



# Can Ombudspersons Prevent PhD Students From Dropping Out?

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article describes all kind of problems PhD students might encounter during their PhD-trajectories. Because of these problems many PhD students leave universities without finishing their thesis and without PhD degrees. It leads to great losses of human capital. The author, who worked for 16 years as a university ombuds at a Dutch research university, is very experienced in the guidance of PhD students whose trajectories got stuck. Based on his experiences he describes interventions of an ombuds that might lead to diminishing dropout among PhD students. Although most of his experiences are accumulated at a Dutch university the described problems of PhD students could occur at universities all over the world. The same goes for ombuds interventions and solutions.

## **KEYWORDS**

Ombuds, academic, universities, PhDs

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## 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. This author wrote a proposal to explore why Dutch universities accept a massive loss of PhD students during their trajectories without passing their final exam. In the proposal I presented the following clarification. Recently a study of De Goede et al from the Rathenau Institute (De Goede, Belder & De Jonge; 2014) showed that at some universities only 50% of their PhD students pass their final exam. I suggested that in no other sector would a 50% loss of human capital be acceptable. Rather, severe measures would be taken in order to diminish such significant losses. These losses do not only concern university investments (material costs and supervision costs). The biggest loss for not finishing a PhD trajectory affects the PhD candidate, who after some years of hard and often isolated work leaves the university without a reward. Within universities it is not completely clear what causes PhD students to drop out. It seems however, that these high dropout rates are taken for granted by many universities as measures to diminish dropout rates are not highly prioritized. My proposal was not accepted.

This article aims at clarification of the role of an ombuds in diminishing PhD dropout. In what follows, I have made use of my experiences as an ombuds over 16 years. In my practice as a university ombuds for staff and faculty during this time I spoke with over a hundred PhD students who had problems completing their PhD research. Because of my contacts with colleagues working at Dutch and international universities I know that these experiences are not all unique to the university I worked at. On the contrary, my experiences are quite general in academia.

## PhD TRAJECTORIES IN THE NETHERLANDS

For a long time, PhD trajectories have been under discussion in the Netherlands. Sonneveld (1997) published an important report on this subject. He showed that the introduction of research schools led to thousands of new PhD trajectories. However, compared to other countries, the Netherlands does not have a high percentage of holders of doctorates among the working population (OECD Indicators; 2013). Nevertheless, between 2000 and 2018 the number of successful PhD trajectories at Dutch universities increased from 2.500 to 4.500 (VSNU 2019).

Only 6.6 out of 1,000 of the working Dutch population holds a PhD degree. Within the European Union an average of 7.5 per 1,000 holds a PhD degree. Within the Scandinavian countries the average is 12.0. The gap between The Netherlands and other European Union countries is growing (OECD Indicators; 2013).

For a long time, there have been serious concerns about the working climate at Dutch universities. The report of the Rathenau Institute (De Goede et al; 2014) labels universities as 'PhD-factories'. From the beginning of this millennium, research schools increased their efforts to attract and train PhD students. According to this study the majority of PhD students were positive about the support they received. The Rathenau researchers discovered that PhD students worked on average for five years before they finished their thesis although they had work-related appointments<sup>1</sup> for four years. It was not clear how the PhD students were able to pay for their expenses without receiving salaries. Exceeding the 4-year appointments was not unusual for the researchers. No remarks were made about losing salaries after 4 years.

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<sup>1</sup> At Dutch universities most PhD students are appointed for 4 years as scientific personnel. They earn salaries during that time.



In 2017 G. van Winkel, researcher at Wageningen University & Research, presented his research into dropout and study results of PhD students at Dutch universities. In his report he divided the study results on completion into three different scientific fields:

|                               |     |
|-------------------------------|-----|
| Humanities                    | 65% |
| Social Sciences               | 75% |
| Sciences and medical Sciences | 77% |

Even in the scientific field with the best completion results there still is a dropout rate of 23% of PhD students. A Dutch Higher Education journal, Science Guide, in 2017 published an article (De Knecht; 2017) about the mental health of PhD students. On the basis of a Belgian study, they reported a dropout rate among PhD students worldwide between 30% and 50%.

**INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF OMBUDS WITH PhD STUDENTS**

In 2018 the European Network of Ombudsmen in Higher Education (ENOHE) and the Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons (ACCUO) organized a joint conference in Edinburgh, Scotland. I organized a working session in which four ombuds working at universities on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean informed the audience about problematic situations of PhD students at their universities. Two of them worked as ombuds in North America (Canada and USA) and the other two in Europe (Germany and the Netherlands). Each ombuds described the major problems of PhD students at his or her university and the possibilities the ombuds had to contribute to solutions for frozen or jammed PhD trajectories. ENOHE asked the presenters to describe their experiences in an ENOHE Occasional Paper (Herfs, Brown, Farrell & Meiser; 2019).

A general rule for all ombuds is that they cannot play a role in the scientific evaluation of the quality of research executed by PhD students. This task is exclusively allotted to supervisors and/or daily supervisors. Most of the time the supervisor is responsible for the acquisition of a grant, the working conditions of a PhD student and the evaluation of the PhDs performance. In all four countries the decision about admittance to the dissertation defense lies in the hands of the supervisor or a promotion committee. Ombuds avoid scientific evaluations of individual performance.

PhD students in all four countries find themselves in very dependent positions. Expectations of supervisors towards PhD students might be ambiguous and/or contradictory. On the one hand, PhD students must show they can perform autonomously and scientifically. On the other, they must follow the directions of their supervisor(s). This can be a recipe for misunderstanding and conflict. An ombuds can play an important role in resolving misunderstandings and/or conflict resolution.

PhD students can visit an ombuds with a variety of problems. They might speak about a conflict with their supervisor, depression, lack of concentration, lack of sleep, lack of progress in publication of articles, lack of finances, lack of time, concerns about visas and permission to stay in the country. Very often these cases are driven by bad chemistry between supervisor and PhD student. It is also possible that a PhD student doesn't have the scientific capacities to successfully end a PhD trajectory. This point is not addressed in this article.

As the four ombuds prepared their lecture for the ENOHE conference in Edinburgh they were astonished to see that there was a great deal of similarities in the problems PhD students perceived in the four countries despite the differences in the educational systems. The similarities encountered by the ombuds officers in their practices related to the inability of PhD students and their supervisors to resolve conflicts and to the abuse of power by some supervisors.

## THE MOST COMMON PROBLEMS OF PhD STUDENTS IN MY PRACTICE

The most common problems of PhD students in my own practice can be categorized in the following way:

### I PROBLEMATIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SUPERVISOR AND PHD STUDENT

The most important reason for delay of and even quitting the PhD trajectory is a bad chemistry between supervisor and PhD student. In those situations where only one supervisor is responsible for a PhD student a bad chemistry between them can have serious consequences. Without a supervisor a dissertation cannot be written or defended. This is not a desirable situation. Therefore, my former university introduced recently a so-called '4-eyes' principle. Because of this '4-eyes' principle there is always a supervisor available even in situations where the cooperation between the first supervisor and the PhD student has become unworkable or in those situations where a supervisor is no longer available because of illness or even death. After having spoken with the supervisor and a PhD about their working relation an ombuds can suggest solutions for a problematic relationship.

Sometimes a PhD trajectory deteriorates because of bad chemistry between a daily supervisor and a PhD student. There are situations in which a daily supervisor is in fact responsible for the evaluation of a PhD's performance. Here, supervision has been delegated to a supervisor who is not yet a full professor. The full professor who has the leading role in the supervision of a PhD student is sometimes only sporadically involved.

Sometimes neither the daily supervisor nor the supervisor reacts to requests of a PhD student. For instance, if a PhD student writes a draft version of an article, it is necessary to learn if the supervisors agree with the content of the draft version. Sometimes PhD students have to wait for weeks or even months before getting supervisors comments on a draft version of an article or on a chapter from their dissertation. Here, sometimes the cultural background of a PhD student can play a role in not receiving timely feedback. It is very unusual for a Chinese or Indonesian PhD student to put pressure on a full professor by asking several times for comments even if the supervisor didn't keep earlier promises. An ombuds can play an important role in opening discussions in those situations where a PhD doesn't dare to ask for timely feedback on a draft article.

### II PERSONAL COMPETENCIES OF PHD STUDENTS CAUSING DELAY

Personal competencies of PhD students can also cause delay in the PhD trajectory. For instance, a PhD student may have no or little experience in academic writing. Poor mastery of the English language (in reading, writing and presenting) can also lead to delay in the PhD trajectory. I learned regularly from PhD students with an international degree that there was often not a good match between their foreign studies and the research plan written by their supervisor. In those situations, they had first to take additional training, for instance in lab techniques, before they could start with their PhD trajectory. Taking additional training goes at the expense of their 4-year PhD-contract. An ombuds might ask for leniency of the department towards a PhD in those situations where a PhD had to take additional courses and lost precious time.

### III POOR TUNING BETWEEN SUPERVISORS AND PHD STUDENT

Regularly PhD students mentioned that meetings between them and their supervisors didn't take place very frequently. PhD students need directions on how to pursue research and how to navigate a particular discipline. In all stages of the trajectory, regular meetings between supervisor(s) and the PhD student are important. Regular meetings are important for the PhD student in order to see if he or she is still on track. For the supervisor it is important to see if a PhD student sticks to the plan and is making progress.

Sometimes PhD students mentioned that a clear research plan was lacking at the beginning of a trajectory. If the research plan was not available planning was impaired. Sometimes a PhD student was summoned by his supervisor with the instruction to read some dissertations of predecessor students in order to think about his or her own research plan.

What happens quite often is that PhD students concentrate on data gathering for quite a long time. Gathering of data can lead to postponement of writing reports and articles. By doing this, it can lead to exceeding the 4-year contract. Therefore, it is very important that PhD students start in timely fashion with reporting and writing articles for their dissertation as well as data gathering. Sometimes PhD students are requested to combine their research with educational tasks. That may also lead to exceeding the 4-year contract if these educational tasks are not compensated. This is especially the case in those situations where a PhD student is afraid to refuse additional educational tasks for his department. As a result, the primary task, doing PhD research, is in danger of being compromised. A PhD student might discuss the lack of meetings with his supervisor or the lack of a research plan with an ombuds. An ombuds could arrange a meeting with supervisor and PhD student and ask for regular meetings in which progress and planning are discussed.

#### IV PUBLICATION PRESSURE

Delay can also be caused by the handling of articles by scientific journals. Sometimes the editor of these journals takes months before deciding to accept articles. Dissertations in the beta-medical sciences and in the social sciences are more and more based on articles published in scientific journals. This phenomenon leads to an enormous number of articles offered at (reliable) scientific journals (not only) by PhD students. High impact journals are in the position to refuse many of these articles. This abundance of articles has led to the rise of so-called “predatory journals”<sup>2</sup>. PhD students are very dependent on placement of their articles by scientific journals, preferably with high impact scores. If they don’t succeed in placement of their articles in high quality journals, they might fall in the trap of these “predatory journals”. Public funds then flow into the coffers of obscure organizations. Supervisors could warn their PhD students of the pitfalls of predatory journals.

#### V THE CONSEQUENCES OF DELAY FOR PHD STUDENTS

It is obvious that where there are delays, time is ticking to the disadvantage of the PhD students. This certainly applies for PhD students from countries outside the European Economic Area. Their visas to stay in the Netherlands are based on their appointment as PhD students. If PhD students foresee that they will exceed the 4-year term of appointment, psychological problems can arise. After receiving many signals about PhD students who encountered psychological problems the Board of Utrecht University decided one year ago to appoint a PhD psychologist. If PhD students exceed the 4-year term all kind of problems might occur:

- Financial problems because of the fact that they will no longer obtain salaries;
- Visa problems if the PhD student does not have a passport from one of countries of the European Economic Area;
- Psychological problems and stress related problems like depression or burn out;
- No admittance to university laboratories and no use of (expensive) research materials.

Supervisors are mostly concerned about the research project and not always aware of the conditions of residency of a (foreign) PhD student. In a meeting between supervisor and PhD

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<sup>2</sup> “Predatory journals” publish articles on the basis of paid fees without executing a quality check or making use of a reliable peer review process. These journals are mainly aimed at generating revenue without any significant contribution. The so-called Bealls’ List now contains the names of thousands “predatory journals”.

student an ombuds could explain the complex situation PhD students find themselves in. Because of the impartial position of the ombuds it is very likely that a supervisor will be open to the ombuds' advice.

## CONCLUSIONS

Within academia PhD students have the weakest position. They are staff or faculty members who nearly always have temporary contracts, and they are exceptionally dependent on their supervisors. They often work in solitary fashion and within four years they must deliver a significant performance. This position of dependency and the high demands placed on them mean that PhD students often have to work under great stress.

Where there are problems, it is desirable that PhD students should be able to rely on the support of an independent and impartial ombudsman. The ombudsman may mediate in improving working conditions, in helping to extend PhD programs, and in resolving disputes between promoter and PhD student and achieving solutions that are timely, fair and humane.

The Central Labor Agreement of Dutch universities (CAO Nederlandse Universiteiten; 2022) offers the possibility to extend the appointment if a PhD student has been delayed due to long-term illness. However, there remain problems. It happens sometimes that unwell PhD students do not report their ill-health, because they assume that an extension of the appointment will not be given after all. Indeed, it often happens that an extension of appointment is not given on the grounds that there are no means of extending the appointment.

There are also still professors who advise completion of the thesis after the end of the 4-year term using a welfare benefit from the Dutch government. This can be an incitement to fraud, because someone who applies for benefits must in principle be available for the labor market. A PhD student who has to complete his or her thesis is not normally available for the labor market. In the conversations I had with PhD students, it regularly appeared that they were very reluctant to discuss their problems with a PhD mentor or PhD confidant from their own faculty or even from their own department. They suspect that the report will be discussed with the supervisor immediately after their departure. It is better to encourage the PhD students to seek the advice of the ombudsman, who works at a central level of the university, is independent and works under official secrecy.

In the months that lie behind us, I spoke to delegations of PhD students. They often did not know about the existence of a confidential counsellor/ombudsperson staff, despite the reports about this person in university newsletters. The information they received about his role, his independence and the fact that he works under an oath of official secrecy, etc. reassured them very much.

The role of the Ombuds for Staff and Faculty has been underexposed in most studies. Recent research by Bergmans and Van der Weijden (2021) on PhD students who provide informal care concludes that supervisors are not informed about the caregiving tasks of the PhD students (Baaren; 2021). The researchers see an important role for the Department of Human Resources in supporting PhD students. All Dutch universities should have had an ombuds for staff by mid-2021 on the basis of recent collective labor agreements (CAO Nederlandse Universiteiten; 2021). It is much more sensible to engage an impartial (some ombuds prefer the use of the word "multipartial") ombuds in mediation about the precarious position of PhD students than to leave this to the Human Resources department. It is clear that Human Resources has increasingly entered the role of management support in the past decades (Stevenson & Van den Berg; 2020). Of course, Human Resources can be involved in the implementation of extensions, and the information to professors about the incorrect use of social benefits by PhD students who do not



have their thesis ready within four years, etc. However, for a vulnerable PhD student, an HR advisor, because of his partiality, is not the most adequate source of answers to questions.

At Utrecht University, the Graduate Committee (a committee of all vice-deans' research of all faculties) is commissioned by the Rector Magnificus to develop university-wide plans to improve the (legal) position of PhD students. Awareness that more attention should be paid to the most vulnerable group in academia is growing. That is a positive development.

Delay causes major problems among PhD students. Consideration should be given to how the consequences of delay can be addressed, for example by setting up a fund from which extension of appointments can be arranged. Timely decisions on extension reduce stress.

Furthermore, it would be good if a PhD tracking system were developed. Not all PhD students are known to the Graduate Schools. This has to do with the different forms of appointment of PhD students. PhD students with university appointments are easily found in personnel files. But PhD students with, for instance, grants from the Chinese or Iranian government are not always easily traceable in central university administrations (Strikkers; 2022). The same goes for PhD students without contracts. This has to change. Of all PhD students, it should be transparent how many are on track, how many have been delayed, the reason for the delay and how many PhD students have dropped out (and after how many years). And in the event of the premature departure of PhD students, exit interviews should be organized, so that the understanding of imperfections increases and is documented. Ombuds can play an important role in describing anonymized essential problems of PhD students in their annual reports. The university can then take appropriate measures.

On the basis of the proposals described above, it should be possible to substantially prevent the dropout among PhD students. A target dropout percentage of no more than 10 per cent may well be entirely feasible.

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**Paul Herfs** worked for 16 years as an ombuds for staff and faculty at Utrecht University. He has a MSc in Educational Sciences and obtained a PhD degree in 2009 at Utrecht University. His thesis titled: “International Medical Graduates in the Netherlands”. In 2021 he retired from his work at Utrecht University. Nowadays he is appointed as an ombuds for the University of the Arts in Utrecht. The author is member of the board of the European Network of Ombuds in Higher Education (ENOHE) and member of the board of the Dutch Association of Ombuds in Higher Education (VOHO). (paul.herfs@hku.nl)