

## **DRIVERS OF ENGAGEMENT FOR THE PHD STUDENTS WHO PERFORM TEACHING ACTIVITIES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

PhD students are a valuable asset for universities as they are able to perform a varied number of activities. Moving on from their basic role of students, their main focus becomes researching on their theses' topics, however a PhD student life does not happen only between the walls of a library. Sometimes, PhD students perform in a benevolent or mandatory way teaching activities within their universities, which upgrades their status to collaborators of the university. However, this sort of activities bring along serious responsibilities which might require the diminishing of time dedicated for the thesis' writing. This paper's aim is to investigate which are the factors that contribute to the engagement PhD students feel for their work as teachers. According to the found driving elements, we intend to define the levels of engagement teachers-PhD students show and to layer them down in a structured way. As the research work is a complex enough work by itself, adding an activity such as the teaching one in the life of a PhD student might affect the well-run of the PhD program. Hence, a second objective of this paper is to determine if the teaching experience helps the students to cope better with the PhD requirements. Overall, the contributions of this paper can be of important value firstly for the PhD students that want to seek academic career opportunities during their PhD degree. Secondly, the paper can as well as benefit the universities that would like to manage better their PhD students and learn how to integrate them in their organizational teaching charts. Learning about their engagement drivers can lead to designing fitted win-win partnerships between the university and the PhD students that could bring added value for both sides.

***Keywords:** engagement, teaching, PhD degree, PhD student, drivers of engagement*

### **INTRODUCTION**

People management went through a revolution when the notion of "Personnel Management" was transformed into that of "Human Resource Management" (HRM). This reconfigured and acknowledged the major importance of the people as an indispensable resource of any organization.

HRM practices involved new concepts such as strategic integration and development, thus perceiving HRM issues as an important part of any business strategy and one of the five functions of any organization. As a result, the progress of human resource (HR), from transactional to strategic means that organizations must ensure that employees are not only physically present at their job but also mentally and emotionally. In other words, organizations desire personnel engagement and use

it as a tool of strategic competence. The absence of engagement impacts among other things a person's morale and productivity therefore the "backbone" of good working environments where workers are accountable for their actions and behave ethically.

The same concept is applicable to the staff involved in teaching activities within universities, among which PhD students also have this role.

During their doctoral studies, students experiment emotionally and intellectually intensive processes involving a wide range of positive and negative experiences [1]. Developing professional identities as both researchers and teachers is core to doctoral students' growth. Recent studies [2] evidence the fact that PhD students might identify themselves more strongly with their researcher role than with the teacher role. So it is of importance to determine what drives PhD students when performing the teacher role. In Romania, the role of a PhD students is not limited solely to their research activities for completing their thesis, but to some extent it also requires involvement in teaching activities. However, the degree to which a PhD student decides to get involved is not specified, as some may choose to dedicate only 2-3 hours per week for these teaching activities while others may engage in these teaching activities over 30 hours of their weekly time-frame.

Hence, this paper's aim is made of two major objectives, each and one of them setting another two research hypotheses.

**O1:** To investigate which are the factors that contribute to the engagement PhD students feel for their work as a teacher.

**H1:** PhD students feel engaged to the teaching activities they perform.

**H2:** Both intrinsic and extrinsic factors contribute to the engagement PhD students have for the teaching activities they perform.

**O2:** To determine if the teaching experience helps students to cope better with the PhD requirements.

**H3:** Performing teaching activities during the PhD studies help students explore better their field of study.

**H4:** Performing teaching activities during the PhD studies decreases the students' time for research and work for the thesis itself.

From the above mentioned objectives and hypotheses, it can be noticed that various facets of PhD students' engagement are intended to be explored through this research.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Throughout the literature the concept of "engagement" or "people engagement" has received various definitions based on the culture and organization that it was

referred to. In 1990, Khan was the first to propose the use of such concept as he tied it to one's physical employment, expression, cognition and emotion in a person's work life. Starting with that moment, researchers have argued whether the concept as defined by Khan [3] can be applicable to all type of organizations thereby generating confusion in business management. In 2004, [4] it was declared that engaging workers of an organization is not solely including the cognition but also they considered the flexibility provided by people's behaviour and emotions. Later on, [5] engagement was defined as a mixture of productivity, ownership, loyalty and commitment whereas Cha [6] see's engagement as the worker's active involvement in the activity, psychology, cognition and emotions of the working environment. All these researchers along with Liu [7] who defined engagement as a five dimension concept namely organizational identity, dedication, absorption, vigour, pleasant and harmony, have in commune the way they approached human's engagement in work: as a multi-faced construct.

Other researchers defined person's engagement in work as a dedicated willingness, such as Hewitt Organization explained in 2001, employees will work hard for the organization as reflected by what they say, by their decision to remain loyal to the organization and by the way they will strive for its success. Therefore, people's engagement in work is highly related to their satisfaction and sense of achievement [8].

Still, other authors [9] define engagement as a positive state of mind characterized by absorption, vigor dedication and a deep pervasive affective-cognition which is not focused on a specific event, person or behavior. Among all the three ways engagement was defined in the literature throughout the years there can also be identified a fourth approach, that is defining a person's engagement in work as the opposite of Burnout. Thus, engagement becomes the opposite of reduces professional engagement and efficacy, exhaustion or cynicism. It becomes the other end of the Burnout dimension like participation, effectiveness and energy [10], [11], [12].

## **METHODOLOGY**

In order to answer the research questions, it has been used a qualitative approach for developing the data collection. The selected participants have been given an online form with open-ended questions. The answers have been carefully analyzed and patterns have been identified in order to draw conclusions according to the research's objectives.

### *Sample description*

The research is based on the answers of 15 PhD students from various study years, most of them belonging to the management and economics fields of research. All of them perform teaching activities within their home universities in parallel with the research activities for their PhD thesis. Almost 80% of the participants had teaching activities because they volunteered to or because the opportunity has been offered and they did not want to miss it. In most of the cases, 40%, the course

coordinator is the same as the thesis coordinator, PhD students teach only one subject taught in one of the semesters and they perform a total of two to five teaching activities per week, on average. The majority of the participants answered that they started to teach from their very first year of PhD studies and more than half of them get paid for the work done, either for all the hours, or after they had taught a mandatory number of hours. The work they are requested to do includes in most of the cases the design of the seminar classes, including presentations and researching for case studies, the design of test papers and marking them. In almost all the cases, the PhD students are involved also in other activities besides the teaching ones, most of the times a full-time or part-time job in a company.

Since the study has been conducted in Bucharest, Romania and the answers have been given by PhD students in Bucharest, Romania, the later on discussed results might illustrate better a reality that belongs to the Romanian academic space and be of more significance to the Romanian universities. However, Romania is a country with Central and Easter European specificities and that belongs for more than twelve years now to the European Union. Moreover, given the fact we all live in a digitalized society with similar conditions for the formal education recognition and professional route in the universities' environment, it is not forced to assume that the results obtained in this study could characterize PhD students from many countries and could give useful hints for stakeholders that aren't necessarily belonging to the Romanian space.

#### *The data gathering tool's description*

The designed instrument for collecting the data of this study consists of five sections. The first section was designed to gather general identification information of the participants. The next four sections have each comprised questions especially designed to obtain data for the purpose of each of the set hypotheses. However, the questions have been imagined in such a way that the respondent would find a logical sequence between them and that the answering of one question could facilitate the process of answering for the next one.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

This section of the research paper focuses on delivering an interpretation on the results that have been obtained after analyzing the answers offered by the participants. It is of great importance to interpret the results in the context of the actual scientifically knowledge available so that they can help other researchers and different other stakeholders of the topic to better understand the issues and to further develop it.

*The first hypothesis* explores whether PhD students feel engaged to the teaching activities they perform.

Having in mind the engagement's definition proposed by Schaufeli [9], that engagement is a positive state of mind related to work characterized by vigor,

dedication and absorption, we analyzed whether the participants' answers expressed any of these feelings.

Nevertheless, before proceeding to a further analysis, it is of worth to reinforce that the teacher role for a PhD student must be seen in the labor's paradigm. Even though 80% of the people involved in the study volunteered to teach, almost 70% of them get a form of remuneration for the work done and they are fully responsible for the activity with the students. Hence, the analysis of their engagement is studied as for any other form of work with its specific drivers.

Being asked what they mostly enjoy about the teacher role, most of the PhD students' answers indicated the interaction with students and the possibility to witness their progress. Additionally, PhD students also enjoy the feeling they have when they are able to teach students something useful for their future careers. On the other hand, at the question what they dislike, people's drawbacks vary from the lack of flexibility in arranging the teaching schedule to the lack of updated course materials and a rather poor payment. Overall, keeping in mind both the positive aspects PhD students enjoy about their teaching roles and the negative ones, one very important question for the study purpose was how do they feel about the teaching role. 80% of the answers contained adjectives such as *great*, *very good* and *excited*. Most of them described the teacher role as a *great experience*, *fulfilling*, *rewarding* or even *a must during the PhD years*. 13% of the answers contained the word *challenging*.

In conclusion, it can be stated that the first hypothesis is confirmed, so PhD students feel engaged in the work they do as teachers.

*The second hypothesis* investigates if both intrinsic and extrinsic factors contribute to the engagement PhD students have for the teaching activities they perform.

*Table 1 – The relationship of PhD students related to different university characters*

<b>Relationship with:</b>	<b>1- very weak</b>	<b>2- weak</b>	<b>3- indifferent</b>	<b>4- good</b>	<b>5- very good</b>
<b>Thesis coordinator</b>	-	-	6.7%	13.3%	80.0%
<b>Other PhD students</b>	-	-	20%	26.7%	53.3%
<b>Members of the same teaching department</b>	-	-	20%	60%	20%
<b>Secretary staff</b>	-	-	20%	40%	40%
<b>Other professors from other departments</b>	-	-	33.3%	40%	26.7%
<b>The dean</b>	-	-	40%	33.3%	26.7%

*Source: Authors' own results*

We choose to consider the engagement drivers as the key factors that incentive and boost the feeling of engagement. These factors can be of both intrinsic and extrinsic nature. Regarding the extrinsic factors we considered that of great importance in the analysis process is looking at the relationship PhD students have during their teacher role with the university figures mentioned in table 1. We can notice that the best relationship PhD students have is the one with their thesis coordinator and with other PhD students. We can advance the idea that they are their main source of information regarding their preparation as teachers. The other university figures such as other professors, the dean, and the support staff seem to make their positive contribution or at least not one that has a negative impact. As a matter of fact, more than 80% of the participants at this research mentioned there was no change of attitude towards them after taking the role of teachers.

In terms of intrinsic factors that could make a contribution to the engagement PhD students feel for their teacher work, we asked them to describe their feelings before, during and after completing the teaching activity. The range of emotions experienced before starting a teaching activity is wide and PhD students feel from *nothing in particular* to anxiety or optimism and confidence. On the other hand, during the class, more the 35% of the participants feel a form of *excitement* described through words such as *happy, optimistic, confident*. In their majority, the answers contain words that describe positive feelings. Regarding the feelings experienced after the class is complete, the PhD students answered in more than 35% of the cases they feel a form or another of *pride and satisfaction, related to a feeling of happiness*. Answers also indicate they feel energetic and ready to continue the work. In 27% of the cases, PhD students indicate a state of exhaustion and a feeling of relief which can be seen of normal if considering 90 minutes of deep state of concentration.

In conclusion to hypothesis two and the paper's first objective, we can state that both intrinsic and extrinsic factors contribute to the engagement PhD students feel for their teacher role.

In addition to this, we can name among the engagement drivers:

- the interaction with the students
- the observation of the students' progresses
- the feeling of doing a meaningful work
- the passion about the taught topic
- the good interaction with the thesis' coordinator.

*The third hypothesis*, under the second paper's objective, explores whether performing teaching activities during the PhD studies help students explore better their field of study.

Regarding our research's participants, in more than 86% of the cases, the subjects they teach are strongly related to the topic of their thesis. This first information could lead us to the conclusion that researching about the classes' materials overlaps with researching for the thesis itself, even though it could be at a much lower information level. The average research time for the teaching topic is of 4-6 hours/week and the main sources of information include in more than 50% of the situations the Internet,

the textbooks and the most important journals such as Harvard Business Review or the Economist, in order to extract study cases.

Hence, it can be drawn the conclusion that the teaching activities PhD students perform do help them explore better their research field.

*The forth hypothesis* intents to investigate if performing teaching activities during the PhD studies decreases the students' time for research and work for the thesis itself.

For this purpose, participants were asked to describe how their lifestyle and work style change after having started to take the teacher role. In 60% of the cases they described major changes in their lives, especially in terms of becoming more organized due to the diminishing of their free time. In 13.5% of the cases, the PhD students accused a negative change of their personal life as well as and in 20% of the cases, the PhD students affirmed they became happier.

On the other hand, in terms of how the teaching role affects the activities of research for the thesis topic, the situations have wide variations and it cannot be drawn a conclusion based on this sample. It appears as if each case is different according to the thesis topic, side activities, such as a job and every person's capacity to organize its work.

In conclusion, based on the questions that explored the fourth hypothesis it can be said that the teaching role does affect the PhD students' life and focus on the thesis' activities. However, further research is needed in order to make affirmations related to its positivity or negativity.

### **CONCLUSION**

This research paper had as objective to determine the engagement drivers for the PhD students that perform teaching activities. Additionally, it investigated whether the teacher role influences the researcher role for the thesis purpose.

Our results show the fact that the interaction with the students, the observation of the students' progresses, the feeling of doing a meaningful work, the passion about the taught topic and the good interaction with the thesis' coordinator are all drivers that engage the PhD students with their teacher role. Moreover it can be noticed these drivers belong to both the intrinsic and the extrinsic sphere so, a first recommendation we could make for a future research would be to determine in what amounts and in which ways, each category of factors contribute to the engagement.

Secondly, regarding the interference between the teacher role and the PhD requirements regarding the thesis' writing, our results show the fact that most of the times the taught topic is related to the thesis topic. Hence, the research done by the PhD students to prepare their classes adds up to the research needed for the thesis itself. In addition to this, regarding the organization of time and personal resources, our present results show a significant change in the personal and professional life that

could lead to a diminishing in the time allocated for the thesis' research. Consequently, a second recommendation we would like to make regarding a future research regards an investigation searching a deeper connection between the teacher role and the researcher role.

However, it must be acknowledged the fact that this research has some major limitations and its discoveries cannot be given the rank of general truth. First of all, the sample of participant PhD students is rather small (i.e. 15 people) and their fields of research is rather limited (i.e. the study has been conducted in only one big university of Bucharest) There are great chances that a replication of this study on a bigger sample or in a different geographical area leads us to slightly different results and observations and a greater variety of perspectives.

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