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**PhD Students and Ombuds:
How Ombuds Contribute to Civil, Fair and
Productive PhD Trajectories**

**ENOHE
(European Network of Ombudsmen
in Higher Education)
Occasional Paper Nr. 12**



Dear readers,

ENOHE has been founded in 2003 in order to bring together people interested in and ideas in connection with ombudsmen in higher education. Now, 15 annual conferences later, the network has developed into a very active group of professional enthusiasts.

The present publication in front of you is the result of a joint workshop style event during the ENOHE annual Conference in Edinburgh in 2018. ENOHE is thanking the authors, Paul Herfs (Utrecht University the Netherlands), Jenna Brown (University of Denver, United States of America), Nora Farrell (Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada), Ursula Meiser (University of Stuttgart, Germany) for their energy and extra working hours they dedicated to produce this occasional paper.

Josef Leidenfrost
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Imprint

Editor in Charge: Josef Leidenfrost

Layout / Design: Alberina Nuka, Vienna
Print: In-house Printing

First Edition: April 2019

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Synopsis

Concerned about the completion rate of PhD degrees¹² in The Netherlands, Paul Herfs invited academic ombuds³ from Canada, Germany, and the U.S.A. to consider the plight of PhD students in their respective countries. The four ombuds noticed that, while their systems are different, the nature of requests for ombuds' assistance are similar. In this paper, the authors consider problems that PhD students encounter and factors that contribute to the poor completion rate of PhD students in their countries. The authors identify challenges that ombuds face in these situations and suggest ways ombuds may assist individual students and identify aspects of the university that are creating problems.⁴

Introduction

In 2015, Dutch citizens were invited to write study proposals for a scientific agenda. Each citizen, not only scientists, could propose an idea for a study. Paul Herfs wrote a proposal to explore why Dutch universities accept a massive loss of PhD students during their trajectories without passing their final exam. A 2014 study by the Rathenau Institute showed that, at some universities, only 50 percent finished their trajectories with doctorate diplomas⁵. Herfs suggested that in no other sector would a 50 percent loss of (human) capital be acceptable; rather, severe measures would be taken in order to diminish such significant losses. Herfs' proposal to investigate problems between supervisors and PhD students and discuss preventive measures was not accepted.

In 2017, Herfs took a study trip to visit with Canadian ombuds in higher education. During discussions about those who contact the ombuds, it appeared nearly all ombuds had experiences with PhD students whose complaints related to issues that jeopardized their academic progress and degree completion. Moreover, it appeared the problems PhD students came to discuss with Canadian ombuds were more or less identical to problems Herfs met with doctoral students at his office in the Netherlands.

When, in the spring of 2018, the organizers of the joint conference of the ENOHE: European Network of Ombuds in Higher Education and the ACCUO: Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons sent out a request for proposals, Herfs organized a session bringing together ombuds from both sides of the Atlantic to discuss the roles of ombuds with regard to problematic situations of PhD students. Four ombuds, two

¹ A *Doctor of Philosophy*, from the Latin *Philosophiae doctor*, is the highest academic degree awarded by universities in most countries and is abbreviated to either PhD or Ph.D. While Ph.D. is common to North America, both forms are widely used. The authors use PhD throughout this paper.

² Throughout this paper, the authors use “PhD” and “doctoral student” interchangeably. The title PhD is not awarded in Germany. The German system relies on a process of “Promotion” and the awarded title depends on the field of study. For example, doctoral degrees in engineering (Dr.-Ing), natural sciences (Dr. rer. nat), philosophy (Dr. phil) and in the economic and social sciences (Dr. rer. pol.).

³ In 2018, ENOHE adopted “ombuds” as a common term of reference to identify those who provide similar services in different countries. While the authors have different titles appropriate to their countries and in the spirit of inclusion promoted by ENOHE, the authors use the term “ombuds” throughout this paper.

⁴ Throughout this piece, the authors intentionally use the gender-neutral and non-binary pronoun “they” to refer to a student or many students.

⁵ De Goede, M., Belder, R. & De Jonge, J.; 2014.

from Europe and two from North America, reported on the status of doctoral students in their countries and discussed the ways in which they respond.

This paper includes information from that conference panel and expands upon the discussion. In this piece, the authors reflect on higher education in four countries, compare doctoral student attrition rates and complaints, and consider whether and how ombuds can play a role in reducing the attrition rates among PhD students.

PhD Students and Educational Systems

On average, for all disciplines and in many locations — including Canada, Germany, the Netherlands and the U.S.A.— around 50 percent of doctoral students do not complete their degrees. More specifically, the most comprehensive data that are available for Canadian PhD completion rates across the whole of Canada is very old so it is deliberately not included. The only current data have been collected from a select group of universities known as the ‘U15’ which includes the 15 universities in Canada that are described as ‘research intensive’. However, the data available is taken from only 8 of these 15 universities and there are at least 96 universities in Canada. This very limited data set demonstrates a graduation rate of a high of 78.3 percent in the health sciences to a low of 55.8 percent in the humanities.⁶

As noted above, the results can be higher or lower depending on the area of study and the institution. For example, in 2009, Grasso, Barry, and Valentine found the following completion rates in the U.S.A. by field of study: 49.3 percent in humanities, 54.7 percent in mathematics and physical sciences, 55.9 percent in social sciences, 62.9 percent in life sciences, and 63.6 percent in engineering.⁷

These results are very worrisome given the amount of resources expended by both the PhD students and the institutions and various funding bodies. These concerns have not gone unnoticed. Based in the U.S.A., the Council of Graduate Schools launched the *PhD Completion Project* “to examine and document attrition and completion patterns at a variety of universities, to encourage graduate schools and universities to develop and model intervention projects designed to both improve completion rates and reduce attrition, and to study and validate the impact of these interventions on PhD completion.”⁸

In Germany, the Federal Statistical Office conducted a study that shows an average 43 percent dropout rate. Completion rates are the highest in natural sciences and mathematics and, in general, higher for women than men.⁹ Another national report in Germany provides data on PhD students, including gender equity, their financial situation and career options. The report also considers measurements taken by universities and on the national level that ensure the success of PhD projects (Bundesbericht Wissenschaftlicher Nachwuchs; 2017). Since 2017, in Germany the law for statistics in the higher education system (HStatG) demands that numbers of PhD students and attrition rates are collected and reported;

⁶ Tamburri, R.; 2013.

⁷ Grasso, M., Barry, M., Valentine, T.; 2009.

⁸ Sowell, R., et al; 2010.

⁹ Statistisches Bundesamt; 2016.

however, the data remains vague because many PhD students start their work without official registration and stop their project without the examination office's knowledge.

In order to understand the circumstances of PhD students in Canada, Germany, the Netherlands and the U.S.A., it is helpful to identify and compare the basic characteristics of their educational systems. In most countries, a master's degree is required for admission to a PhD trajectory.

The Netherlands

In the Netherlands, educational policy is coordinated by the Dutch Ministry of Education and Sciences. Most education is government-financed and controlled by local governments. Students advance from one level to the next by assessment or exam.

| Age | Number of years | Type of Education | Diploma |
|---------|-------------------|--|---|
| 4 - 12 | 8 | Primary education | None |
| 12 - 18 | 6 | Secondary education | General Secondary Education (“Atheneum” or “Gymnasium”) witch qualifies for university entrance. |
| 19 - 22 | 3 years | Tertiary Education (research) University | Bachelor's degree after 3 years. A Master's degree is required to start a PhD-trajectory. |
| | 4 years | Tertiary Education: University of Applied Sciences | Bachelor degree after 4 years. |
| 22 - 25 | 1 or 2 or 3 years | Tertiary Education (University) | Master's degree obtained after 1, 2 or 3 years. |
| 26 - 30 | 4 | Post Tertiary Education (doctorate) | A master's degree is required to start a PhD-trajectory. After successful defense of the thesis in public the candidate obtains a PhD-degree. |

Secondary education is divided into homogeneous streams. Pupils with the highest educational results at the end of their primary education are admitted to the Atheneum or Gymnasium stream. Only those students who obtain Atheneum or Gymnasium diplomas have direct admission to study programs at research universities.

A student who obtains a master’s degree can apply for a PhD position. A master’s degree is a prerequisite for a PhD trajectory.

There are three categories of PhD candidates in the Netherlands: those who (1) are employed by the university, (2) receive financial support from a foreign government or (3) are not employed and do not receive scholarships.

Once a student is admitted as a PhD category-one student, they earn a salary. A PhD student is part of the university faculty. A PhD student who earns a salary is assigned limited educational duties—although research is the majority of their work. Most PhD students are members of research groups.

Most of the PhD students in the second category are from outside the Netherlands. They receive financial support—such as PhD bursaries provided by foreign ministries of education—from their home countries to do PhD research.

The third PhD student category is the so-called “buiten-promovendus” or “an outside PhD.” They are self-funded, do not earn a salary, and do not receive a bursary. Most often, they are at the end of their social career and are willing to finish a PhD research project they

have chosen themselves. They only need a university (full) professor to act as a supervisor.¹⁰ Once the PhD student has found a supervisor, they can start. As these students often combine work with their PhD research, their research project might take much more than four years.

¹⁰ The authors use “supervisor” and “advisor” interchangeably.

Germany

In Germany's federalist structure the responsibility for education lies mainly in the hands of the states. Education is primarily funded by the states, but also by the national government and local entities.

| Age | Number of years | Type of Education | Diploma |
|--------------|-----------------|---|---|
| 6 - 9 | 4 | Primary Education | none |
| 10 - 18/19 | 8/9 | Secondary Education | "Abitur", certificate of general qualification for university entrance |
| 19 - 25 | 3 + 2 | Tertiary Education (University or University of Applied Sciences) | Bachelor's Degree after 3 years, Master's degree after 2 years. Some schools offer 1-year Master's programs or 7 semester Bachelor's and 3 semester Master's. |
| ~ 25 forward | 3 - 5 | Post Tertiary Education (Promotion) | The Master's degree is necessary to apply for the PhD. |
| varies | | Postdoctoral Program or Habilitation | Habilitation, highest qualification level, often necessary for a full professorship |

Secondary education is complex with five different types of schools that can be attended in various combinations. University-preparatory schools grant students who pass their final exams the "Abitur" which is the general qualification required for admission to university. There are also alternative routes to pass different types of exams that will allow entrance to the Tertiary Education institutions, but not all research universities.

The system of "second-chance education" makes it possible to enter higher education after successfully passing lower secondary education, middle school, and evening classes. Additionally, people who have completed an apprenticeship in the dual education system and have working experience are able to apply to universities.

After finishing the master's degree, students may either apply for a PhD program or find a supervisor and apply through the supervisor to the school or division. Depending on the discipline, research area, personal circumstances, and formal qualifications, there are two different paths to obtain a PhD in Germany. Over three quarters of all doctoral students in Germany pursue the traditional individual doctorate, which is based on independent research carried out alone and under the supervision of one professor. The alternative structured PhD program offers a course of study similar to that found in English-speaking countries where a team of supervisors guide their doctoral candidates.

Regardless of the academic path students choose, they will be either employed at the university, hold a scholarship, or finance themselves individually. Those who are employed at the university might not have a student status at the same time; those who are not paid by the university will have a student status. Employees of the university will be part of a research unit and usually have additional educational duties.

Preliminary studies show that the average PhD project in Germany takes between three to five years.¹¹ More concrete data may be available in the future as the systematic nationwide recording of PhD student numbers and success rates started only in 2017.

¹¹ Bundesbericht Wissenschaftlicher Nachwuchs; 2017, p. 153.

A deep change in the system of postgraduate education in Germany may be coming. Until now, only research universities have had the right to award doctorate degrees. The universities of applied sciences are currently fighting for the right to award doctoral degrees and, in some states, the law recently allows trials for such a proceeding.

Canada

The vast majority of education in Canada is publicly funded and overseen by provincial and local governments. However, there are three major sources of research funding provided by the federal government via three agencies: Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC).

| Age | Number of years | Type of Education | Diploma or Degree |
|-------------|-----------------|---|--|
| 4 - 14 | 10 | Elementary School education from Junior Kindergarten to Grade 8 | None |
| 14 - 18 | 4 | Secondary education | High School or Secondary School Diploma conferred |
| 18 - 22 | | Post-Secondary: College & University Undergraduate | College: Diploma conferred after 1 - 2 year program or for some colleges a 4-year undergraduate bachelor degree may be earned. University: Bachelor degree conferred after a 3 - 4 year program. Professional Programs , e.g. Medicine and Law: Typically, a bachelor's degree is a prerequisite to admission to Medical School (4-5 years) and Law School (3 years + articling) |
| ~22 forward | ~2 | Graduate School | Master degree conferred after 1, 2 or 3-year program. |
| ~24 forward | ~4 | Graduate School | PhD degree is conferred after 3 - 6 years. Typically, a Master degree is required to be admitted into a PhD program. PhD candidates are identified as students and not employees. However, PhD candidates are often hired for part-time work as Teaching Assistants and/or Research Assistants. PhD candidates may be matched with a Supervisor by their Department or School or candidates may be expected to approach potential supervisors. PhD candidates receive a stipend typically and often apply for scholarships, bursaries and research grants. |

Any description of education in Canada is by definition general in nature as there is no federal or national oversight for educational policy or implementation, and there are ten provinces and three territories which deliver education in their respective jurisdictions. All elementary and secondary education is funded by municipal and provincial/territorial government, and it is regulated at the provincial/territorial level. Post-secondary education which includes colleges, universities, institutes of technology and polytechniques is funded and regulated at a provincial level. In addition, the province of Québec includes CEJEP education which is two to three years in length and can be a gateway to university or to the workforce.

United States of America

In the U.S.A., funding for education comes from state, local and federal governments and state governments set overall educational standards. Most students advance from one level to the next in a cohort, although some schools are experimenting with outcome-based approaches.

| Age | Number of years | Type of Education | Diploma |
|---------|-----------------|---|---|
| 3 - 5 | ~3 | Pre-Kindergarten (pre-K) | |
| 5 - 12 | ~ 13 | Primary | (Known as K-12) High school diploma or equivalent |
| 14 - 18 | | Secondary | |
| 18 - 22 | ~4 | Post-Secondary: College & University undergraduate | Associate's degree (2 yrs), Bachelor's degree (baccalaureate) (4 yrs) |
| Varies | ~ 2 | Graduate School | Master's degree (1-3 years) |
| Varies | ~4 | Graduate School | Research doctorate (3-6 years) |
| Varies | ~ | Postdoctoral | |

The American higher education system has been described as a “perfect mess” with no architect and no plan, encompassing large and small, public and private, college and universities.¹² The U.S.A. has no national education system, meaning the federal government influences, but does not regulate higher education. Admissions requirements vary from university to university, and each university has its own application process. Applicants for graduate education may be required to take an exam such as the Graduate Record Exam, i.e., the GRE. However, not all universities require it.

In the U.S.A., there are a variety of research doctorates that include PhDs. Research doctorates are structured programs of advanced study and supervised research. The research doctorate requires advanced study but is awarded for successfully completing and defending independent research. A student who has a master's degree can apply for a PhD position, or the PhD may include a master's degree.

PhD students may be financially supported by the university or self-funded. The PhD student who is supported by the university receives a stipend with the amount and duration determined by the department and advisor. PhD students may want to study with a particular researcher, or they may apply to a program and be assigned an advisor. Generally, these doctoral students have teaching or research duties as well as educational and research requirements.

Self-funded PhD students may have personal financial resources or be supported by donors or their home countries.

¹² Labaree, D.L.; 2017.

PhDs

PhDs and other doctoral degrees are considered “terminal degrees” in the same way a doctor of medicine, or M.D., is the highest degree awarded in the field of medicine. To identify key factors that can ultimately affect the likelihood that a particular student will complete a PhD program, the Council of Graduate Schools identified six institutional and program characteristics: selection, mentoring, financial support, program environment, research mode of the field, and processes and procedures.¹³

Common among the four countries discussed in this paper, the relationship between the advisor and doctoral student is critical. The advisor supervises the student’s research, which may include approving the student’s research topic and providing the resources for research. Some advisors may require students to present papers at conferences or submit articles to professional journals. It is the advisor who determines when the research is completed and the writing requirement has been met, allowing the candidate to proceed to oral examination and dissertation defense.

The advisor is both educator and supervisor. The educator teaches the student through example, suggestion, or explicit direction how to pursue research and navigate a particular discipline. The supervisor manages the student’s stipend, determines the student’s duties (e.g., working in the lab, working with undergraduate students, etc.) and may evaluate the student’s performance.

PhD students find themselves in very dependent positions. Expectations of PhD students are sometimes ambiguous and contradictory. On one hand, students must show they can perform autonomously and scientifically. On the other, they must follow the directions of their supervisors.

Students may turn to the ombuds with a variety of problems. They may speak about depression, lack of concentration, lack of sleep, finances, lack of time, anxiety about visas and permission to remain in the country. However, these cases are often driven by bad chemistry between the supervisor and PhD student.

In some situations, perhaps as a normal feature of the department or as a solution to a problem between a student and supervisor, the student has two supervisors. The presence of a second supervisor may be welcomed if the result is a more balanced relationship of supervisors and doctoral student. However, if the two supervisors demand different and opposite actions from a PhD student, it might create new problems.

PhD students must often combine their scientific research with teaching tasks or other assigned duties. If teaching demands increase and the PhD student is not in a position to refuse, this may delay their research — which may in turn jeopardize the completion of scientific research tasks, their financial situation, or their legal status and imperil their supervisor’s opinion of their progress.

¹³ Council of Graduate Schools; PhD Completion Project.

Occasionally, supervisors are no longer available. Perhaps they take a post at a different university, take a sabbatical, retire ... Perhaps they are required to reduce the number of research students they maintain, or they are required to take on new research students.

Sometimes supervisors are unable to provide adequate research facilities. It takes both money and time to establish a lab. Often, a lab relies on grants to supplement what a university may provide. The prestigious researcher who moves to another university may need a year or two to set up a lab.

And, sometimes, the advisor is simply unresponsive, does not respond to the student in a timely manner or takes several months to provide feedback on drafts.

National Differences

In the Netherlands, problems have arisen with the “buiten-promovendi” PhD students when supervisors were no longer able to supervise the drafts of theses, and no other supervisors within the department or university are able to take over the positions of the first (and only) supervisor.

In Germany, problems have arisen about issues concerning intellectual ownership. Sometimes PhD students have had the impression that the revenues of inventions to which they contributed at least partially belong to them. They are surprised to learn that, by law, all revenues of inventions done at a university belong to the university.

In Canada, there is considerable evidence to demonstrate that insufficient attention is paid to ensuring that the minority of supervisors who do not fulfill their responsibilities as they should are held accountable and that alternate arrangements are made for a more productive match in a timely and non-adversarial manner.

In the U.S.A., challenges have arisen when doctoral students choose a university for reasons unrelated to the program itself. Some students may be limited in their choice of schools by their financial supporter, or they prefer a particular region of the country or community for social support for themselves and their families.

Examples of good practices towards PhD students from universities in North America and Europe

In an effort to address the reality of such a high rate of attrition in the PhD students community, a wide range of initiatives have been put into place by institutions of higher education to assist both supervisors and PhD students to work together more effectively.

- 1) Providing a supervisor/student checklist to guide the first conversation to ensure all the key topics are addressed and expectations for both parties to the relationship are outlined clearly.

For example: https://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/graduate/student-guide/academic-matters/forms/student_supervisor_checklist_july18.pdf

- 2) Providing contracts to PhD students to inform them right from the start about the expectations (research plan, topics of research, weekly meetings with daily supervisor, evaluation moments, etc.). One year after start: go-no go decision on the basis of results.
- 3) Offering workshops for faculty members on how to be an effective supervisor.
- 4) Offering (confidential) PhD mentors within departments for issues that are not related to the actual PhD research.
- 5) Offering workshops for PhD students on effective communication and how to resolve negative conflict effectively.
- 6) Offering peer support programs for graduate students who are having difficulty addressing concerns with their supervisors.

For example: <http://gradcrc.utoronto.ca/>; <https://thesiswhisperer.com/>

- 7) Learning and Teaching Commons or Offices are developing resources and collecting best practice documents for effective supervision.
For example: <https://wellbeing.ubc.ca/building-effective-graduate-student-supervisor-relationship>
- 8) Graduate Faculties are establishing and publishing very clear expectations for each party in the graduate student/PhD student and supervisor enterprise.
For example: https://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/graduate/current-students/policies/Graduate_Supervision_Guidelines.pdf;
<https://grad.uwo.ca/administration/regulations/11.html>

The above list is by no means exhaustive or even comprehensive given the wide variety and large volume of programming that has been established by institutions around the world. The foregoing examples are samples of ways and means for preventing and/or addressing destructive conflict between supervisor and PhD student.

As PhD students may be delayed in their progress for many reasons the ‘dissertation bootcamp’ has become a ubiquitous part of ‘Student Life’ and Writing Centre’ offerings. These programs can assist individuals who have lost focus or time due to unresolved negative conflicts to move forward on their own.

- 9) Week-long writing retreats or ‘dissertation boot camps’ for PhD students which are facilitated by expert academic writers.
For example: <https://www.lib.uoguelph.ca/workshops-events/dbc> also see: <https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/evaluating-effectiveness-dissertation-boot-camp-delivery>.
- 10) Weekly writing sessions for PhD students who are looking for peer support and expert guidance to advance their progress with their academic writing.
For example: <https://writingcenter.uconn.edu/writing-retreats/#>
- 11) Weekly sessions for PhD students from certain Graduate Schools during which they present their research findings among their peers. These meetings are led by a senior supervisor. PhD students get accustomed to presenting the main results of their studies.

PhD Students and Ombuds

As Rob Behrens notes in his 2017 monograph, *Being an Ombudsman in Higher Education: A Comparative Study*, some of the constraints on ombudsmen in higher education include their “being limited to matters outside the academic and professional judgement of higher education scholars as teachers and supervisors.”¹⁴

Supervisors are the “context experts,” guides to and guardians of their disciplines. They oversee the student’s selection of research topic and methodology. They determine if a paper is ready for submission to professional journals and to which journals.

PhD students often do not know where to go to if they have problems with their supervisor. While some universities provide specific PhD advisors, most PhD advisors are full professors who have strong connections with other professors and advisors in their departments. Not all PhD students dare to discuss their problems with other PhD advisors in their departments because of the perceived or assumed relationship between the PhD advisor and the student’s supervisor. PhD students often fear reprisal for complaining. They seek a safe place to discuss their problems without fear of repercussion.

The doctoral student who chafes at the supervisor’s direction and hopes that the ombuds will override the supervisor’s decisions about the nature and quality of the student’s research will be disappointed. However, the ombuds may be a relevant and useful resource for both the PhD student and the supervisor. PhD students and supervisors may turn to ombuds offices for confidentiality, impartiality, and independence with the reassurance that no one will ever know of the visit. They can ask the ombuds for advice on how to address their concerns, on their rights and responsibilities, and, in some countries, for an objective review of their concerns.

All who serve as ombuds use similar tools:

- 1) *Active listening*. It is very important that doctoral students can discuss their problems with someone who willing to listen carefully to their concerns without judgment or bias—especially in situations where the PhD student and supervisor are having difficulties with interpersonal communication and cooperation.
- 2) *Conflict management and resolution expertise*. Ombuds are a resource for problem-solving and resolving negative conflict between supervisor and PhD student. Ombuds may coach doctoral students and help them prepare for conversations with their supervisors or may work with both to resolve their differences.
- 3) *Institutional knowledge*. Ombuds know how to access university resources and processes available for informal dispute resolution and formal appeals. Ombuds can also identify university personnel who are equipped to address unfairness in a constructive way for both individual and system-wide concerns.

¹⁴ Behrens, R.; 2017.

Opportunities for ombuds to contribute to more productive environments for PhD students vary among countries. Most ombuds write annual reports. In these annual reports, ombuds may identify emerging trends that are cause for concern and outline specific areas where improvement is needed, e.g., more easily accessed or better constructed dispute resolution processes for broken PhD student/supervisor relationships. Depending on where they work, ombuds may encourage the university to—or may themselves—seek information about doctoral students’ experience in their programs of study or impediments to successful and timely completion of a PhD program. They may conduct annual surveys that solicit input from PhD students as well as exit interviews, particularly with those who left their program without completing their degree.

Ombuds may also engage with the university in less formal ways, meeting with senior or key administrators to discuss patterns of concern or aspects of the institution creating problems and ways to address them. Ombuds may also educate their institutions about practices elsewhere. For example, in Canada and the U.S.A., resources are available and training is provided for supervisors to learn how to effectively supervise and guide PhD students. Some universities provide offices for graduate students, providing consultation services or information about policies and procedures.

Expectations of PhD Students toward Ombuds

A topic of conversation among ombuds is whether the expectations of PhD students are realistic. PhD students, not unlike others, often seek assistance after a problem has matured to the point where there are few, if any, options for resolution. The doctoral student may be facing deadlines that cannot be changed or other conditions over which they have no control. They may hope the ombuds has the authority to overturn or countermand decisions about their academic status and allow them to leave the university with a degree, good recommendations, and professional opportunities.

Sometimes, however, the doctoral student presents the ombuds with an opportunity to help the student succeed. While the ombuds may believe they have “seen it all,” the ombuds has an obligation to look at each request for assistance with fresh eyes. The PhD student’s request for assistance may be realistic. PhD students may visit ombuds at those stages of their research in which they are experiencing severe problems in communicating and working in a productive way with their supervisors. Ombuds are, in some cases, able to help the student (and the supervisor) improve their communication so as to move forward in such a way that the student completes the program. In addition, the ombuds may intervene with the university in such a way that both individual and system-wide concerns are addressed by university personnel.

In conclusion, it is noteworthy that ombuds in higher education in Canada, Germany, the Netherlands and the U.S.A. — each with their own idiosyncratically organized doctoral education — experience such similar complaints from PhD students. The symmetry we have observed is that regardless of how supervisory systems are structured, the inability of PhD students and their supervisors to resolve negative conflict constructively and the abuse

of power by some supervisors are familiar to all. These striking similarities suggest that ombuds, wherever they are located, can play a key role, assisting individuals to become more proficient in negotiating expectations and working toward a more collaborative supervisory approach and encouraging institutions to develop more effective approaches for preventing problems and assisting PhD students and their supervisors to anticipate and resolve disputes in a timely, fair and humane manner.

Note of thanks

We wish to express our great appreciation to Jean Grier (University of Edinburgh) and Wolf Hertlein (Technische Universität Darmstadt) for their valuable comments on the draft version of this paper. We greatly appreciate the support of Rebecca Parker, Executive Writer at the University of Denver.

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ENOHE Occasional Papers

The ENOHE Occasional Papers are a series of publications intended to inform its readers about current trends, recent developments, and scenarios for the future in the development of academic ombudsmen within European and international higher education.

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