities on campus to meet other international students and using the internet to search for information. Other coping strategies include learning Swedish language, asking for help from supervisors or colleagues who have lived in Sweden for sometime and engaging in some after work activities such as sports, gardening and recreation:

*Although I have not coped very well I often talk to parents and loved ones in my home country through telephone to feel good and I often attend student union activities to interact with other international students.*

#### 3.4.2 Reducing Problems Faced by International Students

The international respondents suggested that the challenges faced by international students could be reduced by encouraging more student union activities on campus, providing new doctoral students with comprehensive information and assisting them in fixing things such as bank account and personal number. Others include provision of opportunities to learn Swedish language on campus and the introduction of doctoral students launch to help students interact more with students in other departments. The doctoral courses database should be updated regularly:

*Although the facilities here are excellent and the working environment is good there is a need for more information regarding opportunities available in the department and the university in general.*

## 4. Discussion and Conclusions

The findings from this study show that the challenges that the respondents face in their doctoral studies vary widely. Problems encountered by students during doctoral studies could have negative impacts on their professional career such as longer time of completion and poor quality thesis due to poor supervisor-student relationship. The international student sample generally encountered barriers related to access to information, access to Swedish societal system and cultural differences. Similar results have been reported in other studies (Thomas and Alderfer, 1989; Moyer *et al.*, 1999). In their studies of the influence of race on carrier dynamics-theory and minority career experiences, Thomas and Alderfer found that informal denial of access to sources of support and information are some barriers faced by minority group in postgraduate studies. This is not surprising because Swedish is the major language spoken in Sweden and some information regarding doctoral education are written in Swedish. This implies that students who are not well learned in the Swedish language

may find it difficult to get access to such information. In Sweden doctoral students have more freedom and independent in comparison to students in some other countries where they have less freedom and are more dependent on their supervisors. This implies that international students who originated from countries where students have less freedom and depend more on supervisors may encounter cultural shock in Sweden. Similar findings have been reported in other studies, for example in the review of literature from Australia, New Zealand and Britain Moses (1984) found that interpersonal differences, work style and organizational factors impact negatively on supervisor-student relationship. Although most Swedish universities often translate some information to English there is a need for more facilities that increase access to information to English speakers. On the other hand it is important for international students in Sweden to put more effort in learning the Swedish language to help integrate them into the Swedish society. It is important that university authorities provide more facilities that give information to international students regarding how the Swedish postgraduate educational system operates especially on issues such as student rights and supervisor-student relationship. This may help reduce cultural shock experienced by international students.

The Swedish student sample mainly encountered barriers related to inadequate guidance and little or no mentoring from their supervisors. Similar findings have been reported in other studies in South Africa by Wadesango and Machingambi (2011). They found that inadequate supervisory support affects postgraduate students in South African Universities. This implies that the Swedish respondents may likely find it relatively difficult in comprehending whether they are on the right path of their research programme. This might lead to frustration and economic loss associated with loss of time especially if the student has been on the wrong path. Although one could argue that it is part of learning because doctoral students are expected to be critical thinkers students require supervisors' support to be more successful. Although the Swedish students may have access to most information they need their interpretation of the information may deviate from the supervisors' expectations. This implies that it is important supervisors guide students through the research project and advice them as need arises.

For the female student sample the challenges they mainly face has to do with confidence associated with issues such as oral presentation skills and believing more that they can successfully complete the doctoral studies as well as little or no mentoring. The findings are similar to that of other studies (Berg and Ferber, 1983; Cartwright, 1972; Hoffman, 1974; Menges and Exum, 1983). Berg and Ferber reported that women may not be very confident in their ability to handle the demands of graduate work. Cartwright as well as Hoffman reported that women are less confident than men and it is often likely to influence their career plans and their perseverance in carrying them out. On the other hand Feldman (1974) reported that women are more likely to complain of lack of ability as a barrier to success in postgraduate education. This is not surprising because virtually all the main supervisors of the respondents are male. This implies that some of the female respondents may not get access to some supports specific to women. On the other hand female students may not be very confident in discussing some aspects of their lives with men. This calls for the need to have more women among supervisory team to help in the issues related to mentoring. Female students should be given more opportunities to present their research outcomes to scientific community to help them in building confidence. The male respondents generally face challenges related to little or no guidance in the design of data collection methods. This implies that the male respondents appear to have more freedom and independent in comparison to the female.

The findings of the present study could contribute to the knowledge regarding how to promote a more sustainable supervisor-student relationship to help achieve greater successes in doctoral education. In particular the findings show that some challenges that international student face differs from their indigenous counterpart as well as the challenges female students face differs from that of the male. This implies that each category of students requires supports specific to their needs. Thus it is important for supervisors to be aware of the differences before accepting to serve as supervisor for students. To improve supervisor-student relationship one could provide facilities that increase access to information and more female in the supervisory team. Supervisors should use more time in monitoring the activities of their students and advising them. Associate supervisors should be more involved in the research project; the expectations of the student and supervisors should be discussed at the beginning of the project and the student should be carried along throughout the research project. It is important for supervisors to identify the weaknesses in doctoral students and help provide opportunities to remedy it. Supervisors should develop a feedback strategy that help generate information regarding their performance from their students and strive to strengthen areas they have been lagging behind. New international students should be introduced to all supports available to internationals to enable them fit into the system as soon as possible. For student supervision to be more successful it should have the potential to reflect the heterogeneity of the different student groups' interests. This implies that student supervision that is not holistic to capture the

heterogeneous characteristics of the students will not be very successful. It is important that supervisors are aware that supervision is an experience good, i.e. one cannot predict the outcome of supervision until one is involved! Thus it is important for supervisors to often have time for reflections about their activities associated with supervision of doctoral students and build on their experiences. The findings will provide doctoral education managers more understanding on how to reduce conflict of interests among stakeholders in doctoral education to enhance quality of postgraduate supervision.

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