

# CONDITIONS FOR THE SUCCESS OF DOCTORAL SUPERVISION

Concrete avenues for doctoral students  
and those supervising them

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## Concrete avenues for doctoral students and those supervising them

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## PREFACE

Under what conditions can one successfully complete a thesis?

If you have taken the trouble to pick up this brochure and read these few lines, this is probably a question for you.

Under what conditions does one build useful and relevant knowledge, which, in addition to being one's own work, will be acknowledged and integrated by a scientific community whose backing is essential to be a researcher? Under what conditions and thanks to what accompanying and support measures can one build such knowledge while preserving physical and mental well-being?

If you are a supervisor, you might be saying to yourself "I know, because I did it!". If you are a doctoral student, you certainly think that you can draw on your experience of the Masters. Of course, you are right. Your experience matters a lot. But the fact remains that each new thesis is a unique human adventure, the conditions for the success of which are largely unknown.

The advice you will find in this brochure is not purely a fruit of common sense. It is founded on two research studies, two "theses on the thesis", carried out in Fribourg and acknowledged for their scientific quality. Its authors have summarized here the key elements from the literature and their own research and have come up with possible avenues forward that you can interpret according to your context and your discipline.

Enjoy the read, and may your adventure be happy and rewarding!

Prof. Dr Bernadette Charlier

## CONDITIONS AND MEASURES TO FACILITATE DOCTORAL JOURNEY

The doctorate is a demanding journey, comparable to a long rollercoaster ride where contentment, stress, anxiety, pride, relief, hope, interest, frustration and doubt alternate. As a result of this instability, the initial motivation, nourished by the prospect of professional and personal enrichment, may wane, while the known risks of harm to mental health increase. This



deterioration is notably attributable to the fact that doctoral students are often insufficiently prepared for the multiple, complex tasks involved in carrying out their research, but also the teaching activities entrusted to them. At the same time, supervisors do not necessarily have the tools to supervise them optimally, or do not use them.

This brochure is intended for doctoral students and those who supervise them so they can design and implement, individually and jointly, the conditions and measures to facilitate the career of doctoral students while preserving their physical and psychological well-being.

Its contents are drawn from two doctoral theses in Educational Sciences (Lambert, 2013; Niclasse, 2019). The first is devoted to the professional development of teaching assistants in higher education, and more specifically to the complexity and richness of their research and teaching experience (Lambert, 2013). It aims to describe and understand the individual and organizational configurations that can be a source of professional development, as well as the different ways in which these transformations come about, by analysing the products of the process. The second thesis explores the emotional experiences of doctoral students on a daily basis in order to highlight the key moments in their individual development and transformation process in interaction with their environment (Niclasse, 2019). It aims to understand what is required for them to learn and develop in suitable conditions, while preserving a state of well-being capable of supporting this process. Adopting a holistic perspective, the two studies examine, each in its own way and with specific theoretical foundations, the goals pursued by doctoral students and the meaning they give to their training, the individual and situational conditions of their transformation and professional development, the strategies they implement in these processes and the learning achieved. The results which were complementary in several

aspects were obtained by means of mixed designs (combining questionnaires and interviews), from samples of teaching assistants and doctoral students benefiting from a scholarship and/or registered as external students at the University of Fribourg. These different categories will be referred to in the rest of this brochure in a unified manner as 'doctoral students'.

The following chapter provides a summary of the theoretical foundations on which the recommendations presented in the second part of this brochure are based.

## INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS AND CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

Different parameters come into play in the transformation and professional development processes of doctoral students.

### Individual characteristics

Individual characteristics are a central element of professional and personal development. In particular, they include:

- Intrinsic existential aspirations (fulfilment and self-actualization, authentic and harmonious relationships, social contribution), the goals pursued and the motivations for the doctorate (curiosity, intellectual stimulation, desire to learn and develop skills, aspiration to improve knowledge of a subject related to their interests, perceived usefulness of the diploma) and, where applicable, for assistantship (interest in teaching and supporting students, development of teaching skills).
- Other components of eudemonic well-being, namely the satisfaction of basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, affiliation; see pages 9-10).
- Professional objectives and career plans (research and teaching in universities and higher education, managerial positions in the public or private sector).
- Scientific and educational knowledge, prior experience and skills in teaching and research.
- Personal skills such as critical reflexivity and self-direction (ability to manage professional development by setting goals and implementing appropriate strategies to achieve them).

## Organizational context

The organizational context corresponds to the global environment and the general climate in which doctoral students evolve, and encompasses the resources the institution makes available, or not. These include the regulations, the terms of engagement and remuneration, the working conditions, the infrastructure and the institutional policies regarding the supervision of doctoral students. Two important elements are:

- The possibility for doctoral students to participate in support programmes for research and teaching activities (e.g. doctoral programmes, pedagogical training, mentoring programmes, workshops and seminars). These courses are highly valued by doctoral students, because they provide specific practical tools as well as opportunities to discuss with peers and experts outside of the supervisory relationship.
- Offers of psychological and social support within the institution (e.g. service for gender equality, social service, psychological counselling, chaplaincy). These provide contact with people who know the university world and are subject to professional secrecy. It is regrettable that suffering doctoral students tend to seek help outside the institution (Waight & Giordano, 2018, cited in Niclasse, 2019), perhaps out of fear of being stigmatized or because they are not aware what is on offer, particularly at the start of their doctorate.

## Socio-professional environment

On a daily or occasional basis, doctoral students interact with different categories of people, all of whom play an important part in their various activities:

- Supervisors (main thesis supervisor and other people involved in supervision). As the main relays of learning and support for doctoral students, they play a central role. However, this role can be ambiguous, or perceived as such (e.g. the dual status of thesis supervisor and manager of the assistantship).
- Peers and colleagues (other assistants and doctoral students, more experienced teachers and researchers). These people act as valuable resources for research and teaching, including through opportunities for exchange and mutual support provided informally. A climate of trust, solidarity and collaboration within work teams promotes the professional and personal development of doctoral students. Conversely, an atmosphere marked by competition and rivalry hinders them.

- Members of the wider scientific community, met at congresses, conferences, training sessions, or during scientific collaboration, etc. If based on trust and goodwill, which is often the case, such exchanges with senior researchers can provide sound benchmarks and learning opportunities. They reassure doctoral students of the value and relevance of their contributions and generate criticism and constructive suggestions for improvement. While allowing doctoral students to gradually feel part of the scientific community, they offer the opportunity to rely on or free themselves from professional models and ideals, beyond the figure embodied by their supervisor.

### Personal circle

Made up of family and friends, this personal circle can provide fundamental emotional and practical support for doctoral students. Nevertheless, it can also be a source of conflict by placing demands on personal resources of doctoral students through responsibility and duties.

In addition, some students may have the impression that members of their personal entourage do not really understand their experiences, as they do not or insufficiently know the academic world, its problems and issues. As a result, the family and relatives may not only be considered a beneficial resource during the doctorate.

### Variable configurations

Personal and contextual conditions are not fixed once and for all, nor dissociated from one another. Throughout the doctorate, a key period at the beginning of a career, they interact dynamically taking on variable configurations that can be more or less favourable to professional development. Hence the importance of optimizing these conditions and their interactions, so that each doctoral student (given his or her history, values, aspirations, representations, characteristics, personal context and skills) can take advantage of the opportunities the professional environment offers and find a place in the scientific community.

While training offers (e.g. doctoral programmes, pedagogical training) represent an important avenue for professional development, doctoral students learn just as much - if not more - from interacting with members of their professional entourage and/or the scientific community on a daily basis as well as by carrying out research and teaching activities. These workplace learning

opportunities should be recognized and valued alongside participation in more formalized set-ups.

## ACTING AND INTERACTING IN SITU

The doctorate is a transformation and development process that involves establishing a variety of specific, transversal knowledge and skills as well as a professional posture and identity. On the one hand, this is achieved through meaningful research and teaching activities, and on the other by contributing to those social interactions in which these activities take place. However, participating and interacting do not necessarily lead to growth. Certain levers can facilitate learning in situ.

### Progressing by managing instability

Doctoral students are confronted on a daily basis with situations in which they lack knowledge or which require ways of thinking or doing that challenge how they currently see and act in the world, or how they think of themselves as (future) professionals. These moments of destabilization offer learning opportunities which can, under certain conditions, lead them to transform and develop themselves, to restructure their ways of seeing, thinking and acting, and to experience pivotal moments, thresholds that lead to a deeper, more complex level of understanding.

Learning opportunities take on a particular meaning depending on the stage in the doctorate. It can be broken down schematically into three phases with permeable boundaries. At the beginning of the doctorate, learning focuses particularly on the construction and mobilization of knowledge, the appropriation of codes and standards, allowing doctoral students to build their research and position as a novice researcher within the scientific community. The middle of the process is marked by a detachment from his or her experiences and achievements and the development of a "meta" position, which will lead them to see other ways of organizing ideas (divergent thinking), in particular thanks to the confrontation with unpublished data collected and analysed during this period. The final phase, leading to the completion of the doctorate, is marked by critical reflexivity vis-à-vis the reference frameworks being used, resulting in original

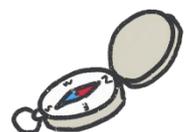
proposals that can contribute to science. For doctoral students this period implies developing presentations and written work and taking responsibility for them. Doing so allows doctoral students to learn to assert their ideas and their posture as researcher with a view to these being acknowledged by members of the scientific community. This learning is finally put to the test during the defence of the thesis, an academic ritual both feared and awaited by doctoral students. Information and advice from supervisors is therefore invaluable in enabling them to prepare appropriately, both with regard to formal and administrative requirements, but also the unspoken habits and rules that permeate this particular exercise.

This transformation and development process is costly in cognitive, motivational and affective resources. It requires an effort. On the one hand, countering the human tendency to maintain a certain stability in systems of representations and beliefs. On the other, accepting and managing the momentary destabilization, which can be uncomfortable and leave insecure. Indeed, (re)building one's knowledge by mobilizing what has been learnt and reorganizing it to integrate new elements requires an active commitment to constructively manage the imbalance. This potentially causes ambivalent emotions (satisfaction at developing understanding, anxiety linked to a momentary loss of bearings, etc.).

### Having a sufficient base of resources

Creating and maintaining a sufficient base of resources is essential to be able to engage in activities which, like the doctorate, require special effort. This foundation is, for the most part, constituted by satisfying three fundamental basic psychological needs that are interdependent and present in each individual (Ryan & Deci, 2017, cited in Niclasse, 2019):

- **Autonomy:** having the opportunity to express oneself, to make choices, to initiate one's actions and to regulate them in line with one's values, aspirations, goals and interests - without becoming isolated.
- **Competence:** having the opportunity to rise to challenges adapted to one's abilities and to seize opportunities to develop one's skills; being able to see that one masters what one undertakes and to feel progress.



- Affiliation: experiencing others as receptive and sensitive, as able to reciprocate; being able to form authentic, warm relationships, suffused with benevolence and trust, consideration for who one is and mutual support.

The concomitant satisfaction of these three basic needs promotes well-being which, in turn, confers the vitality and energy that allows a creative and non-defensive approach to daily life. When supported by supervisors, teams, colleagues and other members of the scientific community, the learning and professional development process is significantly facilitated for doctoral students. Thus, they can:

- (Re)engage in and (re)appropriate their actions by acting intentionally (autonomy) and position themselves within their scientific community in a context where codes, standards and practices are still too often implicit.
- Understand and appropriate what has been done before them and master tools, acts and ways of thinking employed and valued by their community by accessing higher, more complex and critical levels of understanding (competence) that allow them to subsequently evolve.
- Progress in a sphere of trust that provides psychological security and support (affiliation) which makes it possible for them to be momentarily destabilized, without fear of getting lost or of being subject to reprisals. As a result, they benefit from the reinforcing effect of these relationships and are open to feedback and guidance while exercising the intellectual and emotional freedom that allows them to collaborate, take risks, create and innovate.
- Achieve the institutional objective of contributing to science and society set for the obtention of a doctorate.

Actors in the socio-professional environment play a central role in transmission by providing benchmarks and supporting the acquisition of tools for critical reflexivity. In addition to supporting learning and professional development, these human resources help reduce the risk of drop-out or even the deterioration of doctoral students' health. More and more research indeed reveals the worrying psychological state in which a majority of them find themselves (exhaustion, burnout, depression), revealing isolation, intense and chronic stress and a feeling of helplessness well beyond what would be expected from the management of the normal hazards

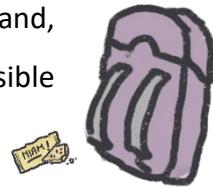
of any research process (see additional resources, in particular Levecque et al., 2017; Schmidt & Hansson, 2018).

### Shared responsibilities

Doctoral students are primarily responsible for their studies, their commitment, the way they invest and make use of the supervision and the support framework provided. On the other hand, they have no grip over the number and quality of learning opportunities offered. These are the educational responsibility of the people and institutions supervising the future generation of researchers. This is why specific recommendations are proposed below, both for doctoral students and supervisors.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DOCTORAL STUDENTS

As a doctoral student, it is up to you to regularly reflect on your situation and, if necessary, actively seek appropriate solutions. Some actions make it possible to anticipate potential problems, others to find ways of remedying difficulties already identified.



### Taking stock of the situation

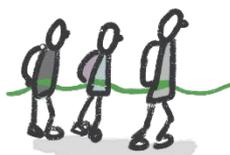
- Consider your personal values, interests, goals and motivations, in connection with your doctoral project and your life in general, and be aware of what is important to you, of what leads to progress, but also of your contradictions (which may pose an increased risk to mental health). The aim is not to attain a precise, fixed vision of these considerations, but rather to pay attention to the drivers behind your actions in order to be able to act intentionally (rather than react) should it prove necessary.
- Examine your personal situation and the conditions in which the doctorate is to take place. Discuss the implications of choosing to do a doctorate with those close to you (partner, children, family) whose daily lives will be impacted by this long-term project.
- From the outset, clarify the formal aspects of the research, teaching and administrative activities with your supervisors and superiors (e.g. contract, detailed specifications, clear instructions about tasks to be performed, organisation of time and workspaces, rhythms and modalities of exchanges, sharing of responsibilities, rights and obligations of the different parties).
- Take stock of the choices at key stages of the doctorate (e.g. decision to embark on a doctorate, selection of subject and methods).

### Communicating and creating a personal network

- Communicate regularly with your supervisors and do not hesitate to ask questions, clarify uncertainties and evoke difficulties encountered.
- Adopt a proactive approach to your supervisors, for example, by soliciting feedback or specific advice, or by requesting and appropriately preparing meetings to take stock of progress together. Since supervisors are often very busy, they tend to interpret the

absence of requests from doctoral students as a lack of need for support. It is therefore up to you to take the initiative should you have a question or difficulty, or simply to remain in contact by providing information on the progress of your thesis or teaching activities.

- Seek advice or help from peers and colleagues. They are valuable partners when it comes to discussing, asking questions or seeking advice. They offer resources that are complementary to those of your supervisors and the closer hierarchical proximity is conducive to discussion and collaboration.
- Create a network of trusted interlocutors, in addition to peers and colleagues. These people are ideally close enough to be familiar with the situations experienced, but without having too direct a relationship, especially not a professional one. They can be (post) doctoral students from the same discipline or a similar discipline, but doing their thesis under the supervision of another person, (post) doctoral students from the same institution, but another discipline, or even (post) doctoral students met in a doctoral programme or during a training workshop. These people play an important role by listening and advising, because they can understand the situations you experience and their implications, but without the risk of competition and without issues likely to complicate daily professional relationships. Actors at other hierarchical levels, such as professors or senior researchers, can also be valuable partners in critical reflection and in the development of thought and ideas.



## Seizing opportunities

Participate in activities supporting research and teaching (e.g. doctoral programmes, pedagogical training, mentoring programmes, workshops and seminars, individual or group coaching). In principle, you should be able to participate freely in offers you consider useful for your further training and professional development. However, you should choose according to your specific needs, expectations, availability and priorities. To make these choices, it may be useful to seek advice from others, for example your supervisors, your superiors or those managing support offers.

## Taking care of yourself

Pay attention to your well-being. The doctorate is not only demanding, but also rich in emotions, both pleasant and unpleasant. Managing these emotions is essential to maintaining a solid base of resources and energy. Doing so makes it possible to handle the fluctuations inherent in any research process (uncertainties, hazards, etc.), but also to support learning and creativity, both of which are demanding in cognitive and emotional terms. Ensuring your well-being means, in particular, setting aside time for rest and leisure, favouring a healthy and balanced diet, and preserving your hours of sleep. It is also about recognizing and expressing your emotions and sharing interacting with people you trust. Meditation (see additional resources) can be beneficial. Without seeking to be therapeutic, it can help prevent the onset of psychological disorders by supporting regulation and emotional recovery, especially under high stress.



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THOSE SUPERVISING DOCTORAL STUDENTS

On a daily basis, as supervisors and experienced members of the scientific community, you play a key role in the professional development of doctoral students. You provide them with a work environment and support offering opportunities to learn and develop. Of course, there are many ways to do this and each supervisor needs to find the way that works for him or her. Nevertheless, certain avenues can be proposed to ensure quality supervision.



### Getting involved and setting up a transparent framework

Whether you are a novice or experienced in doctoral supervision, it is wise to reflect on how you represent your role and the practices implemented. This involves clarifying, first for yourself, your expectations with regard to your doctoral students, as well as the methods of support and the limits that you consider necessary to place on supervision. In particular, this involves asking the following questions: What do I expect from my doctoral students? What should they do (or not do) when doing their thesis under my supervision? What is their role as a doctoral student? What is my role as a supervisor? What actions do I agree to undertake? Who is primarily responsible for research? How are we going to organize the supervision (meetings, readings and feedbacks, etc.)?

At the start of any new supervisory relationship, the first exchanges with the (future) doctoral student are fundamental. They should make it possible to establish a trusting relationship necessary for support. It is therefore essential to be available (allow enough time) and be open to discussion, so that the (future) doctoral student feels free to ask questions and, should he or she feel the need, to raise delicate subjects. These exchanges should cover the following aspects, amongst others:

- Get to know the person, including understanding their values, goals and aspirations; discuss their reasons for choosing to embark on a doctorate to ensure it corresponds to the person's goals.
- Be transparent in discussing the opportunities and constraints of an academic career, as well as the various professional options open to holders of a doctorate.

- Without being intrusive, learn about the doctoral student's personal situation, not out of curiosity, but for its possible impact on the doctorate. Ensure the person has analysed the conditions in which he or she finds him or herself with a view to carrying out a lengthy research project.
- Take into account the person's contractual and personal situation (e.g. respect the thesis time, organize working days).
- Explain transparently the support framework proposed (depending on the aspects mentioned above), specifying what is negotiable and what is not, what will be provided, and what, on the other hand, is the doctoral student's responsibility. Make it clear that the doctoral student is responsible for how he or she takes on and uses this framework.
- Rely on a charter. Establish a doctoral agreement (see additional resources).
- Consider the relevance of co-supervision or co-direction of a thesis, as well as the possibility of setting up a support committee, making it possible to engage third parties in the supervision relationship.

Autonomy, competence and affiliation are the pillars of the doctorate, a base of resources. Supervision should therefore give paramount importance to the satisfaction of these three basic psychological needs.



### Encouraging the development of autonomy

To allow doctoral students to regulate, orient and embody their actions with intention, as a supervisor you should:

- Within the framework of support provided, grant room for manoeuvre in the form of opportunities for choice and initiative.
- Suggest appropriate challenges.
- Explain the meaning of new activities, providing arguments allowing doctoral students to understand how these activities have value and are relevant to the research and to the doctoral student as a professional. In this way, the doctoral student can experience the added value and give meaning to his or her actions. This will facilitate the integration of the values, standards and practices of the scientific community.

- Adapt the support offered to the individual characteristics of the doctoral student and to his/her personal situation, to the difficulties encountered and to the current stage in the doctorate (see the three stages: beginning, middle or end; see pages 8-9).
- Carefully consider the use of coercive measures and rewards because of their potentially detrimental effect on well-being and motivation.

### Encouraging the development of competence

To encourage the development of competence requires offering quality guidance and providing benchmarks to doctoral students:

- Provide intellectual support for the completion of the research, supporting critical thinking and providing theoretical and methodological insights.
- Provide regular informative feedback on output (thesis chapters, abstracts to be submitted, presentations in congresses, etc.) taking into consideration the doctoral student's perspective, recognizing and clarifying valuing indications of proficiency and the development of skills, noting progress, pointing out and discussing shortcomings and mistakes.
- Explain the values, standards and practices (still largely) implicit in the scientific community, as well as the quality requirements for processes and outputs. Play the role of a socialization agent, enabling the doctoral student to understand the "rules of the game" of the scientific world and to adopt them gradually. One good practice, among others, is to support the doctoral student's first steps in the scientific community by jointly participating in conferences, projects or publications.
- Encourage and support independent critical reflection on contents, activities and related experience (identification of obstacles, concerns, etc.).
- Support the development of a personal network of resource people and encourage meetings with experts in the field.
- Foster a culture of collaboration and mutual aid in the research team, allowing doctoral students to benefit from the support of peers and colleagues.
- Encourage the doctoral student to participate in activities supporting research and teaching (e.g. doctoral programmes, pedagogical training, mentoring programmes, workshops and seminars). It is important to relay related information, as doctoral students are often poorly informed about available opportunities, especially if they do

not work as an assistant in the university. Encouragement from the supervisor and recognition of efforts made, enhance motivation and commitment in ongoing training.

## Supporting affiliation

Doctoral students' perception of the quality of support is also linked to more personal and



emotional factors, such as interactions on a personal, warm, benevolent and respectful basis, mutual sharing of experience, but also the recognition of their difficulties and emotional experiences.

This requires:

- Plan and devote sufficient time to discussions and be fully accessible during them.
- Establish a climate of trust and security (authenticity, consideration, empathy, openness) that allows doubt and trial and error.
- Exchange on a personal and emotional level (which does not imply intimacy). Consider the doctoral student as a unique individual, worthy of interest and trust. Recognize and possibly express your emotions, share your experiences - your successes, but also your doubts and the pitfalls encountered - so that the doctoral student can have more realistic expectations, and see, beyond the outputs, the entire knowledge creation process and the uncertainty and vagaries that are normal to all research.

## Developing as a supervisor

In addition to reflecting on your vision of your role and the way you supervise doctoral students, discussing with other supervisors, participating in trainings or reading resources about supervision (such as those suggested in the additional resources) can contribute to your personal development and the development of your supervisory skills.

## REFERENCES AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### MAIN REFERENCES

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### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR DOCTORAL STUDENTS

#### Suggested readings

The books are available at the PSPE library of the University of Fribourg (Regina Mundi site) and the articles in journals accessible via the BCU.

Bourgeois, É. (2018). *Le désir d'apprendre : Formation et construction du sujet*. Presses Universitaires de France.

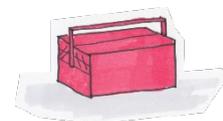
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### **Guides for doctoral students**

- Guide “Getting Your Thesis Off to a Good Start. Guide for doctoral students”
- Guide “Beyond the doctorate. Guide for advanced doctoral and postdoctoral students”

<https://www.unifr.ch/graduatecampus/en/>

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR THOSE SUPERVISING DOCTORAL STUDENTS

### Suggested readings

The books are available at the PSPE library of the University of Fribourg (Regina Mundi site) and the articles in journals accessible via the BCU.

- Bourgeois, É. (2018). *Le désir d'apprendre : Formation et construction du sujet*. Presses Universitaires de France.
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### **Guides for doctoral students**

- Guide “Getting Your Thesis Off to a Good Start. Guide for doctoral students”
- Guide “Beyond the doctorate. Guide for advanced doctoral and postdoctoral students”

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