Why did I drop out? Former students’ recollections about their study process and factors related to leaving the doctoral studies

Ä. Leijen, L. Lepp & M. Remmik

To cite this article: Ä. Leijen, L. Lepp & M. Remmik (2016) Why did I drop out? Former students’ recollections about their study process and factors related to leaving the doctoral studies, Studies in Continuing Education, 38:2, 129-144, DOI: 10.1080/0158037X.2015.1055463

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2015.1055463

Published online: 02 Sep 2015.
Why did I drop out? Former students’ recollections about their study process and factors related to leaving the doctoral studies

Ä. Leijen, L. Lepp and M. Remmik

Institute of Education, University of Tartu, Tartu, Estonia

ABSTRACT

Recent reforms in higher education have provided material for researching different aspects of doctoral studies in a variety of ways. Much of the current literature concentrates on characteristics of effective supervision and doctoral students’ experiences. Less attention has been paid to the study experiences of non-completers – former doctoral students who dropped out of doctoral programmes prior to graduation. In the current study, we explore doctoral studies experiences from the perspective of non-completers and aim to identify factors that were related to dropping out. Data were collected with semi-structured interviews from 14 former doctoral students in the field of education, and qualitative thematic data analysis techniques were employed for data analysis. The results indicate that dropping out from doctoral studies is associated with different factors: for example, (with) students’ personal factors, supervisory arrangements, as well as factors related to institution and the wider learning environment. These results are further discussed and implications for enhancing study arrangements for doctoral studies are presented.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 16 July 2014
Revised 23 February 2015
Accepted 22 May 2015

KEYWORDS

Doctoral education; doctoral studies; doctoral student; dropout

An increasing number of doctoral students (Kehm 2004) and an expansion of the aims of doctoral studies (see e.g. McAlpine and Norton 2006) demand more from higher education institutions and from the supervisors of doctoral students. Moreover, influenced by recent reforms in higher education (e.g. the Bologna process) and the economic crises, a general tendency has been to get doctoral students through the Ph.D. study process faster causing an increasing pressure on universities, doctoral students, and their supervisors (Kearns, Gardiner, and Marshall 2008). According to Gardner (2009), high attrition rates are often translated into high costs for institutions that support students, for the faculty who work with them, and naturally, for the students themselves.

Consequently, attrition rates among doctoral students provide the basis for a number of studies. Vassil and Solvak’s study (2012) demonstrate that the average percentage of prolonging or discontinuing doctoral studies is 60% in Estonia. The same trend has also been noted in other European (Kehm 2004), Australian (see e.g. McCormack 2005), and North American studies (see e.g. Clarke and Lunt 2014; Ostriker, Kuh, and Voytuk 2010). However, Gardner (2009) shows that attrition and dropout rates vary.
between disciplines (from 11% to 68%) with lower rates in the natural sciences and higher rates in the humanities and social sciences.

Research has also been conducted about supervisors’ explanations of the prolongation of doctoral students’ study time (see e.g. Gardner 2009; Manathunga 2005) and about supervisor’s supervising conceptions, attempting to find connections between the style of supervision and the progress in the studies (Lee 2008; Sinclair 2004). Fewer studies have been conducted about the personal experiences of dropped out doctoral students reporting on their explanations for not continuing their postgraduate studies (see e.g. Golde 2005; Tinto 1993). These experiences would, next to other perspectives, help to further explain and better understand the reasons behind the discontinuation of studies allowing higher educational institutes to better plan support systems and measures to increase the effectiveness of doctoral studies, as also noted in several other studies (e.g. D’Andrea 2002; Willis and Carmichael 2011). Subsequently, the aim of the current study is to gain a better understanding about the process of non-completers postgraduate studies and about the factors related to the discontinuation of their studies. More specifically, this study investigates data from the field of education, as an example from social studies and humanities, where on-time graduation rates are genuinely lower in comparison to exact and natural sciences. Additionally, the study is carried out in Estonia, where the on-time graduation rate in the field of education is 25–30% depending on the university (Eesti Kõrghariduse Kvaliteediagentuur 2011). Therefore, the need to determine the reasons behind the discontinuation of studies in this field is particularly important (Ots, Leijen, and Pedaste 2012).

In the next section, we introduce the results of the literature review reflecting on the factors contributing to the progress of doctoral students as distinguished in three groups: personal characteristic, supervisory arrangements, and the wider learning community.

**Personal characteristics and life-situation**

Personal characteristics have been pointed out as important contributors to successful doctoral studies (e.g. Bair and Haworth 2004; D’Andrea 2002; Lovitts 2005; McAlpine et al. 2012). Bair and Haworth (2004), for example, reviewed 118 studies related to doctoral students’ attrition rates. As a result, they distinguished four important factors that seem to relate to Ph.D. students’ persistence in their studies. The most important being (1) motivation, both as an intrinsic as well as an extrinsic motivation (see also Lovitts 2005), whereby the lack of motivation is often cited as being the most important factor connected to attrition. (2) Goal directedness, which comprised that a doctoral degree opens up new opportunities for a doctoral student – opportunities which are personally considered valuable. (3) Positive self-concept and an internal locus control, and (4) well-being seem to relate to the persistence in studies; however, Bair and Haworth (2004) cautioned that the significance of the latter two remains uncertain.

In addition to these four factors, Lovitts (2005) highlighted additional personal characteristics contributing to degree completion, such as intelligence, knowledge (both formal and informal), and thinking style. The latter two were also emphasised in a study carried out among supervisors (e.g. D’Andrea 2002), where effective thinking, planning, and writing are considered reasons why doctoral students do not finish their postgraduate studies: that is, they have been inadequately prepared for doctoral-level learning.
Moreover, several empirical studies (see Bair and Haworth [2004] for an overview) have investigated the relationship between students’ demographic variables and their graduation efficiency. The results have been ambiguous leaving it unclear to what extent these variables relate to dropping out from doctoral studies. However, in a recent study carried out among doctoral students, McAlpine et al. (2012) found that the loss of health, family concerns, and financial strains impact doctoral students academic work and ‘the essential point is that students’ academic issues need to be situated and understood within their ongoing personal lives’ (520).

These findings highlight that several personality characteristics, such as motivation and students’ intellectual and organisational abilities, are related to successfully completing a doctoral study programme.

**Supervisory arrangements**

Previous studies (Ives and Rowley 2005; Lee 2008) have demonstrated that student supervision is another central success factor in the doctoral study process. Various studies (Lepp, Karm, and Remmik 2013; Pole et al. 1997) have outlined a number of activities and responsibilities that supervisors undertake. Some authors (see e.g. Hyatt and Williams 2011, 58–60) propose a list of competencies that supervisors can gain and strengthen, which in turn can be measured by. These can vary from the strictly academic (e.g. providing reference material or giving feedback on students written work), to practical considerations of how to conduct experiments, to providing support in the preparation and defence of the thesis. Mainard et al. (2009) have noted a supervisor’s comprehensive domain knowledge as a perquisite for successful supervision, while Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Lowe (2002), for example, have found that the a supervisor’s thorough knowledge about the research methodology in the domain is even more important. According to Manathunga (2005), supervision also contains a pedagogical component, meaning that the supervisor should understand that students might not automatically understand ‘all the intricacies of the research game’ (228) and doctoral students should be supported in that regard. According to Cotterall (2011), a pedagogical focus is deemed particularly important in supporting doctoral student’s academic writing skills. Students writing expertise will develop as they observe supervisors’ writings and produce their own texts, supported by advice and feedback.

Several scholars (Lee 2008; Manathunga 2005) also indicate that successful supervisors make an effort in building supportive relationships with the students so that a student could maximally learn from both formal and informal supervisory situations. Such relationships also entail that supervisors are enthusiastic about students’ research, show interest in it, and that this in turn would be transferred to the student.

Additional aspects of supervision considered important for successful studies are providing clear aims and expectations towards the supervisee’s research, organise productive and regular meetings, and command of diverse supervisory methods (Brew and Peseta 2004). These aspects relate to the management feature of supervision and are referred to as functional component of supervision (Lee 2008). Experienced (successful) supervisors tend to meet regularly with their students, monitor carefully their progress, and provide guidance at different stages depending on the individual needs of their students (Brew and Peseta 2004).
These results show that for a student to succeed in their studies, successful supervision is needed; however, successful supervision is multifaceted and contains elements of subject knowledge, research expertise, interpersonal relations, management skills, and teaching qualities.

**Interactions within the wider learning community**

One of the aspects through which the theme of doctoral students’ prolongation and attrition has been addressed in recent studies (see e.g. Golde 2005; Pyhältö, Stubb, and Lonka 2009; Willis and Carmichael 2011) is the interaction between the student and the organisation, and the relationships between the members of the organisation.

In the course of their studies, a doctoral student is expected to acquire domain-specific values, mentality, norms, knowledge, and skills needed for succeeding in the scientific community (Gardner 2010). Thus, the academic community is an essential learning environment for students (Hopwood 2010; Pyhältö, Stubb, and Lonka 2009). This implies that the organisation should create an environment in which doctoral students can feel competent, integrated, and valuable members of the community (Stubb, Pyhältö, and Lonka 2011). Pyhältö, Stubb, and Lonka’s (2009) study demonstrates that students who perceived their learning environment more negatively than others also expressed more stress, exhaustion, anxiety, and lack of interest. Lovitts (2001) and Gardner (2010) found that doctoral student’s lack of, or insufficient communication with the community, can lead to a discontinuation of studies. The same is confirmed by Stubb, Pyhältö, and Lonka’s (2011) study, which showed that 56% of doctoral students who had felt the lack of support from the academic community considered it to be one of the reasons for not making progress in their studies; whereas doctoral students who had experienced support from the academic community emphasised the sense of belonging as a factor that made them continue working hard in their postgraduate studies.

Disciplines differ in terms of domain-specific traditions for socialisation, cooperation, and engagement of doctoral students (Golde 2005). Gardner (2009), Golde (2005), and Virtanen and Pyhältö (2012) found that socialising is easier in the natural sciences, where doctoral students often work in the same laboratory as a research group, than in the humanities, where a student often works alone on a research topic. Domain-specific traditions also transmit to supervisory relations. Thus, natural and exact science doctoral students more frequently communicate with their supervisor than humanities doctoral students, and they have more opportunities for cooperation (e.g. joint publications). Several studies (Gardner 2010; Smeby 2000) claim this to be an explanation for higher defence rates in the natural sciences.

However, if the departmental and supervisory arrangement does not work for a doctoral student, they can seek support from their peers. Gardner (2010) noted that the most supportive community during doctoral studies is considered to be fellow students. Participants in their study emphasised that fellow students supported them much more frequently than their supervisor or other faculty members. At the same time, Lovitts (2001) and McAlpine et al. (2012) demonstrate that students need both academic and social integration in order to achieve the maximum benefit from their research studies.
These findings highlight the importance of the wider research environment of a student, which includes the social environment, but also the cooperative working environment including peer-students.

To gain a better understanding of the study experiences of doctoral students of educational sciences in Estonia who have dropped out of their studies, a wide perspective needs to be applied. As the literature review above demonstrates, the progress and satisfaction of a student in their study seems to be influenced by personal factors, intellectual and organisational factors, social and collaborative factors, and factors related to supervision. Consequently, we formulated the following research questions for the empirical study:

(1) How is the process of doctoral studies described by former doctoral students in the field of education and what factors do they associate with dropping out from the studies?

(2) How do they describe the role of the supervisor, fellow students, and the role of the departments in the process of the doctoral studies?

(3) How do they describe their non-academic commitments during the doctoral studies? The answers to these questions can provide researchers, programme developers, and other stakeholders with arguments to improve doctoral studies. Moreover, we will present a number of measures that could be implemented in doctoral study programmes to support student learning and prevent dropout.

The context of doctoral study in Estonia

The nominal study period of doctoral studies in Estonia is four years. Doctoral studies consist of compulsory and optional coursework (60 ECTS) and doctoral research (180 ECTS). One credit corresponds to 26 hours which includes, learning in a formal setting, independent studies, and research and preparation for classes or seminars. At the end, a dissertation is presented either in the form of a monograph or a collection of articles. In the case of a monograph, one peer-reviewed article is required; in the case of a collection of papers, at least three peer-reviewed articles are needed.

To commence, a doctoral student, in cooperation with the supervisor, prepares an individual study and research plan that is reviewed at the end of every academic year by an Attestation Committee, which consists of at least three members holding a doctoral degree or an equivalent qualification. An attestation is an assessment of a doctoral student’s progress in their studies and their research resulting in either a doctoral student continuing as a full-time student, a student being transferred to part time study, or being exmatriculated from the doctoral study programme (Study Regulations 2014).

Doctoral students studying on a state commissioned study places are entitled a state provided monthly allowance of €384. Other options for studying include: students without the state allowance but equal student rights as the former group, and external students without the allowance and student status. Regardless of the above mentioned study arrangements, the vast majority of all students in the field of education work full-time during their studies and their employment has little overlap with their doctoral studies (Ots, Leijen, and Pedaste 2012).
A doctoral supervisor must have a doctoral degree or an equivalent academic degree. Ph.D. supervision is a duty assigned to academic staff. There is no demand for supervisors to participate in supervisory courses.

**Methods**

**Participants**

The study’s sample consists of 14 non-completers from educational sciences (9 females and 5 males) who started their doctoral studies between 2000 and 2010 in two faculties that provide doctoral studies in education at a university in Estonia. As shown in Table 1, their study progress varied from completing none to all of the formal requirements for graduation (completing course work, doing research, and publish at least one article). In selecting the sample, the researchers followed the principle of involving non-completers from different backgrounds and with as many different experiences as possible (e.g. gender, age, supervisor, dropout study year).

The participating 14 non-completers were supervised by 11 different supervisors. As is common within the educational domain in the Estonian context, each dropout had one single supervisor.

**Data**

The data were collected between 2010 and 2013 using semi-structured interviews. All interviews consisted of questions seeking information concerning the process of doctoral studies. Additionally, participants were asked to describe the roles of their fellow students, supervisor, and department in the process of their studies. These initial questions were followed by additional clarifying questions. The main principle for formulating the questions was to aid participants in describing their studies as accurately as possible and provide complementary examples to prevent them from elaborating on general views and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ph.D. student</th>
<th>Year of study at the time of discontinuation</th>
<th>Coursework is mostly or entirely completed</th>
<th>The empirical part of doctoral research has been started</th>
<th>Publications have been published or accepted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jüri</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kati</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mari</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siim</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ants</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riina</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salme</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tõnu</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kadi</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liis</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gertu</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mart</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: ‘+’ – a feature is characteristic to the doctoral student; ‘−’ – a feature is not characteristic to the doctoral student.
principles. The interviews lasted from 35 to 75 minutes (average 55 minutes) and were recorded and fully transcribed. To protect the participants’ identities, students were given pseudonyms.

The data were analysed using qualitative thematic data analysis techniques; we followed the analysis guidelines of the phases described by Braun and Clarke (2006, 87–93). To increase the credibility of the findings, two authors undertook parallel identification of themes and sub-themes. If a disagreement about the identification of the themes was found, the authors discussed the transcribed data to reach a consensus (for more information about consensual validation, see Eisner [1991]).

First, we read the transcripts of the interviews and made notes during the interviews to familiarise ourselves with the data. In line with the research questions, we generated an initial list of ideas about what was in the data in three main areas: (1) doctoral studies progress, (2) the role of supervisor, peers, and department, and (3) the role of non-academic commitments. Next, as a second phase, we coded interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set. Following, the emerged codes were organised under themes and sub-themes. For example, within the area of doctoral studies progress we distinguished the following themes: motives for starting the doctoral studies, evaluations of doctoral curriculum courses, and hindrance of carrying out empirical research. Within each theme, several sub-themes were also distinguished; for example, regarding the latter theme the following sub-themes were identified: lack of resources, change of research topic, methodological disagreements with supervisor, and difficulties with publishing. Next, the themes were reviewed in collaboration with three researchers – to check if the themes worked in relation to the coded extracts and the complete dataset. We also generated a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis where the main themes and sub-themes were presented for each of the three areas of inquiry.

Results

In the sections below, we present the results of the current study organised under three main sections: the overall study process of non-completers; the role of the supervisor, peer-students, and the department during the study progress; and students’ non-academic commitments during their study.

The process of doctoral study

The road to doctoral studies

From the interviews, two major explanations emerged regarding students’ motivation to pursue their doctoral study. Firstly, a general interest towards research (but without a specific research topic) and a wish to prepare themselves for a professional career at university, and, secondly, an invitation from a supervisor or person connected to the curriculum. As highlighted by Mari, for example: ‘I did it [took up studies] because I was invited’. Mari’s data, which can also be seen in other data, highlights that quite often a personal interest towards pursuing doctoral studies was clearly missing. ‘I didn’t have that much aspiration or interest towards it myself. It was supervisor’s interest or invitation’ (Mari). As a result, several interviewees noted that since they had not prepared much to enter the doctoral studies, they were surprised to be admitted and felt that the only reason
they were accepted was to fill the study places in the curriculum. Consequently, participants who had entered the doctoral studies this way indicated that the lack of personal interest might have had an impact on their motivation to study and their dropout, as the following example shows:

It seems to me that it’s best to enter doctoral studies when you have some specific interest or some specific topic or area … but I actually didn’t have it … So that actually led me to ask myself why am I pursuing this. (Liis)

This shows that the motives to pursue a doctoral degree were mainly connected to external motivation, such as a supervisor’s invitation; however, some participants’ motivation were also intrinsic, but, interestingly, none of the interviewees indicated a research interest in a specific topic as being a motivator.

Review of doctoral curriculum courses

The majority of the participants successfully completed their required and optional courses from the curriculum prior to dropping out (see Table 1). In terms of students’ perception towards the usefulness and efficiency of these courses, half of the participants considered the courses useful and pleasant, emphasising positively discussions and reading materials. We can, however, see a clear distinction in perception between students who had a direct connection with the subject field before starting their doctoral studies and students who entered the studies from outside the department. Students who had a connection considered the courses repetitive, in terms of content, and as a result not beneficial enough, as highlighted by the following excerpt:

I have completed my bachelor’s and then master’s degree here [at the same department]. Taken quite a lot of courses which were practically identical … First year was quite boring I’d say. The exams and homework had to be done again. This wasn’t too exciting. (Tõnu)

Participants who entered the programme as an outsider expressed that not having the same preparation made studying more difficult compared to those who had studied in the same department. In conjunction, the feeling of unfair treatment from lecturers by these students was described several times: lecturers favoured students whom they had previously met.

In terms of the coursework, although half of the participants perceived the coursework useful and pleasant, the data does not highlight that the coursework helped students to complete their doctoral dissertation. According to participants, lecturers often did not give guidance, nor helped to create links between the subject and students’ research. As a result, doing coursework was considered by some a waste of time, as Kati explains it:

Some seminars come to mind … I sit there behind the desk and keep asking myself the question why I am here … Already then I was wondering where I would need this. And to be honest, to this day I haven’t seen where a lot of what was taught there could be useful.

Although some positive aspects were mentioned in relation to the coursework, interviewees described negative aspects as well. These were mainly connected to the variability of the target groups, an insufficient link between coursework and doctoral research, and lecturer’s unsuitable communication style. Despite these negative comments, most of the interviewees managed to complete their courses by the time of dropping out,
suggesting that completing courses and the coursework are not directly connected to dropout.

**Conducting research during studies**

Most of the doctoral students planned their doctoral dissertations as empirical research and several participants had already selected the topic prior to their doctoral study. It emerged from the interviews that more than half of the interviewees had not started their empirical research by the time they discontinued their doctoral studies (see Table 1). Some students indicated a lack of financial resources and insufficient time to support their research as a problem. More significantly, students indicated that having insufficient knowledge about research methodology made selecting a suitable research design difficult or caused the design to change frequently. Additionally, even if there was some knowledge about research methods, discussions about these methodologies with supervisors often led to strong disagreements, specifically related to choosing between qualitative and quantitative methods as the following example clearly illustrates:

> I wanted to do a qualitative research study. I was really excited about it… A qualitative research method was completely out. When I had the courage to suggest it I was told that I was stupid… it was implied… And then once, more towards the end of my studies I go to my supervisor and the s/he tells me that you know I went to this seminar abroad and they were talking about qualitative research methods and oh, these are so exciting! Couldn’t believe my ears! But by then, my time [doctoral study time] was already almost over. (Linda)

Interviewees who were preparing publications indicated that they were at a very early stage, and, by the time they dropped out, most of them had not managed to publish peer-reviewed articles (see Table 1). Students who did manage to publish articles were mainly part of research groups (although in a few cases we saw that being part of a research group was not a sufficient condition for getting published). Overall, the main reason for not publishing was, in the participants’ opinion, related to lacking the skills to write journal articles. Therefore, the process of writing and publishing was time consuming, and the feedback from reviewers was more often misleading than constructive, as the following example shows:

> Writing articles and conducting research requires certain specific skills. I just felt that I didn’t have those skills. That’s what hindered it, that I just don’t know how to write these articles in a way that they would get published… Different journals gave different reasons for why my work was not suitable. This again created mixed feelings… (Riina)

Hence, these findings demonstrated that conducting research during the studies were related to shortcomings in methodology and academic writing skills.

**The role of a supervisor, peer-students, and department in doctoral student’s progression**

**The role of a supervisor**

Most of the non-completers noted that outside the official supervisory seminars they would only meet their supervisor or exchange email communication when they themselves initiated it. Some justified their own initiatives as positive, as it gave them the opportunity to be free adult learners.
Students mostly regarded the supervisory relationship positively when they were personally compatible with their supervisor. In addition, most of the interviewees valued their supervisor’s good disciplinary knowledge in terms of theoretical background and methodology, informative conversations, feedback, and reading suggestions. Kind, warm, and friendly interaction was also considered important, also in cases where the research-related supervisory cooperation was problematic.

Interviewees who pointed out dissatisfaction or negative relationships with their supervisor also connected this with their decision to drop out from their doctoral studies. From these interviews, the main themes related to dissatisfaction were the clarity and quality of the received feedback and the lack of a supervisor’s initiative and interest in their study progression and research topic. More specifically, regarding the feedback received from the supervisor, several interviewees pointed out that supervisor’s feedback was shallow and too general and, as a result, the feedback provided little input for the student how to proceed, as highlighted in the following excerpts:

My supervisor suggested a really long list of articles to read in order to further develop the research topic I had chosen by that time. So I read these articles and did not understand how they were connected to my research topic… Her/his main supervisory activity was telling me to read, read, read. (Siim)
The main thing s/he had to say was to avoid vagueness. This comment was spot on… It was true and I am grateful to her/him for it. S/he did say that, but at the same time s/he couldn’t say what should be there instead. (Linda)

Despite the wide recognition of needing to take initiatives when communicating with supervisors, several interviewees also described the wish for the supervisor to show more interest in their research. In addition, aspects such as the supervisor finding the time to delve into their doctoral student’s work and a supervisor’s initiative monitoring the progress of a doctoral student were brought out from the interviews. Several participants described that the supervisor’s own research interest did not fit with the supervisee’s research interest, or that the supervisor was withdrawn from research work due to other work commitments. Therefore, half of the participants did not sense that the supervisor was interested in supervising them, as comes out clearly in the following example:

Well this was the case with me, I mean, it didn’t just happen that I glided away from things like a lizard, but I had been initiating to talk about it with her/him several times, but in the end you already feel embarrassed when you go to talk about it, then it’s probably clear that s/he talks about other things and you need to come back again, sit down and talk about this later. So we sit down and discuss it. I call her/him and ask, I send an email and ask and so it keeps being postponed all the time and so it goes from year to year. (Siim)

In one case, the supervisee described a conflict between her and a supervisor as the sole motive for ending her studies. It was not possible for the doctoral student to continue the studies in the same institution as power relations had very clearly become manifested.

To summarise, several supervisor-related factors, such as interest, commitment, regularity of meetings, and feedback, were highlighted as having an impact on student satisfaction with their doctoral studies and contributing to dropping out.
Peer-students' role

The interviewees described their relationships with former peer-students as friendly. However, less than half of the interviewees described some informal contact with their peers outside coursework settings. Most of the participants described themselves as often being alone when taking courses and doing empirical research and only consulting with their supervisor in case of need and opportunity. A lack of time and duties outside the university were mainly given as reasons for not communicating with peers, as Mart pointed out during his interview:

My communication with them … well I didn’t really … I didn’t attend the events, these informal meetings. I had the opportunity to go, but often the times didn’t suit me and therefore I couldn’t go … there was a group of people who were from my course, I knew them and we always talked when we saw each other, but I didn’t have closer friendships with them.

Interviewees who had little external contact with their peer-students nevertheless said (when trying to find aspects that could have supported them in progressing in their studies) that moving along with others would have supported their motivation for making progress in their studies.

The role of department

Most interviewees only mentioned the department responsible for organising doctoral study after the interviewer had specifically asked about it. Themes such as the university’s financial support (e.g. providing funding for going to conferences and organising scholarship payments), the work of the academic affairs secretary, and the attestation were raised. Generally, the interviewees were positive about the effectiveness of the secretary who communicated with doctoral students and forward study-related information to them; however, neither of these are associated with the actual monitoring of the doctoral study. More commonly, interviewees indicated that the department did not have any substantive role in either supporting or hindering their study. The only substantive role they attributed to the department was the annual attestation where the interviewees expected to have a thorough academic dialogue and hoped to receive advice from various specialists. Yet, most of the interviewees described the attestation as a formality from which students received a positive evaluation to their studies even in cases where the requirements were not fully met or were met insufficiently (e.g. reaching the fourth year of study without practically starting the empirical part, see Table 1), as is illustrated below by Tõnu:

The work of the attestation committees should be more thorough: someone should have at least some idea about doctoral student’s abilities and about how s/he is progressing with research. There should be more monitoring.

Hence, most of the students did not consider the department having any substantive role in either supporting or hindering their studies. Even the annual attestation of the students was often considered formal and insignificant for guiding their research.

Doctoral students’ non-academic commitments during doctoral study

In addition to the circumstances described above, the interviewees also described several non-academic factors influencing their progress. It emerged from the interviews that only
one interviewee had the opportunity to continuously work on her/his research. Most of the interviewees had experienced short-term interruptions during their studies as a result of their everyday work, family life, and personal events.

According to the interviewees, their daily work consumed most of their time. It was, however, not considered possible to stop their work in order to focus on their studies; the scholarships and grants could not sufficiently cover their costs of living. Thus, economic reasons were considered a higher priority for most of the interviewees than their studies. Two participants worked part time while the majority worked full-time. Being able to commit fully to their studies was considered very difficult, as the following example illustrates:

This is the main problem, where your doctoral research topic is not connected to your everyday work at all, then it’s really difficult to combine these things … Because, well you know, when you work full time you have to work 40 hours per week. And when you work for 40 hours per week then you don’t have another 40 hours to spend on studying. You can’t even snatch 2 hours. Not even in the course of a long period. I mean for a short time, a couple of weeks you can do it … So the main reason for me discontinuing the study was that my time resources are limited. (Mart)

Most participants had at least one additional member in their household during their studies. Although most indicated that these members were understanding of their situation, it was nevertheless necessary for them to fulfil family commitments which resulted in doctoral study work being pushed to the background.

These findings highlight that non-academic commitments seem to be very important factors related to dropout. Doctoral students’ daily work and it not being integrated or connected with the doctoral dissertation was described as an important aspect for dropping out from their studies.

**Discussion and conclusion**

The aim of this study was to gain a better understanding of the process of non-completers postgraduate studies and about the factors related to the discontinuation of their studies. In the following section we will discuss some of the main results and conclude with the necessity and opportunities for planning changes in doctoral study arrangements in the light of these results.

Overall, the results of this study align with results obtained in other studies (Gardner 2009; McCormack 2005) demonstrating that the progress of doctoral students and the discontinuation of their study is influenced by student’s personal factors (e.g. insufficient knowledge and skills, lack of interest, family demands, lack of finances), by supervisory arrangements (e.g. supervisor’s lack of support), and by other factors contributing to the wider learning community (community’s support, substantive monitoring of the studies).

Several interviewees entered their doctoral studies mainly by supervisor invitation, while admitting that they actually did not have enough motivation at the time of admittance. This type of invitation could be considered as motivational, as the supervisor expresses support, but our results actually seem to suggest that it is not guaranteed for a successful completion if the doctoral student is unable to develop a profound interest in the research and a collaborative supervisory relationship. Based on the findings of this study it seems to be important to evaluate the doctoral student’s own motivation in
the admittance stage in order to reduce situations where they drift into their studies and are therefore improperly suited or motivated, as also suggested by Gardner (2009). It becomes evident from this research, similarly to D’Andrea (2002) study, that alongside motivation, it is also important to consider the level of the applicants’ knowledge and skills and to critically evaluate whether missing knowledge and skills can be acquired during the study period.

While coursework was not always valued and received criticism from our sample, most of the interviewees had nevertheless successfully completed the mandatory subjects at the time they dropped out. At the same time, it is noteworthy that several doctoral students had reached the final study year without having started the empirical part of their research, including finding a research focus, selecting suitable methods, conducting research, and presenting it in writing. This confirms the research results of studies conducted by Lovitts’ (2005) and Smeby’s (2000) who claim that completing courses in the curriculum is not sufficient for study completion. The transition from a dependent stage to an independent stage, where doctoral student’s autonomy and independence is bigger, needs further support according to the examples given by our interviewees.

Our results suggest that regular meetings with the supervisor were seldom and primarily initiated by the student. Contrary, previous studies (Brew and Peseta 2004; Lee 2008) have demonstrated that regular meetings are crucial in relation to the study progress. Lee (2008) has even claimed that a clear and purposeful focus on the task and appropriate management of the process and time, conceptualised as functional supervision, is one of the most important competencies of a supervisor. This also means that students should not be the only initiators of meetings and monitoring of their study progress. Moreover, Manathunga (2005) claims that the doctoral student might not automatically understand all the intricacies of the research game and therefore scaffolding from others, including the supervisor, is needed. Depending on the progress made, this scaffolding is gradually decreased in order to support the development of an independent researcher. Therefore, it is important to institutionally train supervisors, including the aspects of selecting the right supervisory style and to what extent and how to support different learners.

The role of the department in the doctoral studies should also be analysed and strengthened, because the wider institutional and academic environment is crucial in learning to become a researcher (Lee 2008; Lovitts 2005). This implies that, in addition to administrative support, departments should also offer substantive support for supervisors and doctoral students for making progress in their studies. This includes noticing doctoral students’ poor progress, monitoring the nature of cooperation between supervisor and supervisee, and advising doctoral students in relation to their studies, both in research work as well as more generally, in order to manage better their doctoral studies.

Attestations, which our interviewees described as controlling and not supportive, should be transformed into substantive discussions supporting the progress of doctoral students and should be held between a doctoral student and senior colleagues whose aim should be to offer assistance to the doctoral student to secure progression. Additionally to the attestation, supervision workloads could be monitored and rewarded and a more rigorous system for giving feedback to the activity of supervisors should be established. This system should have the possibility to detect supervisors who use unsuitable methods and communication style and to offer them advice for developing their supervisory practice.
In addition to shortcomings related to the supervision process, interviewees also brought out a lack of support from their peers during their studies. Research (Lovitts 2001; Stubb, Pyhältö, and Lonka 2011) has demonstrated that a doctoral student’s lack of and, in the student’s view, insufficient communication with the community, as well as a lack of sense of belonging, can be the reasons why studies are discontinued. The same is also implied by our study’s results where doctoral students describe the need for a supporting community. Stubb, Pyhältö, and Lonka (2011) also note that doctoral students who had experienced support from an academic community emphasised the sense of belonging as a factor that made them to continue working hard. At the same time, when there is not much contact with the community (which happens to doctoral students after completing courses) and with the supervisor, it is difficult to achieve a doctoral student’s enculturation, which Lee (2008) regards an important aim of doctoral studies. Therefore, the formation of a doctoral students’ community should be supported. This would allow students to exchange various types of important information among themselves and discuss their research work not only with their supervisor, but also with other people from the same field. Additionally, progressing in doctoral research could also be supported by organising doctoral students’ activities in the format of research groups.

Our research findings demonstrate that other work commitments made doctoral research difficult and were considered a reason for discontinuation. Continuous work on the dissertation was hindered by their main work, which in most cases was outside the university and without which the interviewees could not have managed to cope financially. Being unable to lighten the workload, doctoral students were unable to find enough time to commit to their studies. We see that one solution to overcome this problem is to engage doctoral students more in joint research projects, where they would work as researchers and would be paid a sufficient amount to live on. This would also prompt the doctoral students to have daily communication within the research community and, in addition to supervisor’s support, they would also have daily support from fellow doctoral students and other colleagues. In addition, state funded monthly allowances for doctoral students should be increased, thus eliminating the need to work outside the university alongside a doctoral study. Making the organisation of studies more flexible should also be considered, as suggested by Ots, Leijen, and Pedaste (2012). Doctoral students, under this arrangement, could agree on their individual schedule and pace for their doctoral study.

Although this paper reports on a small-scale study in which the narrow focus poses limitations to how many generalisations can be gleaned from the results, we find that the above-described implications could benefit doctoral programmes in Estonian and in other countries facing similar challenges. Further research could explore the implementation of these measures and point out which of the described implications or its combinations are especially valuable for supporting doctoral students’ learning and preventing them from dropping out.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our research team member, Aivar Ots for his valuable contributions to this study. We also thank the anonymous reviewers who provided constructive feedback and good suggestions for improving the paper.
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by a European Social Fund Eduko programme [grant number 1.2.0302.09-004] and by an ESF project in the Doctoral School of Educational Sciences [grant number 1.2.0401.09-0070].

References


