EXPLORING PHD STUDENTS’ CONCERNS REGARDING DOCTORAL PROGRAMS IN ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

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Abstract: Tertiary education involves specific perceived issues among PhD candidates that lead to several self-destructive behaviors regarding the research process and the quality of the doctoral thesis. Studying the emotional mechanisms behind the process of doctoral research offers useful insights for both PhD candidates and PhD supervisors. A qualitative approach involving a concept analysis method was used to investigate the concerns about the doctoral process of a group of PhD candidates enrolled in the first year at the Doctoral School of Economics and Business Administration of Iaşi, Romania. Both spontaneous and induced responses were considered. The order of concerns and the fact that some of them were mentioned together were also taken into account. Most of the concerns are related to time-management. Results are discussed and several recommendations are made.

Keywords: PhD students concerns, economics and business doctoral program, content analysis

JEL Classification: A230 Economic Education and Teaching of Economics: Graduate

1 INTRODUCTION

The starting points of this study are the quality of doctoral research in Romania, the rate of dropout for doctoral studies and the number of requests for extension of the time allocated for doctoral research. Another relevant issue is the large number of changes of the doctoral process in recent years - modification of

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the study period, elimination of distance-learning doctoral studies, changes in funding opportunities, changes regarding the highest number of PhD students allowed per supervisor.

Romanian doctoral students and supervisors perceive the scientific articles published in Romanian journals as inferior to those of other European countries, according to the Research Institute for Quality of Life. Most doctoral researchers and coordinators also consider the doctoral study period in Romania as being too short.

The same Research Institute, in the Report on the opinions of doctoral coordinators and PhD students in Romania, provides information about the extent to which doctoral students face difficulties related to conferences participation funding, access to research data, lack of people with whom they can discuss the PhD topic, quality of guidance, difficulties in combining doctoral activity with job responsibilities, personal financial difficulties. PhD students in economics are mostly dealing with conferences participation funding issues and limited access to research data. The same report reveals that 85% of doctoral students in economics were employed when beginning their doctoral studies.

As shown in the quoted report, there are some factors that cause psychological discomfort to Romanian PhD students. Aspects, such as length of the doctoral program, information literacy or administrative issues determine a chain reaction, causing a feeling of inadequacy that ultimately has repercussions over the quality of the thesis and the research process in general. Identifying those difficulties is an important matter for universities in order to be able to offer a higher quality research programs and a comfortable journey throughout the process.

An exploratory research was conducted in order to identify the main concerns of Romanian PhD students in Economics and Business from Iaşi regarding the doctoral process. A brief literature review is provided in the second section. Third section offers the description of the methodology and the data preparation process. Results are found in the fourth section while the last section provides a summary of the main findings including recommendations, limitations and future research directions.

2 OVERVIEW OF CURRENT RESEARCH

Improving the quality of doctoral programs has been in the attention of educational researchers and administrators for a long period. This section aims to summarize the major findings on the matter of struggles and concerns that doctoral students have to cope with during their doctoral process.
A significant body of literature exists on the topic of doctoral thresholds (Zaiț, 2010) – the main problems that doctoral students confront with along their research program. The main issues previously investigated are doctorateness as a threshold concept (Trafford and Leshem, 2009), challenges of the doctoral journey (McAlpine and Amundsen, 2009), innovation in PhD completion (Kearns, Gardiner and Marshall, 2008), social isolation (Ali and Kohun, 2007), doctoral students’ attrition (Ehrenberg, Jakubson, Groen, So and Price, 2007), socialization to academic norms (Weidman and Stein, 2003), (Weidman, Twale and Stein, 2001), (Thornton and Nardi, 1975), productive conflict and devil’s advocacy (Schultz-Hardt, Jochims and Frey 2002), (Schwenk and Valacich, 1994), (Murrell, Stewart and Engel, 1993), (Priem and Price, 1991), models of marketing doctoral student socialization (Trocchia and Berkowitz, 1999).

A study conducted with the purpose of finding inhibitors and facilitators in a doctoral program revealed that a candidate’s success is negatively influenced by financial problems, family problems, administrative and cultural difficulties or isolation (Dinham and Scott, 1999). The same article concluded that most of the candidates did not have role models in the family while pursuing this academic path. When a candidate is the first in the family pursuing doctoral studies, even though relatives can understand the importance of education, they are not truly able to support the candidate through the process. Also, many PhD candidates have a family of their own and a common issue that they have to deal with is managing to maintain a normal family life during the doctorate process (Dinham and Scott, 1999; Rockinson-Szpakiw, Spaulding and Knight, 2015).

The raised concerns about doctoral studies in the ’90 led to a study revealing that doctoral candidates do not entirely understand what a doctoral program involves or how to manage to successfully complete it (Golde and Dore, 2001). That problem may result in disorientation, low self-esteem research wise or solitude.

Manathunga (2002) investigated the psychological signs that may lead to failure to complete on time the doctoral program. Several behavioral evidence of a future problem is procrastination, avoiding the supervisor, constantly changing the view on the topic of research or isolation (Trocchia and Berkowitz, 1999; Manathunga, 2002). The same paper underlies three categories of factors which affect doctoral progress – emotional, cognitive and social. Emotional factors include low self-esteem or anxiety towards self-performance. On the same note, emotional and cognitive blocks are crucial factors (Kearns, Gardiner and Marshall, 2008) that inhibit research progress. Researchers developed a psychological skills training program that aimed to help candidates overcome
difficulties that lead to failure to complete the program. The research was based on the Cognitive-behavioral coaching model, a general framework was used for subjects to improve PhD students’ performances and achieve their goals. Evaluation of the program shows that students have improved time management skills and were more realistic in their expectations.

A psychological factor that is also often overlooked by the faculty’s administration is the issue of socialization among doctoral students. This concept related to professional success was addressed in the study on the importance of peer relationships during the doctoral program (Trocchia and Berkowitz, 1999). Peer relationships and the relationship with the supervisor are playing an important role in achieving an emotional state that leads to overcoming potential isolation problems and successfully complete the doctoral program. Other study (Ali and Kohun, 2007) regarding the link between isolation and attrition of doctoral students has aimed to create a framework for dealing with this issue. The authors created a four-stage social isolation framework. Those stages correspond with the natural phases of a doctoral program, as follows – preadmission, first, second year and the final period. According to this scheme, doctoral solitude has different causes and different remedies in each stage. There are scholars who state that a low level of socialization among students leads to a high level of stress (Perez and Kutugata, 2013), therefore, a low level of research quality, among other implications. Other scholars (Litalien and Guay, 2015) support the importance of peer and mentor relationships, meaning that the intentions of leaving the program are also influenced by the relationship with the mentor, the administration of the faculty or with other peers. Students strongly rely (Vezoussi, 2009) on other individuals, as mentors or peers in the issue of literature recommendations.

One important barrier in completing a doctoral program is the relationship with the supervisor. The candidate usually has some expectations regarding that relationship which may or may not be fulfilled in the end. Some researchers investigated that issue and developed a scale named Superqual (Hair, 2006), aimed to measure the gaps between expectations and reality in the candidate – supervisor relationship. Such a scale is particularly useful for young supervisors without much experience but it can be modified to be applicable to general expectation about a doctoral program.

Information literacy is another factor that may be a perceived barrier in the process of writing a high-quality thesis. A doctoral candidate has to know where to seek the most relevant information, how to discriminate important findings regarding his area of study and how to use that literature. A paper that aimed to study this issue (Bøyum and Aabø, 2015) has concluded that both Google Scholar
and library databases are widely used, although the literature found in specialized databases is considered more academic, useful and relevant (Vezzosi, 2009; Bøyum and Aabo, 2015). Regular Google appears to be the starting point of searching for simple information (Vezzosi, 2009).

Prior research shows that the candidates in the science-based disciplines are more likely to finish faster the doctoral program (Seagram, Gould and Pyke, 1998; Litalien and Guay, 2015). In economics and business area, studying statistics or accountancy may influence a doctoral thesis written in time. Also, high quality supervision is leading to the same result. A predictive model of doctoral dropout intentions (Litalien and Guay, 2015) was developed. The model is based on Self-Determination Theory which is basically a theory of inner motivation. Briefly, the model states that highly perceived competences are lowering the dropout intentions.

Individual competences in research activities is another issue that candidates encounter. Informative, instrumental and communicative competences (Olehnovicaa, Bolgzaa and Kravale-Pauliņa, 2015) were analyzed and it has been concluded that as the research experience grows, the informative competences are improving. Overall, instrumental competences are less developed, especially for the first year candidates. Doctoral students’ metacognitive profiles are also varying (Cantwell et. al., 2012). These varieties of profiles cause a problematic candidature. Three aspects of that issue are management of affect, management of intellectual demands and management of contingency. All three are considered to be interacting.

The problem of holding down a stable full-time job was also addressed (Dinham and Scott, 1999). In the majority of cases, the candidate needs support for the expenses to complete a doctoral program. The problem of over-education can put into difficulty future PhDs (Gaeta, 2015) as during the tenure they may not be capable to maintain full time jobs. Research education does not prepare them for a future job outside academia and they do not find the gained skills to be useful for a future job.

As it can be observed, there are many issues that doctoral candidates have to face during the doctoral process. This paper aims to explore the concerns of PhD candidates in order to propose several solutions helping the administrative stuff of Doctoral Schools to be able to ensure a higher quality research experience.

3 Methodology

We conducted an exploratory research (based on unstructured written interview) for collecting the data, followed by a content analysis of the individual
written responses. The aim of this exploratory research is to identify the concerns, fears and anxieties, related to the doctoral process of the first year PhD students in the Doctoral School of Economics and Business Administration of the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași.

The study involved a sample of 18 PhD students from various areas of study - Marketing, Management, Economics and International Affairs, Finance, Economics, Accounting and Statistics. This study involved a qualitative approach and content analysis of the written responses of the subjects was carried out. PhD students responded to one open question, initially spontaneously, and then assisted: "Which are your concerns, fears, anxieties, worries about the doctoral process?"

The respondents were encouraged to take their time and identify all their concerns. After doctoral students have written their responses, the operator suggested some general concerns and the respondents were encouraged once again to identify as many personal concerns as possible.

**Data preparation**

A unique code was assigned to each statement for an easy identification. Each code indicated the subject’s number, the subject’s area of study, the statement order and if the statement was spontaneous or inducted. The statements were reduced to a minimum number of words, in order to be easily processed but still accurately expressed the concern of the respondent. This process was mainly achieved through the elimination of irrelevant information.

The next step was grouping items into categories. There were two coders and each of them assigned independently each item into a category, which were debated afterwards in order to achieve a common set of categories. The coding procedure was an emergent one.

With commonly established categories, the coders repeated the previous step. This step allowed the calculation of the Intercoder Reliability, which was 88.595% agreement between coders (Cohen K coefficient). The sources of the coding differences were identified and then analyzed. There was a number of 12 items perceived differently. After a debate, the coders agreed upon the right categories for 7 items but disagreed upon the classification of 5 items. The reasons of disagreement were either the double meaning of the statement, ambiguous phrases or merely different opinions, resulting in the final Intercoder Reliability of 95.698% agreement.
3 Results

Fifteen categories of concerns resulted from the analysis. They are listed in Table 1, by order of the items’ frequencies, from the largest (20 items) to the smallest (1 item).

Table 1: Categories of doctoral concerns by frequencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category Name</th>
<th>Number of items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient time for research</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor quality of the thesis</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient personal time</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulties related to research methodology</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited resources for the current job</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inability to fulfill the mandatory activities for graduation</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited access to necessary data</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited personal competences</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of financial resources</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of support from experts</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral School location</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulties in accessing certain research programs</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plagiarism</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited length of the thesis</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing regulations</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most frequent concerns are related to time required for research. The majority of subjects believe that time allocated for doctoral research is very short and they do not trust that they will be able to finish it on time. PhD students also have many concerns regarding the added value and usefulness of their thesis. In this case concerns particularly refer to the applicability of the research results, the novelty of the findings and the contribution to the field. Many PhD students stated that they have insufficient time for family and friends in the context of doctoral work. The last three categories each containing one concern may be considered exceptions.

Order of the expressed concerns

Insufficient time for research and poor thesis quality are the first concerns that subjects have expressed. Assuming that the order of expression is influenced by the magnitude or intensity of concerns, we can hypothesize that the most important concerns of the subjects are related to these two issues. The concerns about the future or current job are among the last expressed by the subjects. Therefore, those who expressed concerns about the job have not put this issue first, although it is a factor that they take into consideration. Among the last concerns
expressed are also the ones related to the inability to fulfill the mandatory activities for graduation (e.g. publishing, mandatory classes, conference attendance).

**Association between concerns**

Two or more concerns were considered to be associated if they were mentioned in the same statement. This provides us the information about the close connection between specific concerns in the respondent’s mind. There is a connection mainly among three categories: insufficient time for research, limited resources for the current job and insufficient personal time. These three categories are ranked 1, 3 and 4 by the number of concerns. Therefore, these three categories account for 43 concerns out of 115 (15 categories).

All three categories refer in some way to the limited time that PhD students have. There are important time management issues signaled not only by the category with the highest number of concerns but also by two other important categories associated with it.

**Concerns that doctoral students were initially not aware of**

Only 20 statements were written after the operator induced few general concerns. Those worries have existed, but the subjects had not been fully aware of them before these have been suggested.

Students in International Business expressed 5 of 17 concerns the Finance group 4 out of 16 concerns, the accounting group 2 out of 8, the statistics group 3 out of 14 and the management group expressed 5 out of 31 concerns they had not been initially aware of.

The only participants who did not submit their options were the marketing and economics PhD candidates. Overall, most of the concerns expressed after the operator induced general concerns are related to the mandatory activities for graduation, followed by insufficient personal time and limited personal competences.

**4 CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS**

Current issues related to the doctoral research programs in Romania led to this exploratory research which involved 18 doctoral students of the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iaşi and aimed to identify the main concerns related to the doctoral process.

The most frequently expressed concerns by the PhD students by order were: short time for their research, usefulness and overall added value of their thesis, limited personal time. The importance of these issues was confirmed by both frequency and writing order of the concerns.
There are some concerns that PhD students had not been initially aware of, most of them related to the mandatory graduation requirements, insufficient personal time or limited personal competences.

An interesting finding is that three major categories of concerns resulted from the concept analysis referring to time management. PhD students consider that they have insufficient time for research, insufficient personal time and insufficient time for current job. The association of these three categories was visible because the majority of the respondents mentioned this type of issues within the same statement.

It is worth mentioning that the most important concerns have been similar to those identified only for marketing doctoral students, in a previous study for the same doctoral school: time, fear of blockages due to research problems or methodology, mixed and scattered expectations regarding the doctoral research process (Zait, 2010). This means that the concerns have been persistent over time.

Even though this is only an exploratory study, it has some managerial implications. Universities could design workshops and training programs to help PhD students in overcoming difficulties related to the doctoral process. Almost all participants in this study reported time management issues. This data could be useful for the administration of universities and doctoral schools that could organize time management courses. It can be stated that changing the length of the doctoral program from 4 to 3 years has affected PhD students, the time required for the research itself and the insufficient time in general were the main sources of concerns.

These findings could be also used by doctoral advisers and doctoral students. The acknowledgment of the shortcomings associated with specific Romanian doctoral programs could be very helpful in planning and organizing the individual doctoral process.

**Limitations and future research**

The biggest limitation of this study is the small size and the homogeneity of the sample. Although our qualitative approach did not require a larger sample, the findings cannot be extrapolated. Another limitation could be a possible acquiescence bias that originated from the induced concerns. There is also a bias coming from the coders as content analysis implies a certain amount of subjectivity in the process of coding. Moreover, the distance between the concepts lacks a quantitative measurement and this could be a direction for future research.

A future study could explore the specificity of concerns by field of study. The same study could be replicated for doctoral candidates enrolled in other faculties to verify the convergence of the findings. An extension of the sample and
increasing the number of coders could make it possible to conduct a concept mapping analysis, reducing the coding bias. These findings could be useful for developing a scale based on the identified categories for measuring different types of concerns regarding the doctoral program.

REFERENCES
