

THE PHD VIOLENCE METER

Fighting against violence and poor working conditions during the PhD

COLLECTIF ECUME

“The PhD Violence Meter is a **self-assessment tool** that helps PhD students **identify dysfunctions, as well as situations of harassment, discrimination, and violence during their doctoral work**. Its three-segment color scale helps measure the nature and quality of the relationship between the PhD student and their supervisor(s). While reading it, you may be surprised by certain items and their placement on the severity scale—you might think, ‘But it’s like this everywhere!’ or ‘If we start complaining about this, there’s no end!’”

“In our view, this is a sign that these practices have become sufficiently normalized to be considered standard, that one must ‘go through this’, and that accepting certain things helps the university continue to function. On the contrary, we believe that **reaffirming the abnormality—or even illegality—of certain practices can help set clear boundaries and rethink the fight for fair working conditions for everyone at the university**. This is essential for the well-being of workers and for the quality of research and teaching.



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That's great! *Your work environment is healthy when...*

You benefit from regular and supportive supervision, and you are encouraged in your work

The supervision arrangements, agreed upon in consultation with your research supervisor, are respected throughout your PhD. Your input is welcome, and you are free and autonomous in your decision-making, while knowing you can rely on your supervisor for support in case of difficulties or questions related to your research or career. Your supervisor may also receive training in doctoral supervision.

Your research is assessed in a thorough, constructive, and honest manner

Your research supervisor is available to review your work as it progresses, to advise you, and to guide you in your research. The feedback is constructive and genuinely helps you improve your work.

You can freely express your views and share your doubts, concerns, and difficulties, especially during progress review committees

Your laboratory sets up monitoring committees in accordance with current regulations, and you work in a professional environment where you feel safe to raise your concerns. Your research supervisor, the laboratory management, and the PhD student representatives are available and attentive. Concrete solutions are offered to you, and you are informed about available support systems (associations, unions, reporting platforms for gender-based and sexual violence, Health and Safety at Work guidelines, etc.).

**You receive doctoral training.
If you have teaching responsibilities, you receive training and/or support in pedagogy**

In accordance with the decrees of May 25, 2016, and February 22, 2019, you receive solid research training, and your laboratory organizes activities that allow you to develop your skills according to the doctoral competency framework defined by the national directory of professional certifications.
You are familiar with the functioning and challenges of higher education in France. You receive training in the fundamentals of university pedagogy and/or support in your teaching work. You can share your difficulties and questions with other colleagues.

Efforts are made to ensure that you are well integrated into the laboratory and that you can access material and digital resources according to your needs

You are welcomed from the start of your PhD and given access to all the information necessary for its smooth progress. The environment in which you work allows you to thrive by giving you the opportunity to improve your skills and acquire new ones. If you have a physical or mental disability, you have a work environment adapted to your needs (e.g., adapted chair or computer).

You are informed about collective projects, scientific events, and job openings in your research laboratory, and you are invited to participate or apply

You are informed in a timely manner about projects, events, and internal job openings (ATER positions, teaching assignments, temporary contracts), and you have the opportunity to participate or apply after receiving all the necessary information. Access to information is the same for all doctoral students and does not depend on physical presence in the research laboratory or informal discussions with faculty members. From the beginning of your PhD, you are aware of the internal and external networks at your university through which this information circulates. Recruitment procedures are transparent (ATER positions, teaching assignments, temporary contracts).

Your knowledge and skills are recognized and valued

You are invited by your colleagues (faculty and/or PhD students) to present your work or lead scientific events related to your research topic. Your research is valued, as are your qualities, skills, and knowledge."

Your working hours are respected, and you are allowed to maintain a healthy work-life balance

The environment in which you work supports the balance between your scientific career and your personal life, with the latter being respected and considered important for your fulfillment and well-being (e.g., right to disconnect, acceptance of personal life choices, respect for privacy, etc.).

You are supported and guided in your professional prospects

You feel supported by your research supervisor in advancing your career. You are informed when new opportunities arise in your field of research and are encouraged to pursue them if you choose. You have access to up-to-date documentation and training on career prospects, both within academia and in other professional sectors.



This is not normal, caution! *There is dysfunction and violence when...*

They claim that the research environment, and a fortiori your laboratory, is free from all forms of discrimination

The people you work with, whether on a daily basis or more occasionally, consider that the high level of education and instruction enjoyed by members of the academic world makes them immune to any discriminatory behavior (based on gender, race, class, disability, etc.).

You are asked to be available and to work in the evenings, on weekends, or during holidays

You are made to understand, implicitly or explicitly, that an academic career requires continuous work and that this pace is considered normal, even valued by the institution and its members (late-night emails or emails sent during weekends and holidays; surprise or disparagement toward people who take leave and/or do not work outside weekly hours; pressure to meet impossible deadlines, etc.).”

Your skills, knowledge, research topic are underestimated, and you are confined to certain tasks

You are not (or rarely) invited by your colleagues to present your work or to facilitate scientific events related to your research topic. You are made to feel that your topic is not central to the laboratory, that it hardly fits with the unit’s research axes or with other researchers’ projects. As a result, your intellectual work is not valued at its true worth, and you are instead assigned secondary logistical tasks, which add little value to your CV or career.

Your research work is made invisible

Your research work (presentations, publications, or others) does not appear in the university’s internal documents and/or your laboratory does not share it on its website or social media accounts. Your colleagues invite other people instead of you to contribute or take part in a conference, even though you are more qualified than they are on the subjects in question.

It is suggested that your private life, personal situation, gender, ethno-racial background, or health status prevent you from successfully carrying out your research and career

Your supervisor questions some of your personal decisions (moving, choosing a position closer to home, parenthood, etc.) on the grounds that they harm your career. They consider certain aspects of your identity to be problematic and suggest that you should hide, silence, or even change them (gender, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, etc.).

Your supervisor does not honor the meetings you have scheduled together and often delays responding to your messages and requests

Your supervisor does not show up to meetings you had scheduled together, without notifying you in advance or only informing you at the very last minute. They respond to your requests (for meetings, advice, information, etc.) erratically and/or with significant delays

Your supervisor or the supervisory body shows favoritism

Your supervisor or the supervisory body treats doctoral candidates unequally, which leads to the establishment of a hierarchy, unhealthy competition, and a deterioration of the work atmosphere. This may concern skills, knowledge, professional abilities, individual qualities, personality, etc.

Your supervisor or the supervisory body does not provide you with essential information for the smooth running of your doctorate and the continuation of your career

Your supervisor and/or the supervisory body does not communicate clearly and/or equally with doctoral candidates regarding professional expectations and the requirements of academia. This key information is not formally provided during the PhD.

You are constantly infantilized

You are constantly reminded of your status as a PhD student, regardless of your level of experience. During team meetings, monitoring committees, or discussions with colleagues, your contributions are met with condescending or patronizing attitudes (unsolicited and irrelevant advice, over-explaining things you already know, etc.).

You are not provided with a work environment adapted to the psychosocial risks of the academic profession.

Your supervisor does not take into account the nature of your thesis topic (sensitive fields), or even downplays it. When you express the need for psychological support in the context of your work, you are not taken seriously, or are even mocked. You do not have access to the information or contact numbers that could help you, and you are not directed to the relevant university services.

You are given contradictory instructions

Your supervisor or the supervisory body puts pressure on you to finish your PhD quickly, promotes or even imposes the idea of a short PhD (three years in social sciences, for example), while encouraging you to undertake numerous other tasks and activities during the doctorate.

You are isolated from other members of the laboratory

You are kept away from laboratory or university life and its events/projects. You do not receive certain emails that others of the same status receive, you are not invited to participate in certain events or projects while others are, and you are excluded from shared workspaces, etc.

You are subjected to sexist, racist, classist, and/or ableist remarks

Your supervisor or the supervisory body makes discriminatory remarks towards you, or fails to respond when you report having received such remarks from a colleague.

Your supervisor or the supervisory team downplays the problems you encounter during your doctorate

The environment in which you work trivializes and normalizes unpaid work, the harassing/violent behaviors you experience, as well as your deteriorating health and personal difficulties. Your requests, warnings, and complaints are ignored, as are the solutions you propose.

You are asked intrusive questions or subjected to insistent comments about your private/intimate life

Your supervisor or the supervisory team seeks to know your personal situation (relationship, desire to have children, marriage, etc.) or makes repeated allusions to it, making you uncomfortable.

Your supervisor blackmails you

When you make certain requests to your supervisor regarding essential matters for your professional career (signing documents, authorizations, etc.), they only approve them under certain conditions (submitting a thesis chapter quickly, grading papers, etc.).



This is serious abuse ! *Your work environment is dangerous when...*

You are asked to perform unpaid work for your laboratory or university. You are oversolicited for such tasks and no longer have time for your thesis.

You are required to teach courses, supervise dissertations, or grade papers without pay, compensated only through book or supply vouchers. You are asked (or even required) to perform tasks under the pretext of enhancing your CV — such as assisting with conferences, creating communication materials, or managing the laboratory's social media accounts.

Your supervisor obstructs the completion of your thesis and the progression of your career.

Your supervisor doesn't respond to your messages or requests and gives you no feedback on the work you submit. They delay or refuse to sign documents required for employment or for extending your PhD, without valid justification and without informing you beforehand.

Your supervisor or a colleague takes credit for your research work.

Your supervisor or another member of your laboratory or academia (faculty or doctoral student) takes credit for your work, notably by using results from your research or putting their name on work you were supposed to do together but largely completed on your own.

Your supervisor asks you to falsify data and threatens you if you refuse.

Your supervisor requires you to align all or part of your research data with their own results so that their work is not scientifically questioned. Your hesitation or refusal exposes you to threats regarding your career or projects (publications, presentations, etc.).

You receive malicious, humiliating, or insulting remarks about your research work and about yourself.

Your supervisor or the supervisory body makes denigrating, contemptuous, and violent remarks about your research or yourself, and indicates that you have no future in academia.

The supervisory body ignores your repeated calls for help and fails to take appropriate action regarding your problematic relationship with your supervisor.

Despite repeated complaints, the supervisory body does not address the problems you raise or implements unsatisfactory solutions. They tell you not to "make waves" and that it is not possible to upset a colleague (either because of their position of power or under the pretext of their "academic freedom"). No initiatives are taken to improve your working conditions, and the ones you propose are even refused (e.g., co-supervision, informal co-direction, mediation, etc.).

You are threatened with retaliation if you report malicious or violent behavior toward yourself or a colleague, or if you refuse certain tasks or requests.

You are discouraged or pressured not to report certain unacceptable situations or behaviors to the supervisory body, the doctoral school administration, or the evaluators of the High Council for the Evaluation of Research and Higher Education, or if you decline certain professional requests (threats regarding your defense, your tenure-track application, future evaluations, or your projects).

You are offered professional advantages in exchange for intimate relations.

Your supervisor or the supervisory body indicates that the support they provide for certain projects and/or for your career advancement in academia is conditional on sexual or intimate favors.



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Glossary

The term “**your research/thesis supervisor**” refers to the person or persons who officially oversee your doctoral work.

The term “**supervisory team**” refers to all individuals involved in the organization and progress of your PhD (e.g., laboratory directors, members of monitoring committees, doctoral school administrators).

A large part of your experience may fall into the category “This is not normal, caution” (remember: just because these situations are common does not mean they are normal)...

- **Keep records** of facts and statements that you consider abnormal: emails, transcriptions of events or remarks, etc.
- **Identify trusted people** to share these situations with, both to avoid being isolated and to leave a trace of what is happening.
- **Form or join collectives** : Within your doctoral school or university, are there PhD student groups and/or teaching assistants who can guide you? In most institutions, PhD students mobilize through collectives or as union representatives: reach out to them and contribute to their work to improve doctoral working conditions. The more people involved, the less threatening it is to “make waves.”
- **Contact supportive people within the administration** (HR managers if you feel comfortable, Vice-President responsible for staff or workplace well-being, equality officer, etc.) or staff representative bodies. Unions can provide concrete help (e.g., regarding unpaid hours) and can also put you in touch with other colleagues in similar situations.
- **Report problems** : Every university must have a reporting system for moral or sexual harassment (examples: Sorbonne Paris Cité, Panthéon Sorbonne, Panthéon-Assas, Poitiers, Aix-Marseille...). You may receive support (internally or via an external association) and also leave a record of your reports. You can also fill out the Health and Safety at Work register (SST forms). Your employer has a legal obligation to stop harassment situations. If you cannot access the SST (it should normally be available from the prevention assistant), ask a union. Maintaining the register and reviewing the forms is part of the work of university bodies, including the Specialized Health, Safety, and Working Conditions Committee, which meets regularly.
- **Seek support to protect your mental health**

[Nightline Association](#)
Happsy line
[Medical-psychological centers / BAPU](#)



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A large part of your experience falls into the category of serious abuse...

First steps :

- **Keep records** of facts and statements: emails, transcripts of events or remarks, etc.
- **Identify and inform trusted people** to share these situations with: colleagues you trust, staff representatives (unions), administration members, doctor or other practitioner.
- **Remove yourself from the work situation** : take sick leave if you are employed, stop communications with responsible individuals, distance yourself from toxic workplaces, etc. The priority is to protect yourself and give precedence to your physical and mental health over work (fieldwork, analyses, writing, event organization, lab meetings, etc.), even if you were previously committed.

Next steps :

- **Contact supportive people within the administration** (HR managers if you feel comfortable, Vice-President in charge of staff, equality officer, etc.) or staff representative bodies. Unions can provide concrete help (e.g., regarding unpaid hours) and can also connect you with colleagues in similar situations.
- **Report problems** : Every university must have a reporting system for moral or sexual harassment (examples: Sorbonne Paris Cité, Panthéon Sorbonne, Panthéon-Assas, Poitiers, Aix-Marseille...). You may receive support (internally or via an external association) and leave a record of your reports. You can also fill out the Health and Safety at Work register (SST forms). Your employer has a legal obligation to stop harassment. If you cannot access the SST (normally available from the prevention assistant), ask a union. Maintaining the register and reviewing the forms is part of the work of university bodies, including the Specialized Health, Safety, and Working Conditions Committee, which meets regularly.
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 - Happsy Line
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For certain incidents (assaults, moral harassment...), you can file a criminal complaint or appeal to the administrative court (the public-sector equivalent of labor tribunals).


You may think that these actions will change nothing and will not lead to any improvement, either personally or structurally. That is true: PhD students are often little heard or considered. All the more reason to make your voice heard: you are the future of academia, do not reproduce what destroys you. Also remember that it is through mobilization and speaking out that teaching hours were finally regularized. More recently, cases of harassment committed by a PhD supervisor against their doctoral students have been brought before the Council of State, part of the decision is reproduced below :

"The documents in the file, which included several consistent testimonies from doctoral students whose theses were supervised by Ms. XXX, attributed to her inappropriate remarks, humiliating behavior, and abusive solicitations towards them. This conduct caused a clear deterioration of the working environment, so that even if the materiality of these facts is contested by Ms. XXX, the President of CY Cergy Paris University could, based on the information available to him at the time, consider that the acts attributed to Ms. XXX were sufficiently plausible and serious, and that the continuation of her activities within the university presented sufficiently serious disadvantages for the service or for the ongoing procedures."

Conseil d'État, Décision N° 474617, May 28, 2024



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**“END SYSTEMIC VIOLENCE IN
UNIVERSITIES! IF THEY WON’T
CHANGE, WE WILL !**

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