Doctor of Sociology

Pitfalls and Progress: Exploring the Complexities and Forces Shaping the PhD Journey

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<u>**Abstract**</u>

Doctoral education has evolved considerably in recent decades, driven by the expansion of knowledge economies and increased structurization of PhD trajectories. This dissertation explores how structural conditions, individual characteristics, and lived experiences influence PhD candidates' outcomes, with attention to variation across disciplines, appointment types, and stages of the doctoral journey. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines survey data and focus group interviews collected at Vrije Universiteit Brussel between 2017 and 2024, this research investigates key dynamics that shape doctoral experiences and progression.

This dissertation is structured around four empirical studies that examine critical aspects of the PhD trajectory, including dropout, the influence of appointment types, role-identities, and autonomy. The first study examines predictors of doctoral dropout, identifying early experiences regarding supervisor support, passion for research, and time pressure as significant indicators, with disciplinary variations. The second study focuses on teaching assistants, revealing that their lower self-estimated likelihood of completion is linked to certain process characteristics rather than input differences. The third study explores PhD candidates' role-identities, showing that identifying as a student, an employee, or something in between associates with the appointment type, disciplinary context, and progression stage, and relates to their expectations and self-efficacy. The final study delves into expectations and experiences regarding autonomy, and identifies relational and structural tensions that influence PhD candidates' perceptions of it.

By linking individual experiences to broader structural features of doctoral education, this research offers a nuanced perspective on the challenges and opportunities within contemporary PhD trajectories, and suggests directions for improving support systems and policies to better reflect the complex realities faced by PhD candidates today.