

A photograph of a forest path covered in fallen yellow leaves, framed by a circular vignette. The path leads into a dense forest with tall trees and a canopy of green and yellow leaves. The ground is covered in a thick layer of fallen yellow leaves, suggesting an autumn setting. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

THE PHD WANDERER

ESSAYS ON
DOCTORAL STUDIES IN SWEDEN

Edited by Cristina Ghita and Martin Stojanov

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UPPSALA
UNIVERSITET

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I: WHO IS THE PHD WANDERER?

“It’s a dangerous business, Frodo, going out of your door. You step into the Road, and if you don’t keep your feet, there is no knowing where you might be swept off to.”

Bilbo Baggins

1. Introduction

Cristina Ghita and Martin Stojanov

It was at a conference in Karlstad, amidst both the relief and excitement of having presented our ongoing work to fellow PhD students from various Swedish universities, that we—Cristina and Martin, the editors of this volume—took a moment to reflect on what we were witnessing. Seated at the conference dinner table, we took stock of shared experiences of what felt like underarticulated aspects in doctoral training. With the keynotes, presentations and debates of the conference behind us, we saw how the loud and lively discussions continued about research and teaching advice, support, connections, collaborations, and solutions to troublesome issues. We agreed that the informal and light-hearted conversations we observed around us were seldom truly appreciated for their importance to doctoral education. As we recognised ourselves and each other in the conversations around us, we found comfort in knowing that the problems we initially thought were only ours, were in fact shared by many of our peers. We celebrated the common joys of our doctoral projects while also finding comfort in sharing our challenges with each other.

As we shared this observation with our colleagues, we consistently found a recognition and appreciation for the important role of informal and unexpected aspects of PhD studies, and how it is rarely addressed in public forums. After completing our own PhD studies, we increasingly reflected on the often-overlooked aspects of the doctoral experience which we would have been interested to hear early in our process. Whenever we discussed this, we repeatedly returned to two points: firstly, that reflections on the often-overlooked aspects of the PhD experience deserved more attention; and secondly, that while advice from senior academics was undoubtedly of great value, what we often missed were candid accounts from recent graduates about their lived experiences. The idea for the present volume was born from such reflections.

The experience of being a PhD student is as varied as the contexts in which it is situated and viewed from. To those outside academia, it often appears as a romanticized period of intense study and profound personal and professional development — a time when doctoral candidates dedicate themselves to innovative and groundbreaking research. Especially in popular literature, the PhD

student frequently appears as a controversial yet brilliant figure in the employ of research, à la Victor Frankenstein (Shelly, 2012), or as a subject in memoirs detailing the scientific and personal entanglements existent in academic life (Jahren, 2016). Furthermore, a recent trend in Swedish fiction depicting PhD students tends to approach them in dramatic manners, for example in Engberg's (2017) novel *An Outstanding Career*, described as “about the art of failing with mostly everything in life”¹; or Tralau's (2023) crime novel focused on the mysterious death of a PhD student in Uppsala. This trend appears to extend beyond Scandinavia, as seen in horror literature such as Barnett's (2022) novel which features a mysterious expedition where the team often expresses concern whether the accompanying PhD student should have been focusing on writing her dissertation instead.

Within academia, however, this view might take a different tone, as PhD studies are often described as tumultuous yet transformative periods, marked by both joys and challenges. Existent academic literature largely focuses on overcoming the existent challenges and supporting the doctoral candidates deliver their promised output: the dissertation. Therefore, literature here often takes the form of practical guides (Lantsoght, 2018), many with titles framed as survival guides (Firth et al. 2020; Ayres, 2022). A common theme in this type of academic literature is that of aiding the doctoral student to develop writing skills and construct the doctoral dissertation in systematic manners (Davis & Parker, 2012), faster (James & Slater, 2014), or by uncovering invisible rules of academia (Brause, 1999). A few works also approach the topic of PhD studies with a focus on reflexivity, addressing aspects such as emotional and spiritual resilience (Sterne, 2015), or the power dynamics inherent in supervisor-student relationships (Chapman & Stork, 2001).

A commonly held view in the works cited above is that PhD projects are characterised by contrasting periods of time where junior academics learn to navigate both successes as well as failures. For many, doctoral studies coincide with significant life events when families are built, relocations are planned, health issues can occur—either their own or their dear ones, and opportunities arise leading to important decisions having to be made. As Stranegård (2003) notes, conducting the doctoral research can become an integral part of one's identity if only through the process of becoming an expert in a specific area and method. The pursuit of a PhD title is then intertwined with human experiences, many of which are difficult to foresee, shaping how the research unfolds. It is perhaps for such reasons that the doctoral period is often

¹ Our translation from Swedish. Original title: “En enastående karriär”; Original description: “om konsten att misslyckas med det mesta i livet”

referred to through metaphors of a journey in everyday discussions, as well as in academic literature.

The abundance of the journey metaphor depicting the doctoral period seeks to capture the exploratory aspects of this type of education. Terms such as *journey* or *trajectory* (Lantsoght, 2018), as well as *navigation* (McDonnell, 2020), invoke a certain linear progression from point A (the beginning of a PhD project) to point B (often, the successful defence of the dissertation). While we find that such language efficiently emphasizes the output-focused aspect of this process, it can often fall short when considering the doctoral period in its entirety. After all, in light of all the events unfolding in a person's life over five years, how could this period be anything else but complex? In this volume, we aim to draw attention to the messy, unruly, turbulent, lively, vibrant, and spontaneous dimensions of the doctoral years. For such reasons, we propose, instead, to expand the imaginary of becoming a PhD through the metaphor of the *wandering PhD*, which we define as an early-career academic venturing into unknown terrains, sometimes becoming lost, at other times finding exciting directions, committing to new routes, and encountering new travellers on the way. Although they might appear to move from point A to point B, their path is far less clear and straightforward than they originally envisioned it. Thus, through the metaphor of the PhD wanderer we want to capture the non-linear progression of a doctoral project which is filled with exploration and discovery, as well as human connection, ambiguity, and adaptability.

The wandering PhD student depicted in this volume is one situated in the specific context of Sweden. While many experiences described here will resonate with academics outside the Swedish academic system, we believe that Sweden makes for an insightful case for exploring the lived experiences of doctoral students. More specifically, Sweden is often typically regarded as a positive example because of its treatment of PhD students, who are considered salaried members of faculty staff. As such, their rights and responsibilities are clearly regulated by trade unions. However, such advantages do not eliminate the potential challenges and unexpected events that can hinder both the well-being of the PhD students and the progression of their work. Existent literature focusing specifically on a Swedish academic context, often mirrors the previously described broad focus on achieving a successful outcome. For example, Burman (2016) emphasises techniques to facilitate finishing on time and reducing stress, while Lindén (1998) looks specifically at supervision practices. Nevertheless, there are works which stand out for more reflexive approaches, such as Strannegård's (2003) edited volume which includes senior academics from organisational studies reflecting upon their own past experiences as PhD

students and their current involvement in third cycle education; or Österlind et al. (2022)'s work aptly titled *Doctoral Education as if People Matter*. Furthermore, Lindberg (2022) provides a fascinating and in-depth historical account of the doctoral dissertation's development as a genre within Swedish academia between 1600-1855.

Within this body of existent literature, we were particularly inspired by Barbara Czarniawska's call for more open dialogue on the agreements, disagreements, and everything in between that shape academic life:

It is assumed that we all agree on what constitutes good scientific practice, but that is not true at all, which becomes evident when it really comes down to it, i.e., during evaluations, expert opinions, oppositions, and reviews. Should we not then occasionally talk more openly about such matters?²

(Czarniawska, 2003, p.43)

We envisioned the present volume as an opportunity to share the nuanced and varied experiences of PhD students. The chapters within this collection are authored by academics who have successfully defended their doctoral dissertations and earned their PhDs at Swedish universities. Our aim was to create a space for open reflections from those for whom this period remains vivid in memory, yet distant enough to be presented in a thoughtful manner. A consideration in shaping this volume was the inclusion of both Swedish and international academics. Publishing this volume in English, despite its focus on the Swedish academic context, was a deliberate choice made not only in order to make the book available to a larger audience, but also to align it with the reality of the Swedish academic landscape. According to the official Swedish bureau of statistics, 41% of the new third-cycle entrants in 2022 were international (SCB, 2023, p. 64). This is not unusual as the recruitment of international PhD students has long been a tradition in academic institutions worldwide, the Swedish academic system being no exception. Our intention is for this book to go beyond recounting specific experiences of PhD students, offering insights that are relevant to the international community of PhD students in Sweden—many of whom may not be fluent in Swedish.

We were pleased by the interest for such a volume, but also saddened to not be able to include all the proposed contributions—such as PhD students currently working on their dissertations who wished to share reflections from the centre of this intense period, or those who, for various reasons, interrupted

² Our translation from Swedish. Original: “det antas att vi alla är överens om vad som är bra vetenskaplig praktik, men det är vi inte alls, vilket märks när det väl kommer till kritan, dvs. vid utvärderingar, sakkunniga utlåtanden, oppositioner och recensioner. Bör vi inte då och då prata mer öppet om sådant?”

their doctoral studies. This also prompted further reflection on whose voices represent experiences of academic life, and how a more diverse perspective is needed. Although this is a limitation of the present volume, it also opens up opportunities for future projects of this kind.

Many authors in this volume include advice for current and prospective PhD students. While offering advice is easy, implementing it is often significantly more challenging. Furthermore, since doctoral projects and institutional contexts vary, there is no one-size-fits-all advice which can serve everyone. Nevertheless, we believe that reading the included chapters may help sensitise current and future PhD students in Sweden to their expectations, realities, and the multitudes existent in between the beginning and the end of a PhD wandering. The topics included here reflect what their respective authors saw as meaningful. We made a conscious effort to avoid steering the authors in any particular direction, encouraging them instead to write in an essay format that allowed them to explore their chosen topics in ways that felt meaningful to them. As a result, the contained chapters are varied and evocative, covering the following topics:



The process of writing the dissertation is one common to all PhD candidates, though it is experienced in highly personal and intimate manners. In the chapter entitled *A monograph experience: What I knew and what I know now*, Yunchen Sun engages in a unique and engaging dialogue with their past self during the process of writing the dissertation. While past Yunchen Sun feels overwhelmed and uncertain, present Yunchen Sun offers comfort by legitimizing past feelings, which are most likely recognisable by any reader who has recently completed a PhD. Through engaging in a dialogue with themselves, the *two* authors approach complex topics such as writing in a monograph format, developing an academic writing style and identity, and managing the complexities of the research process in which important decisions must be made.

In the chapter *To learn or not to learn Swedish: On balancing learning investments during PhD studies*, Aya Rizk reflects on her own challenges and moments of breakthrough in learning Swedish. Although clear expectations for international PhD students to learn Swedish are rarely explicitly stated, there are existent assumptions that they should achieve a sufficient level of proficiency during their doctoral years. Aya Rizk offers a thoughtful reflection that provides insight into the experience of an international PhD student who is motivated to learn Swedish, actively taking steps towards reaching this goal.

Since such experiences are somewhat invisible to native Swedish speakers or those who have attained fluency, uncovering institutional and societal barriers encountered by even the most motivated PhD students to learn the language is valuable to any institutional environment.

Although not all PhD students in Sweden are required to have teaching duties, most are involved in some form of teaching. Per Fors looks back at his own initiation into teaching in his chapter *Making teaching work (even if you didn't sign up for it)*. Although teaching came as a surprise at the beginning of their doctoral period, for Per Fors this developed into a passion in which its value became increasingly clear. This chapter is especially relevant for those who might see teaching as a distraction from research, illustrating how these two can be complementary, even essential, for those pursuing an academic career beyond the PhD.

A common aspiration and expectation among PhD students is for their work to be relevant both to their respective discipline and to society at large. In the chapter *Becoming relevant*, Martin Stojanov reflects on the encountered opportunities and choices made during their doctoral project, the alignment between their initial vision of the project, what was realistically possible, and the adjustments made to ensure the project's relevance. Martin Stojanov reflects on the wish for his work to become relevant as well as himself as a young researcher. As such, the first encounter of a doctoral student with relevance as a scientific criterion is explored, and later discussed in relation to how this was transferred in the work conducted post-PhD studies, in a post-doctoral fellowship.

Emil Ahlström takes a creative approach in their chapter *A Travel Guide to Dim-Lit Lands*, exploring the topic of writing a PhD dissertation through the lens of Eastern philosophy. The chapter invites readers on an imagined journey alongside the author's reflections on recently completing their dissertation. These reflections are enriched by quotes from the Japanese poet Bashō and original haikus composed by the author, illustrating the writing process. The poetic form the chapter takes highlights the deep emotions intertwined with seemingly rigid aspects of writing—such as structure, routines, and revisions. This chapter also testifies to the desire many PhD students share, namely to craft a doctoral dissertation that is not merely reporting scientific results, but is also a personal and engaging work.

In the chapter *Flying the interdisciplinary flag in doctoral projects*, Cristina Ghita revisits her diaries from the doctoral period, reflecting on the entry in a new discipline and the eventual integration of theories and elements from other fields. While interdisciplinary projects are becoming increasingly accepted and encouraged in research, they remain risky territory for many PhD

students, as expectations still exist to make contribution within a specific discipline. Moreover, interdisciplinary projects present particular challenges to doctoral students where the degrees are awarded in a single discipline and supervisors who are experts in distinct fields.

Paulina Rajkowska reflects upon dealing with personal challenges and their impact on her doctoral work in the chapter *Stranded at sea: Navigating crisis, responsibility, and activism in academia*. The chapter goes beyond a mere recounting of turbulent times, offering an evocative portrayal of how struggles can remain invisible to those around. For these reasons, Paulina Rajkowska illustrates the importance of support systems and the crucial role trade unions play by sharing her motivations, involvement, and current full-time work in the Swedish Association of University Teachers and Researchers. Thus, the chapter exemplifies a different yet vital academic career path—that of an academic dedicated to improving Swedish academia.

The chapter *We, nomad: Towards an ethical mode of becoming in Swedish academia*, Shruti Kashyap offers a powerful and evocative account of the challenges faced by international PhD students, particularly women of colour. Drawing on feminist theories such as Rosi Braidotti's nomadic theory, Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, as well as Sara Ahmed's work, the chapter includes a compelling call for transforming the academic spaces which are seemingly meant to be inclusive but often fall short in practice. The chapter is a manifest to choosing to thrive and contributes to a growing body of literature dedicated to building a more just and inclusive academic world.

Perhaps one of the most often discussed elements of PhD studies, aside from the writing process, is supervision and the relationship between supervisor and candidate. Niki Chatzipanagiotou provides in the chapter *Wandering through change: The role of supervisors and support networks in the doctoral journey* an excellent account of a case where supervisors were supportive and encouraging, therefore having a positive effect on the doctoral experience. This chapter is particularly relevant as discussions about doctoral supervision often emphasize challenges and problems, outlining what should not be done or avoided. In contrast, this chapter contributes in showing what *should* be done in order to foster a successful and healthy relationship between the PhD supervision team and their students.

Olof Wadell and Chelsey Jo Huisman offer a unique view of a theory-driven reflection of their doctoral periods in the chapter *The PhD journey: An entrepreneurial perspective*. As the authors shared much of their their doctoral studies' aspects, they offer a rare joint perspective on the research process. While both authors used effectuation theory in their doctoral studies, they now re-orient it towards their own experiences by alternately exploring themes

through this theoretical lens. Although one might assume that the experiences of two academics in such similar contexts will be alike, the chapter reveals how different this can be.

PhD students often receive advice emphasizing the need to become independent while simultaneously establishing or joining a strong network. Naghmeh Aghaee and Blerim Emruli discuss in their chapter *Striking the balance between independence and academic integration during PhD studies*, the potential social isolation that PhD students may experience. The authors reflect on the challenges of finding a balanced level of independence while navigating academic social structures and offer practical advice on how this can be improved.

In the final chapters of this volume, we include two interviews with two senior academics who are experienced in supervising, recruiting, and interacting with PhD students. We engaged in discussions with Christina Keller, Professor at the Department of Informatics at Lund University and the Dean of the Swedish Research School of Management and IT; as well as Thomas Taro Lennerfors, Professor at the Department of Civil and Industrial Engineering as well and the head of the department's division of Industrial Engineering and Management. The interviews focused on the main themes presented in the chapters of the PhD Wanderer. We chose to include these interviews as transcripts, as we aimed to give the word to seasoned supervisors in a conversational and informal manner, similar to the Karlstad conference dinner where the idea of the present volume first took shape. While we acknowledge that no collection of essays or interviews could fully replace the spontaneous and enjoyable exchanges that happen in break rooms, conference dinners, or social events, we hope that the voices captured here will resonate with current prospective PhD students both in Sweden and beyond, their supervisors, and their institutional environments.

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unfair to ask them to transform something so intimate into text and we are thankful that they have succeeded in such evocative ways.

Finally, we want to thank everyone who, whether mentioned directly or indirectly, was a part of the chapters in this book: supervisors, administrators, colleagues, family, and friends—your support is the backbone of the PhD wandering.

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2. A short overview of doctoral studies in Sweden

Although the academic position of a PhD student typically involves advanced research training and working toward earning the title of Doctor of Philosophy in a specific field, there are certain aspects unique to the Swedish context. In Sweden, a PhD program is referred to as third-cycle education, following the first cycle (bachelor's degree) and second cycle (master's degree). Generally, PhD students, or *doktorander*, are not regarded solely as students despite the title of their position, and are also salaried university staff (although other forms also exist, such as PhD students funded by scholarships or industrial PhD students).

To be admitted to a PhD program, candidates must have acquired 240 education credits, including at least 60 credits from second-cycle education, making a master's degree a prerequisite. This position is highly regulated in state universities, which constitute the majority of Swedish higher education institutions. Prospective PhD students must apply for doctoral positions through publicly available advertisements.

The particulars of how PhD students are funded in state-owned institutions are governed by the Higher Education Ordinance (Högskoleförordning 1993³). In this volume, we discuss certain practices, traditions, and regulations unique to Sweden. We provide a brief description of some elements that may require clarification for international readers or those unfamiliar with the Swedish third cycle of education system. However, this is not an exhaustive account, and we encourage readers to consult more comprehensive resources, such as those provided by the Swedish Association of University Teachers and Researchers (SULF, 2024).

PhD student or PhD candidate

Although there is a distinction between the two terms—*PhD student* typically referring to an academic in the early stages of their doctoral project and PhD

³An English version is offered by the Swedish Council for Higher Education at <https://www.uhr.se/en/start/laws-and-regulations/Laws-and-regulations/The-Higher-Education-Ordinance/>

candidate describing someone further along in their process, such as finalizing their dissertation—the concepts have become closely associated, and often being used interchangeably. One reason for this is that the PhD dissertation is often seen as a continuous backdrop to doctoral work, continually under development. Additionally, in Sweden, where the position combines both educational and salaried roles, the term student might be perceived as falling short. This duality is also important as different PhD rights have different origins, for example the right to be represented in board meetings due to the role of the student, and the right to be supported by unions due to being an employee.

Supervisor or advisor

While the term *PhD supervisor* is more commonly used, *advisor* has recently gained a certain preference, as it suggests a less authoritative role over the PhD student's work. In this book, the terms are used interchangeably, depending on each author's preference and usage. In Swedish, the word *handledare* is a more straightforward concept, leading to potential differences in translation to English, an issue pertaining to language acquisition which some authors also mention in their respective chapters.

In Sweden, a PhD student typically has two supervisors, a main and a secondary one. The main supervisor is more closely connected to the doctoral project and may also hold the project's funding, although this is not always the case. Both supervisors have a designated percentage of their employment dedicated to supervision, which includes regular meetings, mentorship, collaboration on studies and paper-writing, and administrative tasks. In projects with strong industry ties, an additional supervisor from the relevant company may also be assigned.

Length of doctoral programs

In Sweden, the traditional duration of a PhD program is four years with a possibility of extension. PhD students are often given the opportunity to teach up to 20% of their time, though this is not always guaranteed. Teaching responsibilities extend the four-year period dedicated to research by an additional year (if 20% teaching is allocated every year). In many fields it is also possible to complete a shorter third cycle education resulting in a licentiate degree. While five years is typical for PhD students who consistently spend 20% of their time teaching, the duration may be further extended due to parental leave, sick leave, or other special circumstances. This is the reason why most authors in this book refer to a period of doctoral studies of five or more years.

PhD courses

Doctoral courses are offered to actively employed PhD students, who are expected and required to complete a specific number of credits, including dissertation work. While some courses may be mandated by the home institution, most coursework is chosen by the PhD student in consultation with their supervisors and based on what is relevant to their research. Doctoral courses can be taken either in Sweden or internationally and are typically condensed into several weeks.

Progression seminars

Progression seminars are milestones that many, though not all, departments organize for PhD students. When required, these seminars mark key stages in the candidate's progress. Typically, there are three progression seminars, although they are not standardized across universities and faculties:

A research proposal seminar within the first year, where the candidate presents their overall plan and any preliminary work completed.

A mid-term seminar, in which the candidate presents their progress, including preliminary results, any eventual publications, and future plans.

A final seminar (often called the "90% seminar") held relatively close to the defence date, where the candidate presents advanced results while still being able to incorporate feedback before submitting the final dissertation.

Monograph or compilation

There are three types of doctoral dissertations a candidate can pursue:

A monograph is a book-format work composed of chapters and represents a single, cohesive doctoral project. It includes final results that have not been published elsewhere.

A compilation dissertation primarily consists of previously published academic articles included with the publisher's permission. This type of dissertation must be preceded by an introductory section—called a *kappa*—which explains the overall doctoral project, how the articles contribute to the study, and synthesizes the results from the included articles. While the articles themselves are published, the *kappa* must be original and unpublished elsewhere at the time of the defence.

The essay compilation is a less common type which has a similar structure to the compilation dissertation but consists entirely of original, unpublished works.

Although the monograph is often viewed as the more traditional format, preferences vary by discipline. Compilations are more common in the natural

sciences, whereas monographs prevail in the social sciences and humanities. However, this distinction is not absolute.

The dissertation defence

The defence of a PhD dissertation in Sweden is held at the candidate's home institution and is a public event. An assigned opponent is invited to discuss the dissertation's contents with the candidate. Although the discussion between the opponent and the candidate is central to the defence, the opponent does not determine whether the dissertation meets the required standards of scientific rigor and relevance. This responsibility lies with the grading committee. The grading committee consists of academics (typically three or more) chosen for their expertise in areas relevant to the dissertation's subject matter. During the defence, the committee members may also ask questions and engage with the candidate. After the defence, the committee deliberates privately to decide whether the dissertation has passed and whether the candidate will receive their PhD title. Unlike some other academic traditions (e.g., the viva), Swedish dissertation defences result in a final pass or fail decision, with no revisions typically required after this assessment.

Collegial decision-making

Sweden has a strong tradition of trade unions, which are widespread across many sectors. For PhD students, the respective trade union negotiate salaries annually and establish general working conditions through collective agreements. However, to receive support in specific situations, individuals must be active members of their union. SULF (the Swedish Association of University Teachers and Researchers) represents higher education teachers, researchers, and doctoral students. While many are only members of unions, others become actively involved by volunteering in local university associations or participating in union activities.

Swedish universities are generally organized hierarchically into faculties, departments, and divisions, each of which elects board members to represent various groups, including students, PhD students, teachers, subject divisions, etc. These board members meet to discuss and take decisions on proposals affecting their constituencies. Serving as a PhD student representative is a limited-term commitment that involves reviewing documentation, acting as a liaison between the department's PhD students and the board, and voting on decisions.

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II: PHD WANDERINGS

Yunchen Sun

Yunchen Sun is a researcher in organizational studies by chance and a collector of lived experience by design.

They believe in the power of stories—especially those of people working in relation to change. Their work explores how manufacturing and assembly workers design and change their ways of working in pursuit of a digital factory, how knowledge workers develop new ways of producing knowledge with intelligent automation technologies in the achievement society, as well as how cultural workers adjust their ways of organizing in response to technological upheaval.

They also believe in the power of narratives—particularly those of creative nature. Highlights of their artistic expression include an introspective poem reflecting on the PhD process, a performance art video exploring consequences of routine change, and a monologue dissecting the phenomenon of “quiet quitting”. And of course, the pages that follow.

Sun, Y. (2022). *Designing Routines for Industrial Digitalization* (PhD dissertation, Department of Business Studies, Uppsala University). Available at <https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-483822>

3. A monograph experience: What I knew and what I know now

Yunchen Sun

A wandering PhD has a goal in sight – a PhD dissertation. In the Swedish higher education system, this formal written document can take the form of a monograph or compilation, though its prevalence varies by field. Different disciplines have unwritten preferences, assumptions, and associations with the choice of PhD thesis form. Monographs are more common in humanities and social sciences, while compilation-based theses are more common in science and technology, medicine and pharmacy. A monograph is more than just a few hundred pages of text; it is a testament to independent scholarship. At the same time, it is a scholarly production—a dialogue with state-of-the-art researchers.

As a proud *monographist*, I fully embraced the monograph way of working, albeit a little too monomaniacally. Immersing myself in the monolithic world of research, I found both comfort and challenge in the monotonous yet deeply reflective nature of the process. But looking back, I realize that I wasn't truly alone in my monologue. Throughout my academic career, I've developed a peculiar habit: engaging in constant internal *mono-dialogues* with my past selves—especially those from critical moments that shaped my PhD trajectory.

This essay is an externalization of those dialogues, an attempt to normalize the complexities of certain situations, and illustrate how particular decisions can shape an academic career. The conversations that follow begin with my future self-initiating a dialogue with my past self, including a brief background on the career stage I was at during that time. These are thematically divided into four key aspects: working with the monograph format, improving my writing skills, managing the research process, and developing my academic and personal identity.



Monographing the way

Yunchen in 2024: Second year of postdoc, publishing the first paper based on the monograph.

Yunchen in 2018: Second year of PhD, preparing to attend two international conferences and meet the research community for the first time.

—You know our monograph has been a great conversation starter during this postdoc. Almost all your colleagues have written compilation-based theses. People are curious!

—Oh, my! Oh, great to hear from you. And to know that we still have a future! In academia, no less! But wait... are we the odd ones out?

—Not exactly, but people just aren't that familiar with this format. Most of them have worked with multiple smaller case studies, and the compilation format feels more intuitive to them. I often have to explain that, like doing a compilation, doing a monograph isn't really a choice—it is dictated by the circumstances.

—Yes, how do you respond to your colleagues then?

—Well, the project had already been running for a year when we joined, and it was set to continue to last for two more years. The longitudinal data was simply too rich. Sure, it could have been the case with separate papers, but that never felt quite right.

—Oh... oh... this isn't very reassuring, you know. I'm writing some conference papers as we speak.

—Right, but that is still important! Remember we were told that writing a monograph doesn't mean working in isolation. We have to talk to other people beyond just the supervisors.

—Yes, I am aiming to attend two conferences in 2019 with my papers. Maybe I will finally meet the faces behind the names I'd been citing and converse with them.

—You did meet them! The first conference was nerve-racking, and you were even late for the session! But by chance, one of the conferences had a community event, and that helped you connect with the entire research community. You kept attending these events and even co-organized one later on!

—That sounds amazing. Tell me more! Did those conference papers help with the monograph?

—Not directly. None of the conference papers have been published yet. Out of the six papers, only one is currently being prepared for journal submission.

But the process of writing them helped organize and present ideas, and more importantly, it allowed us to get feedback from the scholars we were citing.

—I see. Would you consider yourself a part of your research community now?

—Good question. It depends. I do keep up with state-of-the-art research. I know who the key figures are in the field. But since we wrote a monograph, we didn't get to establish a scholarly profile in the same way as those who published papers. In that sense, our academic impact has been minimal. I also decided against writing for a popular audience based on the PhD material, which some scholars do. I just couldn't separate the "PhD-ness" from the text. So, I've had neither significant academic impact nor public outreach yet. But now that I have one journal paper published, and hopefully more to come, that might change.

—Seems like you're doubting the monograph choice again. I didn't know we'd still be this indecisive. What's done is done!

—I know. But this doubt only comes up when triggered sometimes, and right now it's about career advance in academia. In hindsight, we could have worked more on the conference papers and submitted them to journals. But back then, we weren't sure if we wanted to stay in academia, so we weren't thinking about long-term publishing strategy. That said, there's no point dwelling on hypotheticals. So, no, I don't regret writing the monograph. It gave us the opportunity to deeply engage with the empirical setting and literature, helping us become an independent researcher and an expert in the field. And unlike papers, the monograph is entirely our own work!

—Good on us! I had no idea there was so much strategizing involved in publishing!

—Oh, absolutely. Ideally, having at least one publishable manuscript ready toward the end of the PhD is advisable. It took me two years after the dissertation defense to publish the first paper, and it wasn't even intended for the research community we had originally worked with. Some people take even longer, especially if they end up in postdoc positions that don't offer the flexibility to revisit their past work. Others never manage to publish from their monograph at all. And yet, there's always that lingering thought—maybe we'll return to it someday, maybe there's still something left to say. It haunts us, sitting in the back of our minds, keeping us latched onto a version of ourselves that no longer exists. Maybe that's why we've never truly moved on...

Crafting ideas into words

Yunchen in 2023: First year of postdoc, finalizing the first draft of a journal publication.

Yunchen in 2022: Fifth year of PhD, out of funding, finalizing the dissertation before the submission deadline—(re)producing over 15,000 words within a few weeks.

—Over the past few weeks, I was drafting this new article and I came across this 80-page document filled with random text fragments. Care to explain how this is useful?

—Oh, those are all darlings I killed when rewriting the dissertation! Some are notes from articles I read, and others are comments from my supervisors. I didn't want to actually kill them, so I kept them here instead.

—I appreciate your thoughtfulness, but I think you overestimated how much of this would actually be reused. I have barely looked at these notes. In fact, I think I've finally figured out my own approach to crafting words and organizing ideas.

—I am all ears!

—Writing is a skill, and a craft that can be developed. We used to blur the boundaries between different stages of writing and treated everything as text production. What I mean is, we think too much about the text while writing and constantly revise it as we go. We're thinking, producing, rewriting, and copyediting all at once. It might work in the short term, but it's not exactly productive when it comes to generating the body of a text.

—That's true. I do think and write simultaneously. I also recognize that all ideas don't emerge before writing; some come through during the process itself. Writing isn't just documenting thoughts. It's part of thinking.

—Exactly. And that's what makes writing on a computer both powerful and tricky. It's efficient and generative, but it also makes it too easy to erase, edit, and fall into copyediting mode prematurely.

—I didn't think that would be a problem, though.

—Nothing is a problem until it becomes a problem. You pushed yourself to intensely write and edit at the same time in order to finalize the dissertation, but then you hit a writer's block when you became too much of a gatekeeper over your own words. That led to struggling when writing for an important submission after your defense, and which ultimately resulted in a rejection.

—Thanks for the foresight! But honestly, at this stage of my PhD, I have to push myself to meet the FINAL deadline. Do you still let deadlines dictate your writing process?

—Oh, absolutely. But with this journal submission, I had to rewire my brain. I didn't have to write 20 pages for each chapter anymore, so binge-writing didn't work in the same way. The writing now is much more concise and straight to the point, for lack of a better term. Speaking of which, I still don't

know how you managed to switch between different chapters and work on them in parallel.

—Sigh. It is about managing different writing styles. Because writing is also about voice. In the theoretical chapters, it is the voice of other researchers in the research community. In the empirical chapters, it is the voice of my study participants. My own voice isn't really present until the methods chapter. Then, I gradually insert more of my perspective in the theoretical chapters and in the discussion. Maybe I could have incorporated my own point of view earlier, but I have yet to master the genre of academic writing.

—I get that. Sometimes I also get tired of reading academic texts in our field. It can be discouraging and even lead to temporary writer's block. But you counteracted that by blasting DJ sessions on YouTube during those pandemic-era livestreams. That still helps me too.

—Yeah, I've never been comfortable with silence. I need music or white noise to keep me going. Good to know that's still the case.

—It is. And I also rediscovered our love for literature. Reading non-academic texts has given me both temporary relief and inspiration. Sometimes, I read texts from the humanities, which have a completely different writing style and help shift my perspective. Because reading is what?

—Fundamental!

—Absolutely. You're also lucky and unlucky to not have been writing in the era of generative AI. Some texts nowadays aren't even written by human anymore. It's easier to generate ideas when you need a quick input, and for us non-native speakers, AI can help with language improvement. But of course, people are now more suspicious of writing that seems too polished. Not that we have that problem. We still have grammatical mistakes in the abstract, even after proofreading it three times!

—Whoops, well, you know what they say, mistakes make us human.

Rising from turmoil

Yunchen in 2021: Fourth-year PhD, preparing for the final seminar.

Yunchen in 2020: Third-year PhD, conducting an unofficial midterm seminar and reluctantly wrapping up data collection due to the pandemic.

—I need to channel your productivity for the final seminar! You were so productive at the start of the pandemic to have written a conference paper in a week. That's a new record.

—I guess I have nothing else to do but focus on work. When will the pandemic be over?

—We don't know. But hey, at least there are vaccines now, in record speed.

Yay to science. Now that the data collection is complete, I feel like I've had an adrenaline shot. Did the conference paper take off?

—No, but I owe you for laying the groundwork and starting the systematic coding process.

—Glad to hear that! I have a goldmine of empirical data. So, while self-isolating, I dig into that goldmine.

—That inductive phase really helped tease out the narrative analysis. In hindsight, stopping data collection at that point was the right decision. The storyline naturally ended around the first Covid outbreak.

—Yeah, I am disappointed that data collection has to end so abruptly, but I guess some things are just beyond our control.

—Exactly. But working with emerging themes from the data was an iterative process. It is a goldmine, but there are so many gold nuggets that I'm still in the process of refining. That's what made writing the theoretical and discussion chapters particularly challenging. There are just too many moving parts in the empirical chapters.

—Oh, okay! What exactly are the moving parts? Is it because a few possible directions for the empirical chapters I am laying out for the midterm seminar? If so, sorry about that!

—No, those inductive themes are really helpful! Surprisingly though, the biggest challenge come from the deductive part. After reviewing the literature and attending conferences, I realize that some hot topics in the field needed further problematization. That's where I'm struggling now: I have a rough idea of what I can contribute to the discussion, but I don't know how to frame it theoretically or present it in a way that makes sense. I also don't know how to structure the dissertation that will work best for the empirical material. Don't even get me started with the research question...

—Sounds like you're confused, but at a higher level.

—Exactly. Another layer to the problem is that all these ideas exist only in my head. Our supervisors can't foresee what will work or not until I actually write them out. There are outlines but they aren't enough at this stage. Writing these chapters takes so much time. I have to choose which one to prioritize.

—So, a chicken-and-egg problem here: which comes first—writing to figure things out, or figuring things out before writing?

—Yes. For the final seminar, after consulting with our supervisors, I decide to be pragmatic: focus on writing, especially the literature review in the theoretical chapter, to figure out the gap. Ugh, how I hate that word. Gap. I'm so tired of justifying the existence of my dissertation! And other people having a say about its existence!

—Jeez. I see the pandemic and the research process are compounding, and your mental health is taking a hit.

—I know. That’s why it’s important for me to vent, to you, from time to time. But I also need to talk more with my peers. Maybe they’re going through the same thing. The problem is, we’re still in a pandemic, and everyone is struggling. I don’t even know where to begin.

—Maybe start by reaching out to your cohort and creating a small bubble where you can meet and talk regularly?

—Damn. I was wiser back then!

—Well, I have less emotional baggage. Either way, speaking of peer feedback, I finally developed a sense of reading between the lines: to discern whether feedback is about the writing itself, the ideas behind it, or if the commenters are just projecting their own situations.

—Exactly. I’ve started prioritizing some comments over others. For the final seminar, I hope to get feedback on whether my writing captures my ideas, and whether those ideas are good enough for a PhD.

—Well, as saying goes: A finished dissertation is a good one. We have to learn when to stop listening to others and finish what we have started.

Figuring it out

Yunchen in 2025: Third-year postdoc, finally accepting achievements from their dissertation and moving on.

Yunchen in 2017: First-year PhD, starting coursework and conducting the first interviews at the case company.

—Recently I stumbled upon our first research proposal! What a nostalgic trip. I even noted down some ideas that might be useful for my current research!

—Thanks! There’s already so much empirical data, and I’m really inspired to explore all the nooks and crannies of the case and everything it has to offer.

—Exactly. We started broad, and over the years, we gradually narrowed the scope and readjusted the ambition level. But it was a great start. We had so much energy.

—Thanks! In one of the very first courses, we were told that getting a PhD is like getting a driver’s license. So... are you driving now?

—No, but I’ve become an excellent backseat driver! But no, I didn’t feel competent until a few years after the defense. To be honest, I was not my own person for a long time afterward. Writing a monograph and completing the PhD took everything out of me. And academically speaking, I didn’t feel like the work was good enough to earn the degree. There was still so much more I wanted to write, but I ran out of time and money.

—Oh, I wish I could be there to give you a hug.

—Thanks. The process is so lonely, and I don't have anyone to relate to. I guess that's why I keep having these dialogues with my past self.

—Do you want to reflect on what makes you feel like an imposter?

—I think it's rather complicated. Externally, because we chose to write a monograph and "failed" to turn the conference papers into publications, we were rarely seen as a real colleague during the PhD. Compared to peers who published multiple papers, I felt less accomplished. Our research does have real-world implications, but I didn't take the strategic route of promoting my monograph outside academia. Personally, I was completely burned out by the end and went offline. I didn't manage to do any social activities outside of work. I suffered from involuntary loneliness.

—So, we are the PhD mental wellbeing curve with a steady downward slope...

—Yes, and I'm living proof that it's accurate. But I'm also living proof that things do get better. I've started to figure out that our monograph experience does not define us entirely as a researcher, nor as Yunchen.

—Oh, what changed?

—Well, about a year after our defense, we received an award for the monograph. And not long after that, we got a coveted funding opportunity. But for a long time, I was in denial. I felt like I didn't deserve any of it. Through therapy, I've learned that we internalized all the criticism of our work we received as criticism of us as a person. Slowly but surely, I've started to unlearn that. I'm learning to separate my academic identity from my personal identity. Our successes or failures in academia are just one part of us, but they don't define us. We are our own person and so much more than just an academic. And it also turns out that we are a competent researcher.

—That sounds... both concerning and liberating. Is this really what my future looks like? Is this what academia does to us?

—Yeah, unfortunately, this is something everyone has to figure out on their own – what academia, and research in particular, mean to them. I come to realize that perhaps there's an inherent difference between doing a compilation-based thesis and a monograph. When someone writes papers, they develop a certain rhythm for writing, and they get to practice closure. But with a monograph, it stays with us. We never really learned to let it go. Even now, I'm still extracting material from it to write papers.

—It does seem poetic... monograph chooses us, but we have to learn to let it go.

—Exactly. And maybe that's why we are writing a monograph.



This is my monograph experience: what I once knew little about and what I now know. I have learned to accept my monograph's impact, see writing as a craft, navigate the unexpected in the research process, and become my own person/researcher. Though this is my lived experience, I am sure parts of it will resonate with other brave, wandering monographists to be. In the end, experience is meant to be lived, and no one can take that away.

Aya Rizk

Aya Rizk is a senior lecturer and researcher at the Information Systems and Digitalization department at Linköping University. She grew up in Cairo, Egypt and studied business informatics at the German University in Cairo. After completing her M.Sc. degree there, she worked in the industry as an analytics consultant for 3 years before deciding to go back to academia and pursue a PhD education, which brings her to Sweden. She currently lives with her husband and two daughters. When not on campus, she is likely to be found in the swimming pool, either for her daughters' swimming or her own diving training. She's also a diving judge in Egypt, Sweden and internationally.

Aya's research is focused on the digitalization and datafication of organizations. She studies how digital technologies and data drive change and impact the nature of work, such as in decision-making and innovation initiatives. She worked on different projects e.g. to accelerate data-driven innovations in smart cities, develop a national earth observation data infrastructure, and examine the impact of automation on organizational work environments. Her work is published in the European Journal of Innovation Management, Journal of Big Data and the eJournal of eDemocracy and Open Government.

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4. To learn or not to learn Swedish: On balancing learning investments during PhD studies

Aya Rizk

Part I: The landing

In April 2015, I departed Cairo with my husband towards Luleå, where I embarked on a new journey to pursue a PhD. There are many ways one can compare Egypt and Sweden, and it will almost always end up placing them at two ends of a spectrum. Even more so if we compare Egypt's capital with a small city in Northern Sweden. Either way, I came with few expectations, one dream, and the mindset that I will learn as I go about this new life of mine. That spring day in Sweden was like a winter day back home, with most of the snow still remaining but not freezing as to shock me. The days were relatively long, and the scenery was breathtaking.

The next morning, I went to the office for my first day of work, as a PhD student. Being welcomed by a nice supervisor and pleasant colleagues gave me more hope. All our communication was in English and extremely smooth in the first days, weeks and months. Whenever I met colleagues or other PhD students the topic of learning Swedish came up and I proudly said that I was trying to learn using Duolingo – back then being that trendy new gamified experience to help one learn a new language. The summer break came, and I was alone in the office because I was still unaware that everyone in Sweden is on vacation in July. Like an ambitious student, I dedicated my first Swedish summer to reading books and articles in my field, aiming to understand the specific research problem I wanted to focus on. I also celebrated the occasional learning milestones of Duolingo, learning what a turtle is called in Swedish – great!

Autumn came and my colleagues started reappearing in the corridors. One day, as I sat at the lunch table, I received a question in Swedish! All eyes anticipated my answer with faint smiles on their faces. It came from a

colleague who always tried to help newcomers learn the language by speaking it to them – with good intentions but at the fastest speed possible. I laughed awkwardly. After all, since I knew what a turtle was in Swedish – I should be able to understand the question after being in the country for a couple of months, no? Well, no, unfortunately that is not how it worked. This encounter triggered many questions in my mind: when will I be able to understand Swedish? How quickly should I learn? What goals can I set for myself? If people normally learn by attending the Swedish for Immigrants¹ (SFI) courses, how will I be able to learn Swedish while working fulltime?

Sometimes these questions disappeared somewhere in the back of my mind when I was very focused on research and teaching, which were both happening in English. Other times, I felt again the weight of these questions: in a casual meeting where a quick discussion was taking place in Swedish, when I got the occasional question from my supervisors curious to know how my Swedish is progressing, when our head of division was discussing teaching loads and work distribution and I realized my limitations due to lacking language proficiency, or when I wanted to make a short Swedish conversation in a shop and could not. The worst (and best!) of all was when I went back home and realized my husband, who arrived in Sweden at the same time as I, was then fluent after only six months, writing assignments and giving presentations in Swedish with emphasis on argumentation and analysis! How did this happen? How long ago did he know the word for turtle in Swedish?! I realized then that...Duolingo (alone) was not taking me anywhere.

Part II: Doing it on the side, or strategies that did not work

Realizing that I needed to put more effort or try a different strategy motivated me to ask people around me about their own strategies on learning the language. When I told my supervisor that this is something I wanted to invest time and effort in, she immediately suggested the Swedish for Employees courses that the university offered to its staff members. So, I enrolled in the first course, bought the books, attended all classes, and even worked in my exercise books at home. This experience was particularly rewarding because I met newly employed colleagues from all different departments and socialized with people sharing my struggle with Swedish – we all knew about the turtle, but nobody could formulate a full sentence about it yet. The exception to this rule was, unsurprisingly, the colleagues that spoke Germanic languages close to Swedish, such as German or Dutch. They enrolled in one of the

¹ SFI is a national program providing free Swedish language courses to immigrants in Sweden

language courses and disappeared shortly afterwards, only to meet them a few months later in a seminar and hearing them have a full, sometimes scientific, conversation in Swedish. Impressive, I thought. So, I asked my German friend about the secret. “There is no secret”, she said, “just immerse yourself in the culture!” I thought culture was something you could immerse yourself in during your work, so I did just that.

Around the same time, I was approached by a fellow PhD student from the same department who was about to graduate. He asked if I wanted to represent the institution in the university’s PhD student association, that is the student union for PhD students. When I immediately asked if I needed to be fluent in Swedish, he answered that it was not a requirement, but that it helps to understand some. The little self-confidence in me said I did understand *some* Swedish, so what better way to “immerse myself in the culture” than joining a student union. After all, Sweden has one of the strongest unions, and that seemed to be a great opportunity to learn about such organizations. This appointment meant a two-way representation: representing our department’s PhD students in the union itself and representing them in the department’s own leadership meetings. The latter was exclusively held in Swedish, where the head of department, all division heads, and an administrative representative were present.

This was already two years into both my PhD and my life in Sweden. The meeting typically started with the head of institution double checking that I was fine with Swedish as the language for the meeting, which I confirmed enthusiastically as I was eager to learn. Most of those attending started speaking slowly, but the meeting quickly picked up the pace. On good days, I interrupted for clarifications, and on bad days I gave up entirely unless it concerned PhD students directly and I switched to English. If I were to estimate now, I think I only understood a third of what was discussed in those meetings. The same was true for the union’s meetings with representatives of all the different departments. It is important to understand that this was a task that was cognitively demanding, just as all the different tasks required in a PhD training. It was fairly common to have a headache on the days I had meetings with either of those groups. It was strange to me given how accommodating the participants of these meetings were to me, a non-Swedish speaker. My little self-confidence turned into mountains of self-doubt.

More than six months into this appointment, I was introduced to another PhD student doing research on learning second languages, and we ended up working on a project and a paper together. This colleague spoke 19 different languages at the time, six of which fluently. Fascinatingly, he had developed his own “language learning toolbox” which included techniques such as

speaking in tongues, that is the practice of uttering words and speech-like sounds that one does not comprehend. That allowed him to learn new languages in the span of weeks. Spoiler alert: It did not teach him what the turtle is called in the respective language!

That toolbox was indeed of interest to me. He graciously shared with me his Swedish folder from that toolbox. Grammar was not very explicit in this folder. It was organized through complete sentences, verbs, nouns, and other components which were all mixed to create basic sentences in a particular situation. Unlike the language app mentioned previously, one learned through practicing pronunciation and hearing full sentences. Unfortunately, I did not understand then that this is how it was supposed to work—by repetition and training my ears. So, I gave up after a few trials under the pressure of the PhD project.

Part III: Realizing the dilemma

As I showed before, there were three strategies that I tried, but which were not sufficient to help me reach a basic Swedish conversation level: the Swedish for Employees course, immersing myself in an administrative position, and my colleague's tailored toolbox for learning languages. Do not get me wrong, these same strategies worked perfectly for some people, as I mentioned. They just did not work for me, so I wondered why. About the same time, I was diagnosed with burnout-induced depression and took sick leave one month before my summer break. This triggered a journey with an occupational therapist who helped with rehabilitation and facilitated much reflection. Essentially, we discussed all my stressors, one of which was learning Swedish. It may seem silly at first: why would learning a new language be a stressor for a PhD student?

My reflections led me to realize the dilemma that caused this stress: I wanted to make sure I do not miss important career opportunities, for which I need to speak Swedish, but which required me to invest time away from my research and potentially harming my career development. This dilemma was embedded in everyday interactions and conversations. For instance, during my PhD student representative appointment, I experienced firsthand all the opportunities I would be missing out on if I will not learn Swedish. I did know relatively early that I want to continue working in academia, and that entailed teaching, research and administrative assignments.

In our division, we often had discussions on teaching load distribution which was divided in “English courses” and “Swedish courses”. Since our division offered fewer English courses because bachelor programmes are in

Swedish, there were limited options available for non-Swedish speakers. This also meant that there was an increased probability to having to teach something that I was not necessarily interested or even had expertise in. Then comes the research, although that depends a lot on the field. Some would say that if you work in a lab or with machines, then it does not matter, and if you work with humans, then it matters a lot. It often came up in our division meetings that we received funding for a research project where the data collection needed to be conducted in Swedish. For instance, the researcher should go to rural areas and speak with the elderly there about their digital experiences. Other times, the financier might expect a report or a presentation in Swedish. Again, I saw firsthand how I was “missing out” on these opportunities. Then looking at all the different committees and leadership groups, I seldom saw a non-Swedish speaking person present. In larger universities, that was even more prominent because the competition is fiercer.

Funnily, when I discussed this with some foreigner friends in academia, they thought it was just my FOMO² – “so you do want to get overloaded?”, they would ask sarcastically. To me, it boils down to having the choice. Having the choice of teaching what I like, to be included in a research project if I am passionate about the idea, and being able to pursue a higher administrative position. And lastly, having the choice to maintain a balanced profile across the three areas, and not be forced to overcompensate in one area for not having enough merits in another in order to be promoted. Without the local language, my opportunities became limited, thereby limiting my potential career growth.

Perhaps part of my experienced pressure also came from the meetings with division heads or senior faculty at my home university as well as other universities where I was invited as a PhD representative to evaluate research environments. A frequent statement I heard in these meetings was “A PhD student should be able to speak/teach in Swedish within X months/years”. This statement was presented as a goal, vision, or achievement despite rarely working. It was seen as a way to align resources with collective responsibilities in the department – this was not easy either. These hypothetical PhD students were typically expected to learn Swedish between 6 months to 2 years according to these ambitions. Instantly I asked, “what resources are available to them to be able to achieve that?” Curiously, that question was surprising to them, although it is a typical question asked when setting goals related to anything. The available resources were related to the Swedish for employees classes that I described earlier.

Some discussions were more nuanced, and follow-up meetings were organized to explore solutions. We discussed the PhD student receiving credits

² FOMO – fear of missing out

towards their PhD degree, to be able to dedicate the necessary time to learn the language. The problem with this approach is that the language is not really an essential or relevant part of a PhD education according to the Swedish Higher Education Ordinance. But neither is the pedagogical training necessary to teach, which most institutions are eager to grant PhD students to make them qualified teachers. So why is the latter approved and encouraged but not the former? My experience indicates that the answer lies in the distinction made between Swedish and non-Swedish students, which pedagogical training does not include. However, an opposite distinction is made in *some* institutions, which allow Swedish students to include course credits from their Swedish master's program towards their PhD degree, something not possible for international students, especially those coming from outside the European Union.

Other differences between language and pedagogical training include how formalized they are and what alternatives are available. Senior faculty and division heads feel at ease that documentation proving pedagogical skills can be provided and credits can be approved based on that. But they cannot get a similar one for language proficiency, at least not yet, and not to the level that ensures conversational proficiency. In terms of alternatives, they would often point to SFI as the national starting point for integration, which makes it inefficient to invest university resources into. Moreover, not all municipalities offer SFI courses in schedules that fit PhD students' work.

Part IV: Strategies that worked

Several months after recovering from my burnout and depression, I had a new perspective on learning the language. I realized this was a structural issue and I was not the first or only PhD student struggling with it. I also understood that the language expectations I was putting on myself were in addition to the equally demanding academic ones. Instead of being a constant stressor, I tried to make learning Swedish a matter of opportunity – if it comes, I do my best to seize it, if not then I try to consciously explain to myself what I am prioritizing right at that moment. That worked for my mental health, but what worked to learn Swedish? Well, basically not separating the listening from the speaking, in addition to personalized feedback. For instance, during my first parental leave, I took my daughter to the open daycare to socialize with other mothers. Every time there was a social circle I would start my first few sentences in Swedish, and politely ask if I may switch to English. Everyone was so polite in reassuring me that it was fine, yet everyone chose to later socialize with others who shared their language. This would continue until I and the other mother at the end of the room would lock eyes, ask each other if we

spoke Arabic. Fast-forward and that's how clusters are created. The point of describing that encounter is to say I tried to listen to Swedish in many different contexts, but the listening and trying to speak did not necessarily go hand in hand. I decided that it was time to put more effort into speaking.

I joined a language learning platform called iTalki, which has amateurs and professionals teaching languages. For \$5-10 an hour, I could practice speaking Swedish where a tutor and I had a conversation, and they corrected me as I went. Truth is, the issue was not that I was making many mistakes, but that I was still largely missing vocabulary. Those lessons helped with that – I found that personalized feedback in a conversation I am initiating and on a topic of my choice was of great help. After a few months, I could follow more of the parents' interactions, speak more, and started being approached by Swedish mothers to arrange playdates.

My parental leave was over, and I went back to my English-speaking bubble at the university. After several months COVID-19 hit the world. If anything, I assumed that the limited social life would wipe out my language learning progress. Little did I know that the digitalization steroids every organization took during the pandemic led the municipality where I lived to provide both full-time and part-time SFI courses online. I quickly applied to the part-time online option as I always thought that would perfectly fit my work and life situation. This meant two to four hours of work in the evenings to complete assignments, and once a week to participate in online conversation sessions on a topic for which we prepared in advance. In reality, this required mostly an hour a day from me since I was not a complete beginner – it seems that the turtle, speaking in tongues, and my other efforts did contribute to some learning after all. Again, the personalized feedback on my written assignments and conversations were a boost, now more on grammar and structure than on vocabulary. Within the span of three months, I could sit for the national test for the C level, and in two more months for the D level. This was great because for the first time I had proof of some Swedish proficiency.

All this was at the end of 2020, around the same time as when I finished my thesis and was about to defend it. I also knew I was moving with my family to another region and municipality within Sweden, where it would be much easier to use that official proof to enroll to the next levels of language courses offered. In the beginning of 2021, we moved to Södertälje for my husband's work. I was lucky to continue working for a year remotely. I took my D-course certificate and tried to enroll in the next level. I was unlucky to find that this was the only level that was not offered on distance. After several months trying to figure out how to do a placement test for my proficiency, we got the

happy news that we are expecting our second daughter. My ambitions to continue learning Swedish were paused for a while, between my fulltime working-from-home postdoc assignment, a slightly difficult pregnancy, and job search at universities nearby.

Towards the end of that year and my pregnancy, I had interviewed at another university and signed my contract to start after my parental leave. I was optimistic because my group had Swedish as its official working language, and I finally wanted to test my conversational skills in a working context. Although my PhD journey was over, my language learning one was not. The coming section describes the biggest learning curve in my language learning journey, after which I started to acknowledge that I can speak Swedish.

Part V: Knowing what I do not know

My language learning journey started having that phase of also acknowledging how little I know, even if I could speak. This began when I started my new job and was assigned to teach a course to first year BA students where all the material and literature were in Swedish. I reasoned that I could not disrupt the course by switching the language in a program that was designed to be conducted all in Swedish. I was also collaborating with two other Swedish-speaking teachers. I took a deep breath and a leap of faith in the little Swedish I thought I knew. In the first year, I pushed myself a lot in learning Swedish on the job. I read all the courses' literature that was in Swedish. Whereas I knew the corresponding material in English, I still took it seriously as if it was new material to me. I read all the student submissions in Swedish and formulated written feedback in Swedish as much as I could. I put two specific rules for myself: 1) I will not bulk-translate any text, and 2) it is ok to wait on lecturing in Swedish. The first one was to ensure my cognitive engagement, and the second one was to be kind to myself.

Setting these rules to myself made me take twice to three times longer hours than I was assigned to finish my teaching related tasks, spilling over into my evenings and weekends, and other tasks I had. But my working vocabulary quickly grew. It became a less daunting task to read a Swedish book. I became more comfortable reading Swedish books to my children at home without ruining their ears. I started collecting the courage to reply to my colleagues in Swedish. Many progress indicators started showing. The second year I gave the same course I mentioned, I started using presentation slides in Swedish during my lectures. The exercise of creating the content in Swedish was helpful, and it became better for the students. The third year I started conducting

workshops with the students in Swedish, where I spoke in shorter segments and helped them with different tasks.

Relatively quickly I became a program director for this Swedish undergraduate program, where I interacted with the faculty, industry representatives, and students, all in Swedish. I started collecting research data in Swedish. I also started to immerse myself in other activities since I was not so self-conscious anymore. I picked up diving again as a sport, 18 years after retiring as an elite athlete. Speaking Swedish in these new contexts helped me to grow my repertoire even more. Finally, I am not afraid of Swedish, and I know better now how little I know of the language, about the culture, and the people. But I continue to learn. Unlike the PhD journey, this language learning journey has no end really.



Part VI: Concluding remarks

This year, I am celebrating 10 years living in Sweden. As much as I miss my big warm family, I do enjoy living in this country. Having described my journey with (not) learning the Swedish language alongside my PhD studies, I want to conclude with three things: what institutions can do to facilitate this process for incoming PhD students, what students can do themselves, and a disclaimer about my experience.

What can institutions do? In part III, I tried to describe some of the discussions different research groups and divisions have about helping PhD students learn Swedish. I think the most important thing these groups should be doing is having conversations *with* PhD students. Speaking to the students themselves (as opposed to talking *about* them) is crucial for the individual PhD planning, in which part of it may involve to explicitly assess whether a particular PhD student is interested and motivated to learn Swedish. After all, let us be honest, no matter how systematic the institutions try to help with language learning, uninterested or unmotivated students will not be benefitting from these efforts. Furthermore, there are legitimate reasons not to be motivated to learn the language, such as planning to relocate after graduation or being comfortable with living in Sweden and using only English.

There is also the collective benefit of reaching out to all PhD students in trying to solve the language versus resources dilemma. Both Swedish and non-Swedish perspectives are important if a systemic change is to be introduced to enable learning the language, namely to create fair conditions for all the students. If we take the example of language versus pedagogical skills: both are

necessary to the “academic life” after a PhD training, then isn’t it worth providing the same structural support to language training? There may be other solutions that emerge from these discussions. The one strategy I am sure is not productive is excluding the PhD students from the discussion.

There also needs to be an understanding and awareness that not all foreigners have a similar trajectory in learning a language. Since it is common to speak of how unique every PhD journey is, why cannot we acknowledge that it is the same with language learning? It also makes a significant difference what the distance is between the student’s mother tongue and the Swedish language. Blanket-style goals of speaking or teaching in Swedish within a determined amount of time is simply unrealistic: a German-speaker will always take less time and effort than an Arabic- or Chinese-speaker. Instead of these goals formulation, we might start talking about conditions, opportunities, resources, and accreditations. A process that encourages the motivated students and help them realize their individual goal in a way that does not jeopardize their PhD training quality.

What can students do? I often get the question of what I would do had I known what I know today about learning Swedish. I would try all the things I tried! I would learn about the turtle, socialize with colleagues around Swedish for employees’ classes, try speaking in tongues, join platforms, immerse myself in the Swedish culture, and more. In hindsight, every such strategy contributed something. I would, however, change three things:

First, I would change my attitude towards these strategies in the sense of taking them more seriously and exposing myself to them more. For example, knowing now how speaking in tongues works, I could have tried my colleague’s toolbox more persistently. Second, understanding now that personalized feedback was most effective in developing my vocabulary, I might have tried setups that provided me with such feedback early on. Third and last, the idea of starting my PhD as a part-time employment, with language studies on the side, and slowly going up in percentage till full-time employment does not sound as crazy as it did the first time I considered it. If this is something I was sure about, I am sure my supervisors would have been accommodating. Of course, here lie a multitude of factors that influence this decision, including salary, qualification to study support, pension, teaching, or other obligations which bring me to my disclaimer.

Disclaimer: I believe I have been quite privileged in my PhD journey. First, I had a supportive working environment: from colleagues and supervisors to leadership. This is an organizational culture that should not be taken for granted. It simply takes one bad apple to create a hostile and stressful

environment for a PhD student and a foreign employee trying to learn the language. Second, I was employed during the first two years through strategic funding. This funding meant much less stress on the research front as I was not bound to deliver results to a specific funder and could enjoy freedom in shaping my research. So, what does that have to do with learning the language? It does not, but it does affect the overall level of stress I was exposed to, which also gave some room for learning the language. Third, I had an advantage with my family constellation: when I moved here, it was just me and my husband. We had our first child after three years, which meant that during those three years I could put in the extra hours in the evenings and weekends to learn Swedish without consuming precious family time. Indeed, every person has different priorities and different thresholds when it comes to work-life balance, so personally that felt like a huge advantage when I wanted to temporarily move that threshold. Fourth, the world was hit by a pandemic: as I mentioned earlier, the COVID-19 pandemic hit us during the last year of my PhD. Although I am not sure about others' experiences, the first couple of months I felt quite productive and in control of my time. And that allowed me to enroll to SFI part-time and on distance, which was the first time the municipality offered that combination. If it had not been to this world event, I would have never properly learned grammar or had the confidence to have a short conversation.

P.S: the word for turtle in Swedish is *sköldpadda*.

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Fors, P. (2019). *Problematizing Sustainable ICT* (PhD dissertation, Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis). Available at <https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-375131>

5. Making teaching work (even if you didn't sign up for it)

Per Fors

“*Why did you apply for a PhD?*” If you are currently a PhD student, I can imagine that you have been asked this question at least once by a colleague, family member or even one of your own supervisors, perhaps as you were interviewed for your position. The main aim of the PhD education in Sweden is for enrolled students to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to undertake autonomous research.¹ By the time students finish, they should be well acquainted with scientific methods and approaches, capable of critically evaluating both their own and others' scientific work, and successfully defend a thesis within their subject area. Still, academic work is much more varied, encompassing activities ranging from studying various phenomena in great depth through data collection, analysis and writing, to administration, the use of tools and technologies, and teaching. As a result, PhD students may enter academia with vastly different expectations and be drawn to various aspects of an academic career.

The motivation for pursuing a PhD has been the subject of several research studies. Leonard et al. (2007), Guerin and Ranasinghe (2010), and McCulloch et al. (2017), for example, found that motivators such as *personal development* (pleasure in learning, testing themselves out, proving their ability, gaining confidence, or self-fulfilment), *development of certain research-related skills* (necessary for a specific job or position), *a drive for independent research*, *interest in a specific empirical field* and *a drive for innovation or discovery* were especially common among PhD students. However, motivations related to teaching and supervising undergraduate students were notably absent from their findings.

Although some PhD students in Sweden are fully engaged in research-focused activities throughout their education, the vast majority employed by Swedish universities have approximately 20 percent of their time allocated to departmental duties, typically teaching or supervising undergraduate students. Since education is one of the three core tasks that Swedish universities are expected to fulfil – the other two being research and collaboration (Brolin,

¹Swedish Higher Education Act (SFS 1992: 1434)

1998) – ensuring that PhD students are properly prepared to teach is a key priority for Swedish universities. At Uppsala University, where I did my PhD in Industrial Engineering and Management, students who teach should take at least one course in teaching and learning in higher education.² Most opt for the Academic Teacher Training Course (ATTC), which aims to further the “development of the participants’ competences regarding planning, implementing and managing learning and teaching processes”.³ PhD students at other universities, both in Sweden and in other parts of the world, are offered similar courses where students are trained to become better educators, based on the assumption that teaching is a necessary skill to master when pursuing an academic career.

Still, as emphasized by among others Bok (2013), a glaring defect of graduate programs is how little they do to prepare students for teaching. Bok (2013, p. 2) even claims that professors may advise their students not to devote all their allocated teaching time to teaching, “lest it distract them from the all-important task of writing a thesis.” In online discussions among academics on the forum social media platform Reddit (r/GradSchool), while some find teaching during their PhD both fulfilling and important for their careers, the majority seem to struggle to balance teaching with research, often viewing it as a distraction from their dissertation work, describing it as a “massive timesuck.”⁴ While this discussion offers only a limited glimpse into how PhD students perceive teaching during their PhD, it reveals a striking range of ambivalent attitudes (is it valuable and even necessary?). Such mixed views would be highly unusual, even unthinkable, in conversations about their research.

My assumption, based on the introduction above, is that many students enter academia with pre-existing, intrinsic motivation for and interest in research, but without clear opinions about teaching. Once enrolled, most students eventually find themselves in the roles of teacher and supervisor, but they may not have yet formed an academic identity where they feel comfortable as educators. While some come to enjoy teaching or find it useful, a common sentiment among academics – and PhD students – is that teaching is a “necessary evil” that should at least not be prioritized over building research credentials for future academic positions. Such an approach might be rational short-term, as time is limited and must be devoted to the tasks PhD students

²Guidelines for Doctoral Studies at Uppsala University (UFV 2022/728)

³<https://www.uu.se/en/staff/employment/continuing-professional-development/courses-for-employees/academic-teacher-training-course>

⁴https://www.reddit.com/r/GradSchool/comments/1d9twli/what_are_your_thoughts_about_teaching_during_phd/

are actually assessed on (i.e., research output). However, it may come with negative long-term consequences since permanent positions such as assistant or associate professorships are often teaching-oriented positions, and often require teaching-related credentials.

Homer (2017, 2018) writes that PhD students are expected to build a research portfolio that includes publishing, obtaining funding, and demonstrating impact to secure competitive permanent positions. While these are recognized indicators of academic skill and competence, they are notoriously difficult to achieve consistently. Teaching-related activities, although often regarded as secondary to research, can offer an effective alternative for demonstrating researcher development (Homer, 2018). Richards (2017) also illustrates how teaching during his PhD education directly enhanced his research skills – improving his critical eye through marking, sharpening communication through teaching complex ideas, and developing clarity and focus useful for presentations and public engagement. Furthermore, at least in Sweden, most research-focused roles, such as postdoctoral positions, are often tied to precarious, short-term contracts. Securing these roles also requires you to land highly competitive research grants and stipends to sustain your career, and to be flexible in where you live and work. While some junior scholars may appreciate the flexibility and autonomy of such a career, it can become unsustainable in the long term.

My ambition with this essay is not to claim that in order to pursue an academic career you need to love teaching or make it your sole passion. It is perfectly fine to treat teaching more as a side activity, to aim for academic positions that focus more on research, or to seek positions outside of academia. However, I will argue that for those of us, who got into academia mainly with research in mind but without clear views or opinions about teaching, it is reasonable to start actively embracing teaching as a core part of an academic identity. The remainder of this essay is structured as follows. First, I will share an account of my own PhD experience from the perspective of someone who was a reluctant teacher, yet aspiring academic. Second, I will share some concrete insights I have gained throughout this journey, as well as through conversations with colleagues who have also recently completed their PhDs. I have structured these insights as somewhat tangible strategies or advice that can be useful both for coping with the challenges of teaching but also to find ways to genuinely enjoy it. My hope is that this will offer current PhD students the guidance and perspective I wish I had when I began my own journey.

The PhD journey from the perspective of me, a once reluctant teacher

“How did I end up here?” I wondered, as a newly hired PhD student in the Division of Industrial Engineering and Management, was tasked with developing and teaching a course on Industrial Project Management – *in English!* Just a year ago, I had barely scraped through the project management exam myself. “How was I supposed to pull this off?”

When I applied for the PhD position, I had plenty of reasons and motivations for applying, which I’ll touch on shortly, but teaching was never one of them. It’s not like I thought I would dislike teaching, or that I would be a bad teacher, I had simply never considered that teaching would be part of the position. Ever since I started studying a bachelor programme in Mechanical Engineering at Uppsala University, I had sincerely enjoyed being in academia. I wasn’t entirely sure why I had chosen this particular program or field of study, and I found some of the courses only mildly engaging. Still, I enjoyed the experience of learning new things, and even more so, the entire atmosphere of academia, with its student traditions and extracurriculars. All these things opened up to me as a student at the university. At the time, I never considered an academic career, though some of my classmates joked that they’d be shocked if I ever left academia, since they couldn’t picture me working anywhere else.

There were probably many different things that eventually led to me staying, but I only started considering this option after I had been enrolled in the Master programme Industrial Management and Innovation. If I had to pinpoint one particular event, I would say that my academic interests were mainly piqued when taking a second-cycle course called The Philosophy of Innovation. Up until then, we had mainly been studying practical stuff: how to make a CAD drawing, how to program a CNC mill, how to plan and execute a product development project, and so on. But in this course, we read excerpts from books and articles that I had never encountered before during my bachelor programme, by authors such as Adam Smith, Karl Marx, Joseph Schumpeter and Michel Foucault. Mind-boggling stuff that made little sense at first, but gradually grew on me. I eventually realized that I had discovered *theory* – and I immediately fell for it! I especially liked how reading difficult texts at first made me feel really stupid and really smart at the same time, and eventually allowed me to make connections between the abstract and the real. In particular, I remember writing the final course paper trying to understand project management through a theoretical lens of governmentality. My interest was deepened as I started writing my Master’s thesis the following year. During this process, I had the opportunity to combine my growing interest in theory

with real-world empirical material by following the implementation of Green IT initiatives in several Swedish government agencies, analyzing the cases through the lens of Scandinavian neo-institutional theory.

So, that is basically the answer to the question stated in the beginning of this essay. I ended up as a PhD student because of the academic environment and atmosphere, in addition to my newfound desire to read, write and learn. After reading some of the literature on motivation for applying for a PhD, I've come to realize that this is apparently quite common. I never actually considered that a substantial part of my next five (actually six – since our first-born son arrived during my PhD) years would be spent teaching. Still, there I was, before even signing the contract, reading an email about my future teaching duties. Honestly, I was initially quite taken aback by the realization that, in the near future, I would be standing in front of students close to my own age, confidently discussing project models, various types of risk analyses, project charters, and other topics I wasn't entirely familiar with (yet). The next few months passed in a blur, and for that reason, I'll have to spare you most of the details. However, I remember oversleeping just before a lecture, forgetting to meet up with a guest lecturer, and often ending my lectures too early. Still, with support from fellow PhD students, I somehow muddled through. I had completed my first course, and although the results were less than satisfactory, I felt relieved to have time to fully focus on formulating my PhD project for the months to come, dreading the countdown to when the next course would begin.

A year or so later, I would take the Academic Teacher Training Course (ATTC). Although I had become a bit more confident in my teaching, I still felt deeply anxious about my teaching abilities, and I thought that the course would help me to overcome some barriers. The course lasted for five weeks, including twelve days on campus with intense lectures, seminars and workshops focusing on university pedagogy. The course kicked off with a preparatory assignment about various perspectives on knowledge and pedagogical traditions, as well as the importance of considering students' prior skills, knowledge, and expectations for my courses. As the course progressed, we engaged in discussions about philosophies of pedagogy, constructive alignment, and forms of examination. Looking back at it now, it covered just about everything you would expect in such a course. But at the time it did little to help me overcome the challenges I personally struggled with, both concerning the more practical things (such as planning lectures with relevant content, acting confident in teaching situations, preparing and marking assignments, moderating discussions, etc.) and making teaching feel like a more meaningful and enjoyable activity. I simply wasn't there yet.

As I “wandered” through my PhD journey, I eventually came to the realization that although teaching can sometimes feel like an anxiety-inducing chore that diverts attention and resources from my research, most of the time this is really not the case. I know some people would say that “if you don’t like teaching, then academia is not for you.” While there is some merit to such claims, there are ways to increase the likelihood of starting to enjoy teaching more, and identify more as a teacher *and* researcher, rather than as a researcher with teaching responsibilities. In the following section, I will share strategies that have personally helped me achieve this shift. Additionally, I have gathered insights from colleagues and friends about their effective approaches. If you’re struggling with motivation to teach, these strategies may also prove helpful to you.

Closing the gaps in your academic identity: meaningful integration of teaching and research

While many universities have started to acknowledge that teaching should no longer be “the poor cousin of research” (Biggs and Tang, 2007; p.2), academics are more often than not still mainly assessed based on research quality and output (Cadez et al., 2017). Still, from the perspective of students, the department, and the broader academic community and society, teaching and research are equally important skills to master. But what I have recently come to realize – and what has made teaching far more enjoyable for me – is that prioritizing teaching often brings more immediate and tangible value than research. With teaching, the impact is visible: you can see students engaging, understanding, and progressing. Research, on the other hand, tends to offer more abstract or delayed feedback; metrics like publications and citations rarely provide the same sense of direct impact. Reflecting critically on the utility and visibility of teaching, especially in comparison to research, can foster a stronger sense of purpose and meaning in the classroom. As put by one of my colleagues when discussing this issue with him:

Our publications are all well and good – but most of them don’t exactly make a monumental impact. However, when interacting with students, you have certain opportunities to actually shake their fundamental beliefs about the nature of the world and their expectations of what knowledge they can gain in the classroom. Perhaps even what they want to do with their lives.

From a more individual-centred perspective, teaching also promotes growth and is an essential step in developing into a well-rounded scholar. In research,

we are often embedded in research environments with rather similar perspectives and worldviews. While theories and methods of analysis can differ, widely dissimilar perspectives, opinions or approaches are much rarer. When teaching we meet students with widely varying levels of prior knowledge, competencies, skills and values. As a teacher, you learn how to navigate such an unpredictable environment: you are sometimes forced to produce arguments that you don't agree with yourself to contrast or problematize prevailing perspectives, or explain problems from different points-of-view. Such challenges can be meaningful for any individual, but surely if one is an academic scholar.

This has quite substantial and direct impacts also on the thesis writing process. In many parts of the PhD thesis, it is necessary to explain methods, concepts and theories for a more general audience, perhaps one not directly involved in your field. In academia, there are some opportunities for practicing the presentation (written or oral) of your research, such as at conferences or research seminars, but these opportunities are arguably rare, and the feedback you get from bored conference attendees is not always useful. However, one way of practicing these skills – of presenting highly complex phenomena to an uninitiated audience – is through lecturing. Teaching can also be an effective way to rapidly acquire in-depth knowledge about a subject which – assuming it is a course offered by your own division – should have at least peripheral relevance to your research topic.

In an ideal world, your teaching and research interests would align, allowing for direct connections between the two. In my experience, however, PhD students are often assigned to teach courses that, at first glance, are only vaguely related to their actual research. As I emphasized in the previous section, even when there is such a mismatch, teaching still helps you develop many skills that are valuable for enhancing your research and, in turn, make the teaching experience feel more meaningful. That said, deliberately aligning your research with your teaching – and vice versa – can create other important synergies. There is a significant disparity in the amount of freedom PhD students have in their teaching roles. Some primarily work as teaching assistants to more senior teachers in seminars or labs, while others effectively have their own courses, which they can design as they see fit. Still, you will find that you often have more freedom than you think to tailor the course more also to your own needs. Curricula and course objectives are often somewhat vague, and regardless of whether you are responsible for a course, a module or only a lecture or seminar, you should be able to find creative ways of incorporating your own research into some of the course content. An example can be to use your own case studies, and to analyze them together with students from the

perspective of a theory or methodology that you teach. My own experiences with this technique are that it has several benefits. For example, it makes teaching much more fun and engaging as you'll be able to engage with the content in a deeper and more nuanced way together with the students, and it can provide new perspectives on your empirical material. This goes beyond mere empirical cases. You can incorporate a specific theoretical perspective from your research into the course, encouraging students to engage with it. This deepens and nuances the students' understanding of the subject and can give you new insights about your theoretical perspective. Furthermore, especially if you're tasked with teaching a subject that doesn't particularly excite you (because this happens), you can use part of the course to explore more peripheral elements that you do find exciting, and think about how these elements might complement and enrich the topic.

Another way to find synergies between your two main tasks is through pedagogical research. It's understandable to prioritize activities that directly contribute to your thesis during your limited research time. However, there are often quieter periods (waiting for feedback from your supervisor on a manuscript draft or when a paper is under review) when you may take the opportunity to reflect on your teaching through a research lens, perhaps even as a small side project. At Uppsala University – and likely elsewhere – annual conferences on education provide a platform for teachers to share their experiences with teaching and course development. Attending these conferences offers a refreshing break from thesis work, allowing you to focus on your teaching and courses with the same critical mindset you apply as a researcher. Evaluating your teaching methods, syllabi, and assignments through this lens – and perhaps even writing a paper about your teaching – can deepen your engagement with the practice. These kinds of pedagogical presentations and publications are also useful for your CV, given that you one day may apply for a permanent position with teaching responsibilities.



Some final words

Marking exams, reporting grades and giving feedback on case studies might not be the reason why you ended up as a PhD student, but this doesn't mean that you should see teaching as a necessary evil that you need to muddle through to keep focusing on your research. Education is one of the main functions of universities, and teaching is a practice that you can learn to like, even if you entered academia without considering the teaching aspect, just like I did. If you're aiming for an academic career, there is a chance that you

eventually end up in a role where teaching is your main responsibility. This means that it is necessary to sooner, rather than later, develop an academic identity based in part on you as a teacher. My main ambition with this short essay has been to – from the perspective of a once reluctant teacher – provide some strategies or approaches to teaching that may help you in this regard. These strategies or approaches aim to provide some insight into the importance of teaching, and how it can be viewed as creating academic value both for yourself as an academic but also for the academic community and its students

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Stojanov, M. (2021). *Datafication in Public Health Surveillance : Making Authoritative Accounts* (PhD dissertation, Department of Informatics and Media, Uppsala University). Available at <https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-454758>

6. Becoming relevant

Martin Stojanov

It should come as no surprise that the relationships we form as PhD students to our supervisors, other PhD students and more senior academics, or to research participants, are central to our doctoral studies. My intention is to use my memories of my time as a PhD student and newly turned postdoctoral researcher as a way to tease out some of the specific ways in which the relationships forged during the course of being a PhD student, are central to the emergence of relevance. The purpose of this chapter is not to reconstruct past experiences as they happened. Rather, I am relying on my memory of what I consider pivotal moments in the path from PhD student to postdoctoral researcher. I carry these moments with me as turning points, marking a clear before and after, in my understanding of relevance, of how research practice comes to matter.

While I focus on experiences of becoming relevant, my attention to relevance does not emerge in a vacuum. In fact, quite early in my PhD studies I discovered that in the field of my studies, Information Systems, relevance seemed to be something requiring particular attention and, indeed, something that we were all at risk of failing to achieve. There also seemed to be, according to some, a tension between achieving relevance and living up to esoteric concerns such as rigor and theoretical contributions (Straub & Ang, 2011). All this to say, I write this essay as someone who has inherited a concern for relevance as at least partially related to an accountability towards publics outside of academia. Nevertheless, the purpose here is to convey that encounters with relevance unfold within research practice.



A great opportunity

One of the first things I did as a PhD student was to attend the yearly department kick-off.¹ At the evening social, my supervisor caught up with me to share the news that he had found a great opportunity for a case study for my doctoral project. My co-supervisor had established a collaboration with an organization where I would have great access. I'm sure I was happy to learn about this, and knowing now how difficult it is to gain good access to organizations open to research collaborations, I should have at least been excited about the possibility presented to me.

A few weeks later, my PhD supervisor and I had a meeting scheduled with the contact person. The e-mail subject, leadership study, perhaps already gave me a clue that the path I was on seemed to have little to do with the topic of patient empowerment, which had drawn me to the PhD position. I remember leaving the recruitment interview happy that the would-be main supervisor was excited about a laboratory study in the vein of ethnomethodologically inspired Science and Technology Studies.² Where we were now, did not look like a place for that kind of study: I remember a sad elevator, a bleak and desolate corridor, and an office environment that spoke plainly about the hierarchies at work. I don't believe my feelings had anything to do with the place itself, or a lack of possibilities for a research project that it most definitely held; this was not relevant for what I thought I had signed up for.

My supervisor and I had a debrief as we left the building. I thought I did my best to feign excitement and curiosity, because I thought I needed to. But my supervisor knew me well enough at this point to suggest that we consider something different. The e-mail we received from the could-have-been participant, generously sharing a list of possible contacts, only confirmed that this was not the right context for the imagined study.

While it's a privilege to be allowed to choose where to conduct the study and with who, PhD writing is a practice that relies heavily on the PhD student's ability to drive the project. A project extending over such a long period of time is bound to run into challenges, either due to the many dependencies that exist for a project to finish, whether that is availability of data or productive collaborations. It's also dependent on the changes one inevitably goes through over four years or more of doctoral studies. Because you do well to assume that there will be challenges, you also want to make sure that whatever it is that you pursue, feels relevant to you. I am thankful for my PhD supervisor

¹ In many Swedish workplaces, the start of a project is marked by a gathering. This department arranged a kick-off at the beginning of the autumn semester.

² A prominent example is *Laboratory Life* by Latour and Woolgar (1979).

rightly sensing that no matter how great of an opportunity that field site might have been, it was not a right fit for *this* PhD student. The PhD project is an achievement produced in and through relations which allow for it to take hold. This web also contains the PhD student's relationship to the PhD project itself, and in times where I struggled, it helped that I felt that my work mattered. There are many reasons to pursue a particular research problem, and they are not necessarily about a passionate pursuit of knowledge. But as the project manager of an often-solitary work practice as that of the doctoral study, it helps to have the reasons why something matters close at hand to keep yourself going.



Encounters with relevance

The opportunity that had presented itself was not the right one for me. Nevertheless, I still needed to find participants for my PhD research. Fortunately, my contact person at the organization I worked with during my master thesis generously provided me with new contacts. If granted access to this new organization I had been put in contact with, it would have allowed me to study the changes in the provision of healthcare by equipping homes with sensors. This focus on healthcare made it easy to feel like the project mattered. Given the prevalence of failures whenever new IT is introduced and new ways of working are to be developed, studying the work of this organization was likely to be of great relevance to the Information Systems field. More senior researchers and discussions during a doctoral course on qualitative methods assured me that my research approach could also be helpful to participants; my presence, even if it was to understand what is going on by “only” asking questions, could strengthen the work of people I wanted to interview and shadow, by encouraging their reflective practices.

It all seemed promising as the management at this organization seemed to want me there. I participated in meetings as part of a preliminary study a few months into my PhD studies with the intention of getting an idea of what to write for my research proposal. It was interesting! I was very happy to have gained this access. However, these were meetings organized by the contact person I had from my master thesis project. Months passed, and I was yet to gain further access. Almost a year into my PhD, I got the opportunity to meet with the CEO of the company when I was asked to organize a workshop for them during their company getaway. The workshop went well enough, and what didn't was a good learning experience; most importantly, the CEO assured me that I would have the necessary access to conduct further research

with them. I remember leaving the venue, feeling hopeful and excited about getting started after summer. The tree-lined country road (we were out in the middle of nowhere) I had walked to get there earlier that morning felt different on the way back. Finally, I could start my fieldwork.

I conducted the first interview after the summer. It turned out to be the last interview with someone from this organization. While the full reasons as to why this unfolded into a false start are unknown to me, the explanation I received had to do with the sensitivity of the timing. The organization was undergoing a lot of changes. I left the last meeting I attended with that organization, with the impression that there was a misalignment between the management, who had promised access, and the actual people who I would have been working more closely with during participant observations.

It turned out that this would not be the last false start of my fieldwork. Whether conscious or not, during my second attempt to gain access to a relevant organization, I had a slightly different strategy. I contacted a local start-up working on sensors for eldercare. After several meetings and developing a rapport with the person working most closely with the product, I met the CEO of the start-up. Shortly after the meeting, I was informed that unfortunately, the fieldwork could not continue because the CEO was not comfortable with it.

Two years into my PhD, I started feeling a bit nervous as the midterm seminar was approaching and I began considering whether I should expand beyond organizations that work with developing physical sensors for the home. This is when I reached out to the organization where I would eventually conduct my research over the next two years. The response from the people I contacted was almost immediate and shortly after I was there for a preliminary interview. I would be working most closely with software developers and epidemiologists. Getting the necessary approval from the management also went smoothly. If my two previous experiences of false starts had taught me anything, it was that you can feel when you are welcome in a place. Somehow my presence was deemed relevant enough to what the software developers and epidemiologists cared about. The only remaining hurdle seemed to be that I had to reframe my understanding of what my PhD dissertation was actually about. This was the start of a becoming together, an encounter (Savransky, 2016). Relevance seems to have been something that was predicated on a mutually shaping relationship that could provide the milieu for which something could unfold. There was *some* place, with *some* people, where a bundle of practices making up this particular PhD project could take hold, as it was unfolding, even before it could be assessed based on any kind of impact outside of academia or the field of Information Systems.

Relevance emerged not as a feature but a relationship. You may make choices but something already exists prior to an encounter: you cannot bend your interest in whichever way for anything, and you must allow yourself to enter into a becoming with the other. “That is, things mutually pose their own obligations and negotiate how a novel thing may come into matter. Creative constraints are, thus, reciprocal forms of mattering that simultaneously limit and induce novelty.” (Savransky, 2016, p. 93)



Feeling relevant

I realised quite early in my PhD that what I wanted was to continue working in academia, so the worry about what to do next once I had handed in my PhD thesis, came as no surprise. Rather, it was an intensification of a feeling which I had lived with since I first learned about the precarity of academic contracts, the expected years of postdoc positions on short-term contracts and relocating. Another challenge is knowing how you fit in, since it is other people who decide whether or not what you bring to the table is relevant.

I almost did not apply for the postdoc position I secured after my PhD. It appeared in one of the many job announcements mailing lists I was subscribed to, for all the institutions I would consider moving to based on my imagined willingness to relocate (subscribing to such mailing lists is highly recommended). The topic of the postdoc project sounded really interesting as it intersected with the topic of my PhD thesis and would allow me work towards something that had been the main motivation for my choice of bachelor and master studies. I would have the chance to develop many of the skills I believed I needed for what I had planned for future research. It would allow me to live somewhere that suited my life at that moment. The start of the postdoc matched perfectly with when my then current employment ended. I also recognised the PI from the PhD defence committee of one of my friends, as the committee member who had asked thoughtful questions and seemed like someone who would be a great mentor. Incidentally, this was the same person whose name had come up in a conversation with my old master thesis supervisor, who mentioned that this person would be a great fit for a project which I was developing for my postdoc. Despite all this, I somehow was discouraged to even apply because I doubted the relevance of my background. The moral of the story is, *apply, apply, apply*, for as long as it feels like the effort is worthwhile.

Part of the challenge of staying in academia is up to chance. Or as a friend insisted when I was sharing my anxieties over whether I will ever get funded: it's an endurance game. If your proposal gets rejected, you try again. Before I got my postdoc, I had submitted several unsuccessful applications for post-docs. The process of writing up postdoc applications meant that rejections could sting in a particular way, because of the time invested, the excitement I managed to build up imagining the interesting work that it could lead to, and occasionally giving into the temptation of imagining how that could open up opportunities for the next thing. While I don't think any of this can or should be avoided, it does mean coping strategies to manage rejection are useful.

It made quite an impression on me, while I was in this headspace of looking for postdoc positions and worrying that I might not be able to stay in academia, when I spoke to a PhD student who had just had their successful midterm seminar, clearly on a path to research and teaching, that they were unperturbed by the uncertain outlook. This person was not naively thinking that it will all work out. Instead, they appeared to be completely unbothered because they were not worried that they would be able to continue doing what they like doing. It might just not be in academia.

This conversation sparked an examination of what it was that I enjoyed about being in academia, and opened up new possibilities for imagining what to do next. It also sensitised me to the downsides of staying in academia, which was helpful for the situation I was in, and encouraged me to look elsewhere. After completing my first post-PhD application for a job in industry, I suddenly found myself deeply invested in an imagined future of working as a product owner for a large pharmaceutical company. It did not lead to an interview, but it turned out applying worked as a coping mechanism. It was also a helpful way to gain a better understanding of what is interesting and enjoyable about academic work, what the qualities of the specific practices that draw me to this work are. Abstracting the aspects I enjoyed in my work practices from academic institutions allowed me to more clearly consider what mattered, and with that, the scope of possibilities for where my PhD could become relevant expanded.

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Ahlström, E. (2024). *The Dominant Divide: Innovation in Project-Based Organisations* (PhD dissertation, Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis). Available at <https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-538049>

7. A travel guide to dim-lit lands

Emil Ahlström

“The moon and sun are eternal travelers. Even the years wander on.”
–Bashō¹

In the travelogue “Narrow Road to the Interior”, the Japanese haiku poet Bashō takes the reader with him on his journey to visit the homes, shrines and sites of the great poets of yore. In the book he writes about his travels through the 17th century Japanese countryside where he meets monks and farmers, sees grandiose temples and babbling brooks, and through it all he writes haiku, small fragments of his experience in succinct packaging.

For some peculiar reason, I decided to try to do something similar in this chapter, proceeded to fail miserably, and instead wrote something which is partly similar while also completely different. In this way the following chapter truly is an essay, an attempt², as well as a journey. It is a travelogue through the writing process, visiting some sites that will be familiar to anyone who has ever attempted to write something of scale. It is modeled on the experience I had during the writing of my monograph thesis, many, many pages worth of toil and trouble. Perhaps by following in my footsteps you, the reader, can avoid some of my mistakes, something which, inevitably, will lead to you identifying ever new ones.

Writing this chapter did indeed take me on a journey, and quite an erratic one at that. Where are we heading? To my thesis, and perhaps to yours, or to something else entirely. The only thing we know is that it is the written word that counts. And so, with hat and walking stick in hand, please follow me out the door. The Swedish poet Karin Boye wrote that “there is goal and meaning in our path, but it’s the way that is the labour’s worth. (...) Strike camp, strike camp! The new day shows its light. Our great adventure has no end in sight.”³

¹ All references to Bashō taken from a collection of his travelogues and haikus *Narrow Road to the Interior: And Other Writings*, translated by Sam Hamill.

² The term “essay” originates from the French term “essais” chosen by Michel de Montaigne for his books with the same name (see chapter 50 of the first book, “On Demokritos and Herakleitos). *Essais*, literally translated, means “tests” and for Montaigne this literary form allowed him to attempt to understand, to not necessarily show the whole of something but rather to peruse a topic, to test the depth of his knowledge (or lack thereof).

³ English translation by David McDuff.

And so, we strike camp. To understand what to do we must do it, that is the only way to learn and the only thing I can offer is a few words of advice along the road, “don’t go there”, “pass this way quickly”, “here you can stay for a while”. What you do with this advice is entirely up to you.

For in the end, even though I will be showing you some of the paths I took, that does not mean you will follow the same journey. This is true for anyone who wants to show you *the* way. It won’t be there for you. It is overgrown and difficult to see, it tells you to go straight when your whole body is telling you to make a turn. Sometimes it might have been right, oftentimes it will be wrong, and the only way to find out, I am afraid, is to make the turn. The one thing we can all tell you, is that you will never reach the end unless you start.



The chasm of the unwritten page

dangling
blinking
an empty page

It starts on a white page. Nothing but a white page and a pulsating marker, slowly ticking the seconds away here-gone-here-gone-here. Our journey starts at the end, the only way forward is to cross the first and final chasm, the chasm of the unwritten page. I spent a long time, lingering at its borders, looking wistfully across to the unseen other side, hidden in the distance.

Below me, mists fill the chasm. Here we must be courageous, lest we should fall and drown in its white hypnotic shades and leave our pages unwritten. The only way across is forward, there is no shortcut and no pre-constructed bridge, only the bridge you build yourself. In what manner the bridge is built, in increments, year over year, or all in one fell swoop, does not matter. What matters is the building itself. Each word that you add is a stepping stone. Even if it turns out that it is removed in the end it made out the scaffolding from which the final traverse was made. I waited a long time before I reached this point of my personal journey. Many years of putting it off, of doing little of material note in the files on my desktop, of leaving many pages unwritten. Perhaps the same is or will be true for you too. Sooner or later you will reach the chasm, and it is better to get there early and start constructing the bridge, but also better late than never.

Leap of faith
feeling shapes beneath your feet
stepping words

One step at a time

Among Bashō's rules for traveling is one that states that you should never take the same lodging two days in a row unless you have a real good reason for doing so. Movement, in and of itself, is the one thing which makes the journey possible. If we stay for too long in any one place we might start to feel like the road is too long, as if it is useless to even get started. That would be a mistake, but a mistake which makes sense when the road seems long and the mountain passes insurmountable. At the start of any journey of great length it is impossible to see the end, it is, like the other side of our chasm, hidden from view in an unseen distance. This does not preclude other, closer, ends however, and I will tell you how I made what felt impossible possible, by moving.

Every day we will walk for a thousand paces, sometimes a little more, never a little less. We start early, in the cool warmth of the morning sun, before we've really had time to wake up. There is no reason to overdo it, a thousand extra steps today might just mean that we are more tired tomorrow, steady is the mantra. A thousand words then you are free, but always a thousand words, every day, no matter how long it takes to reach that count. If you are quick today, congratulations, enjoy your lunch in peace. If you are slow today, no reason to worry, tomorrow is another day.

keyboard tapping
birdsong in the garden
warm fluorescent screen

In the summer of my fifth year of my PhD, I wrote eighty pages through this slow but steady pace. Every day I added to the foundation, or the decoration, or the scaffolding of my bridge. If I got tired of one part, I tinkered away on another, sometimes method and other times cases or theory. Always wanting to stop and rest or give in to the temptation of the white chasm and the fall. One thousand words a day, that was my promise to myself. I started before daybreak, and every day of that summer I moved constantly forward, one thousand words, stopping mid-sentence or mid-thought, never staying for too long at any one word. If a thought is too complicated, leave it for tomorrow, or the day after. Leave it for the free time in the afternoon or a sleepless night. There will be many days for you to finish that thought.

The joy of the great endeavour, of overcoming a great barrier (even if it was put there by you yourself, for example by having started too late) has its own value but the steady pace approach that I used to cross the chasm does not need you to wait until the very final moment to be of use. What if you started tomorrow with a hundred little steps, and then a hundred more the day after that? How many steps will you have taken in a month, a year, a PhD? What if you did not wait until it all seemed overwhelming? Look around, where can you go to next? That method section, does it need to wait until you

have results or could you describe it tomorrow? That case company, you know who they are so tell us today!

*Step by step
the ant travels
too*

The mirage of structure

In the end we can all see the finished work before us, the road that was once taken makes out its pretty little turns across a pristine landscape, but it is a mirage. It hides behind well-made brick roads the erratic route which we actually trotted along. This text is not written from beginning to end or according to some plan. It is written in bits and pieces, here and there. I wrote one sentence and then another with little thought of their internal coherence. Coherence was achieved afterwards, as is often the case. Thoughts are thrown out at stochastic intervals during the process and my task has been to pin them to the wall before they fall so that I can do the sorting after. The order is the story I wanted to tell in the end, the route I wanted to take you along. Groups of thoughts can offer many stories, I ended up with this one.

There is therefore not necessarily any reason to be too systematic when you are writing. We are meandering along on our way to the finished dissertation. We visit the sea of data and search its depths for fat catches, perhaps we spend many months here at the banks, fishing for answers. We stay for a while to clean the catch but then we must continue on, around the bend we have the badlands (full as they are of deep valleys somehow twisting and turning their way back to where you started) of literature and theory and when a particular thought hits us we must make our way back to the beginning and start tracing the path of problematization.

During my PhD, in Tokyo, I once visited the Meiji temple where someone had taken their time arranging fallen brown leaves into small symbols. Hearts, circles, paths to walk along. This, too, will be your task as you are journeying on.

*words fall on the page
autumn leaves
what a mess*

Finding the right way

The question then, is what the finished shapes can tell us about the road taken. My metaphors here meet at a point of conflict. The bridge and the road, the chasm and the landscape, they paint different, somewhat opposing pictures of the writing process. In a thesis, one would perhaps spend a long time here, by the banks of the swamp of metaphors (dank, dim, and prone to drown you, the

swamp will do as a metaphor for metaphors), contemplating the implications of the bridge and the road. Picking the one that feels right, and sticking with it throughout, ensuring coherence and continuity. I will not, not here, but it is still worth it to consider how these choices affect the writing journey.

If the final product is a mirage, it is in many ways in order for the reader to avoid the real road taken. As we moved along, we made one journey at first to trace out a meandering way through the virgin wilderness of thought only to then lead the reader by their hand on a newly built highway.

*Revising,
horse dung left
for future me*

It has to be done I suppose. My thoughts and writings tend to meander too far, to add things with little to no value for the end product. However, you should not be afraid of pruning. To revise your text will, for most, be the experience of realizing that you took a wrong turn somewhere along the way. Now you have to trace your way back, realize where you went wrong and then walk all the way forward to where you wanted to be again. It feels, in short, like a giant waste of time.

However, it is not simply so that you, fellow traveler, have stayed the same. When you made the long and arduous journey up a mountain you learned something, even if it turns out that you took a wrong turn and surmounted the wrong peak. The next, and hopefully correct, mountain will be easier. Your legs and your hearts will be stronger, your feet more secure. The mistake of hating your own past work (or hating to revise it) lies here, in many ways you would not have been able to see that you took a wrong turn unless you took it, and the right path might not have been unless you at first got lost.

*manure
when used right -
Blossoming flowers*

This, sadly, does not mean that you can show everyone the entire route you took. For me, as it might be for you, the PhD was a long and difficult journey, but you probably don't want reading your thesis to be a re-enactment of that experience. You have to ask yourself when the scenic route is necessary to show, and when is it a distraction. You have to ponder when and where you should stop and cast your eyes and arms towards a splendid vista and when you are actually supposed to be moving along a highway to the conclusion.

A finished text is not the real journey, it provides a path for those that would follow which has been meticulously built in order to show that which we want them to see, it is a pre-booked helicopter ride straight to the main

sights. It is a Potemkin village. A mirage of order brought from the chaotic ramblings of a mad person (which we all are by the end, I am sure).

In the end I meandered my way here and there and visited many different places along the way but finally reached my destination by way of the monograph, looking, as it should, similar to what others have done before. I ended up at a similar place as everyone else and yet there is something to be said about the way you took there, and what was learned along the way. For the one who knows where to look, the book is filled with hints of the road taken.

Strike a new path

Traveling gives you time to think, to ruminate in your mind, and the same is true for the process of writing. As words appear before you, their meaning can be perceived and tested. Not before you are forced to formulate them do you actually think about them. On paper (digital or physical makes little difference here) is where you finally confront your thoughts. And confront them you must, to experience the limits of your words. In many ways this writing journey thus mimics the PhD journey, from the feeling of excitement and confusion in the start all the way through imposter syndrome and fear of failure. Let me give you an example:

I thought it would be a good idea, a fun idea even, and a great learning opportunity to write this chapter in the form of a travelogue, a description of a journey through doing the writing journey. I would write it in a certain style, a style which is not the same as my usual, and through haiku poetry, something which I have no experience in doing. Consequently, throughout the writing of this chapter I've felt presumptuous, pretentious, pathetic. I've tried writing something which I do not have the skills to do and without any particular reason to do it in that way. When my proposal was accepted, I was terrified.

*Lost for words
what presumptions from
a wannabe poet*

*hoots and screeches
these words of mine
sounds of an ape*

Perhaps this is only natural, but in the words of the Swedish Country singer David Ritschard “you have to dare to be pathetic”. And so, I decided to dare. Will I use poetry, or a travelogue, to describe my future research ideas? Most probably not. But perhaps a turn of phrase, perhaps a leftover thought or a particular cadence will sneak their way into the knapsack from which I draw

my writing. Because when you've traveled a long way, you start to make out weird little patterns, ways of walking which attract you, make you happy or simply feel right. These patterns should not be completely discarded. Perhaps a turn of phrase that was pruned from one section inadvertently can find new life somewhere else. Bits and bobs that you found along the way should be safely stored in your knapsack, who knows when you might need them again, who knows when you will reread an old lost thought and suddenly realize its new potential. Thoughts only operate in context, but they can operate in many contexts.

*A stray thought
left along the wayside...
For me!*

Perhaps therein lies the main message I want to convey to any new and current PhD students. Do not expect that things will go as planned, be ready to roll with the punches, because no great adventure ever goes the way you thought it would, and, if nothing else, the act of trying something new is what allows you to learn. There is value in trying, in taking the rare opportunity to do something you never would have done otherwise, and writing only gets better the more you do it. Perhaps just a set amount every day. I wish you safe travels.

*Grass for a pillow,
the traveler knows best how
to see cherry blossoms*
- Bashō

Cristina Ghita

Cristina Ghita has a multidisciplinary background in English Studies, Cultural Analysis, and a PhD in Information Systems.

Her research focuses on how technological artifacts are implemented (or rejected) in everyday life. Her expertise lies in reflexive qualitative methodologies, and new-materialist theory. She cultivates an interest in philosophy of science, with the ambition of unpacking the somewhat concealed aspects of research practices which despite their importance are seldomly officially accounted for the final scientific output. In her private life, she continues to develop an interest for the materiality of the surrounding world through photography.

Cristina defended her PhD dissertation “Technology in Absentia: A New Materialist Study of Digital Disengagement” at Uppsala University in 2022. It was awarded the Börje Langefors Price, from the Swedish Information Systems Academy, for the best dissertation in its respective discipline in Sweden.

Ghita, C. (2022). *Technology in Absentia: A New Materialist Study of Digital Disengagement* (PhD dissertation, Department of Informatics and Media, Uppsala University). Available at <https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-473448>

8. Flying the interdisciplinarity flag in doctoral projects

Cristina Ghita

Interdisciplinarity: bringer of funding and raiser of eyebrows; catalyst for collaborations and instigator of ontological conflicts; jack of all trades, but alleged master of none.

Interdisciplinarity is increasingly making an appearance in academic work: in journals welcoming interdisciplinary contributions, in funding agencies stimulating interdisciplinary collaborations, or in centres and research groups who make it the focus of their work. Interdisciplinary projects come into being also at the hands of researchers who themselves employ multiple disciplinary perspectives and develop an academic identity around this practice. Today I consider myself to be an *interdisciplinary researcher*, but the road here has been full of both wondering and wandering. It has only been in the past few years that I fully committed to this label, and it is my aim in this chapter to reflect about my doctoral project and its interdisciplinary aspects. I find it necessary, then, to include only the briefest introduction to my academic background.

During my bachelor's studies, the programme I was enrolled in was divided into three main areas, namely literature studies, linguistics, and media and communication studies. Despite this, one could only choose to major in the first two; I chose literature since I was already developing a large interest in theory and felt that I could apply it better here. During an exchange semester at Newcastle University, where I had taken courses at a media and communication department and fallen in love with sociological theory, especially of the post-structuralist flavour, I decided to change the direction of my studies by enrolling in a cultural analysis MA programme at Lund University. I remember it as a time of immense growth, where I could advance my skills in using theory in applied contexts. I specialised in ethnography and was enchanted by the multitude of contexts which it could give me access to: I could study how a gym was trying to be more accommodating to older and aging members one day, and move on to activism in the following month. As I was writing my

master's thesis, I had a moment of clarity when I knew that I wanted to do this and nothing else for the rest of my life: to understand how other people live their lives and write about it in a way that could do these experiences justice. Despite what I would consider today as highly interdisciplinary programmes, neither my BA nor my MA were described as such. So, I never understood it to be part of my background since, after all, my degrees were in two specific fields. It said so, right there on the diplomas.

In 2016, I moved to Uppsala after being accepted to a doctoral programme in Information Systems. Information Systems? It was yet another direction for my studies and although I still strongly believed in the value of entering a new context and exploring it with new eyes, or the so-called ethnographic lens, I was beginning to feel like this will finally backfire. For the following five years I was to research how increasingly more people became interested in *not* using digital devices such as smartphones. Information Systems is in itself an interdisciplinary field, if not through its definition, through the practices of its scholars. Much ink has been spilled on whether Information Systems has a “core”, what can be considered research specific to this discipline, or whether there are any native theories to it. I soon became anxious, and afraid that my diverse background would be unwelcomed, that others would question whether I am prepared to be part of this research community, or if my subject was even relevant or could be considered Information Systems-worthy.

When I voiced my fears to my supervisors, they were supportive and understanding and advised me to always have prepared an answer for the impending question of “Is your research Information Systems research?”. In their voices I heard a productive question meant to make me think critically, but in my mind it sounded accusatory and set me on a trajectory of doubt. It took many years to understand the value of such a question, together with “what is your study a case of?” I needed to be ready to explain to others in very simple manners what my research was about and the contributions it made to the discipline. When I could finally do that, I also became more confident in myself.

I was an avid diary keeper then, as I am now, so I decided to build three main points I wanted to make in this chapter based on notes from my past diaries as a doctoral student.



I am taking an introductory course about research into this new discipline of mine. Five years we shall spend together, Information Systems. You and I. How will you change me and what shall I give back to you? I want to bring a new perspective, but perhaps what I have in mind is not novel at all? Are you

new to me or am I new to you? A little bit of both? Will we get along? Will you close your doors and say 'no, thank you, we don't want any' to anything that I will try to sell to you? Or will it pique your interest that I want to look not at what people do with technology (I know you like this a lot), but what they do not? It could be fun, I think. Just leave your door ajar for me.

My first doctoral year was very reading-intensive. In retrospect this served me well but it initially came from a place of insecurity. Coming from a different background than the one I was stepping into for my doctoral project, I had many doubts about whether I deserved to be there to begin with. I took introductory courses, I read papers in Information Systems, and tried to carve myself a path while still remaining true to what I wanted to do. I wanted to bring in my background in creative writing and literature, and use theories learned in my master's studies, but I was unsure how and if it was worth building such a project.

For learning how to handle this feeling, which could be paralysing at times, I have only my supervisor to thank. He defended my abilities against my own harshest critique and supported my ideas, encouraging the good ones while also letting me explore the less fortunate ones so that I can test them for myself. This gave the freedom to explore how my own background could be useful in my new discipline and provided me with a safe space where the old saying of "there is no stupid question" could be taken at face value. I started reading new theories, casting a wide net first and then selecting a few that seemed relevant to my study. I became a fiend for annotating books and articles, started thinking through writing and am guilty for once having sent my supervisor a draft labelled "To use or not to use technology" in which I tried to combine Shakespeare and technology non-use. Not all interdisciplinary projects should see the light of day. But it broke the ice, and it was easier after that to send drafts to my supervisor, something I was struggling with then. It came with the realisation that my thoughts scatter, pulling some ideas in and pushing others away, in an amalgam which in its early stages is difficult to put into coherent text.

Because I was relying on ideas from different fields I juggled with different sources of literature and had a difficult time systematising everything. These drafts came out then, as they do now, in messy forms which I feared that I might be judged upon as a not serious or prepared academic. I didn't see the beginning of a doctoral period as an education, but as a job in which I thought that I was expected to already know everything. Although I still struggle today with sending early draft texts, I remember this being so much worse and the additional fear started settling in that not sending any text might have given

the impression that I was not writing at all, which was not true. Pulling approaches from different disciplines became overwhelming while trying to learn the one I was to position my work in.

Since I was going to research technology non-use I became increasingly interested in knowing how I could study something that doesn't happen, *absence*. I understood that what interested me the most in this area were tensions and paradoxes which made my head spin and my body come to tension at the excitement of working with it. It was the materiality of absence which was a wonderful thought to me: it was provoking, it was calling for exploration and I was there to explore. It became my interest and my direction in my dissertation. It led me to a range of new materialist theories which I fell in love with because they made me see both my project and life in general through new and exciting lenses. It felt right and yet it was somewhat outside the boundaries of what was traditionally done by others near me in my discipline. I took a specialised doctoral course in these theories where I met those experts who before that moment had been unreachable: names on papers and books I was reading. It was pivotal and those moments are still to this day the most vivid moments I remember: PhD courses in which I could discuss methodology and philosophy of science. I felt happy but then I would come back home and putting everything in practice felt strange. I felt as if I had woken up from one of those dreams which are wonderful but soon forgotten, only insufficient glimpses remaining which give the faint hint of a good idea slipping away. Reading interdisciplinary work and then doing it was different. Furthermore, I had to explain why and how I was doing it. I would spiral in reading the reference mentioned in an article I had originally found in a theory book. If quantum physics was mentioned to frame an argument, I would want to learn about it more and watch an endless string of videos explaining it (or trying to). I felt like I needed to understand *everything* in order to only briefly mention it. In my dissertation, I dedicated ample space to chapters such as “positioning the work in Information Systems”, where I wanted to clarify why this is appropriate in this discipline. I wrote and prepared as if someone would manifest in the room with me at any second and question me about how all this work fits in this discipline, to only finally uncover the sham I was running all along. I put an incredible amount of energy in answering to a critique that never came. I grew to love Information System and yet still fear that because my work was somewhat interdisciplinary, I would upset the order of things, whichever that was. Doing all the extra work sounds great now but it was exhausting back then. Nevertheless, I never regretted it.

I have all these ideas and yet no idea how to make them work. I think I am not good at explaining all of my reasoning but yet it all feels so clear in my mind; What a treacherous road. At my progression seminar someone questioned something in my text adding “but I am not an anthropologist, so perhaps I don’t get it” and I felt like I wanted to respond back, rather loud really, and say “neither am I, and I don’t think you need to be in order to work with qualitative methods”, but I said nothing and chose to not fight that battle right then. In the end the seminar went well, and my many pages of feedback and I, met with my supervisor who was a mountain of support, and who allowed me to think about what matters. Focus I must, but moments like these are pushing me off the track of writing and thinking which is already such a delicate balancing act.

Sometimes harsh critique did come, as it is inevitable in any early researcher’s life. It was difficult, at first, to understand that comments were directed to the text and not to me personally. Reading or hearing negative feedback would bring my blood to my cheeks and a tremble to my voice. I wanted to defend my work as if I was defending my character. It was not good. An advice I often received was that the critique was towards my work and not me. I know for many this is a strong distinction, but for me it was a blurry boundary since I would invest a lot of time and effort in what and *how* I wrote it. It was most difficult when a portion of text that I was particularly proud of was not well received and later had to be deleted altogether. I realised slowly that some critique was unfounded and to be ignored, while other was well-deserved and would help me down to road. At the same time, even when some feedback was not quite hitting the mark it could still be indicative that I didn’t write with enough clarity and the text could be misinterpreted. Nevertheless, I learned to bring my feedback home from seminars and conferences, let it sit untouched for a couple of days, and then when the emotional response had subsided, approach it with a clearer mind. I found that even the harshest critique received had an ounce of truth and that I could use it if not to change something drastically, to clarify it.

It was most difficult to know how to handle critique which came as a response to interdisciplinarity. Since my topic combined and was relevant to several disciplines such as media and communication, sociology, human-computer interaction, and others I found that some of the methods I was using were recognisable for everyone in such fields but sometimes were described with different labels. While one reviewer was recommending me to describe my method as diary studies, another was of the opinion that another label was more appropriate. I learned that although I could not provide ample

explanations on why I was *not* doing something, I could nevertheless explain why I chose to do it like I was doing it. In the end, my project combined different methods, two theories, and focused on multiple empirical sites. I found a way to explain why this was needed in my project, and how this would be of value.

I found that critique was the only sure thing I could expect to receive in academia so I learned to welcome it and not take it personally. Someone told me once that academics tend to focus on the 20% of the negative feedback and ignore the 80% of the positive things. I relate to this profoundly and once I heard that, once I saw it in my own reaction to feedback, I learned three things:

How I could overcome my emotional response to harsh critique through exposure: I sent work at conferences, to colleagues who could read it, and explained it plainly to those inside and outside academia who were interested in hearing about it. Listening to their critique taught me how to handle it by not engaging in a debate then and there. I would always thank the discussant for their feedback and then assessed later together with my supervisor what was useable and actionable feedback.

How I could stop focusing on the negative feedback, which is of the useless kind, and focus on the constructive kind which actually made my work stronger.

How I needed to acknowledge that I am deeply privileged to have supervisors who tell me *when I am doing something well*. This was rare for other fellow PhD students, but I remember when my supervisors praised me or told me that they have heard something good about me or my work. It made me feel good, sure, but it also made me understand how important these people were for me and my work. It was not about validation, but the feeling that I was surrounded by allies and supporting supervisors who told me when I was doing something wrong, but also when my work was good. Knowing what to keep doing is just as important as knowing what I should stop or change.

There is a comment on the side on my dissertation document and the text stares right back at me filling me with dread: "I don't really know what you're doing here". It's scary, it's terrible, it's from my supervisor, and it's on the part that is to be a main contribution in my analysis. I close the document and take a walk but I can't relax and I feel suffocated by all the good weather outside. Spring means my dissertation defence is just around the corner. Why did I choose to work with different concepts which might look so alien to this discipline? Why didn't I just follow the beaten path and played this safe? I come back home and my second supervisor has replied "This is what she is doing"

linking to an article which is explaining how this would work in Information Systems. Saved. Saved. Saved.

The last months when I was finishing writing my dissertation appear now in my memory as if I was doing it all in another world, lived by another Cristina altogether. My body supported this exhausted mind and pushed it through - “we can do this” was my mantra every day. I would wake up extremely early, go to work, write for the whole morning, and then continue with other tasks such as editing, teaching, meetings, etc. Rince, repeat. Despite not being a morning person, I found that my rhythm of writing works best in the early hours; this is also what the doctoral years taught me- more about when and how I work best. Draft after draft it felt like the feedback from my supervisor was placing barriers with every comment on the side of my final text. And yet I still felt moments of joy because I was writing this piece of text which was in its final stages and what I needed to fix were details. When everything was done, when the dissertation was ready and sent to the publishing department, there came the time to register it in the university system. And there, in the little option field where I had to type which discipline this belongs to - I froze.

So, after all this time of trying to write this text within this discipline: was it Information Systems? I still harboured fears of rejection by this community. It was not fair; I had pulled concepts and help from other disciplines - should they not be acknowledged? At the same time, I wanted to frame it in the discipline of Information Systems so badly: should this effort go unnoticed? In the end I chose Information Systems - social aspects. I reasoned that the “social aspects” would have to do - that it would encompass the disciplinary worlds I visited and gained so much help from. It was the best I could do.



At the moment of writing this, I am currently at the end of my postdoctoral fellowship, in a technical faculty, in a department of civil and industrial engineering. I work in an interdisciplinary group in Energy Studies. And I reflect:

Are we custodians of our disciplines? Why do we feel ownership over them and what are our obligations to disciplines? Interdisciplinarity has become much wanted in research projects, but how does one learn *how* to do it? Today, working amongst academics from industrial engineering, psychology, political science, and others, I understand that respecting other perspectives and collaborating is the normal, not the exception. But this is terribly hard for those PhD students who are in individual projects and have to prove that they have contributed with their work in *a* discipline. After all, we become Doctors

in a specific discipline, and our doctorate diplomas do not declare us interdisciplinary PhDs. Being in this environment has allowed me to fly the flag of interdisciplinarity and consider my doctoral work for what it was: at the intersection of Information Systems with other disciplines.

As PhD students, we are used to a set of questions which we somewhat dread the more we progress in our project: what is your work about, what are your main theoretical/methodological frameworks, and when will you finish your thesis? The last one is such a dreadful question, it should probably never be mentioned outside supervision, but the first two require some attention and thought. We wish to give a simple answer, and where there is none, as is often the case in interdisciplinary work, we feel inadequate.

I find it easier to call myself an interdisciplinary researcher after passing my PhD defence. But as a PhD student, being daring with your dissertation can be scary. I discovered that after graduation, I had access to centres for interdisciplinarity, could work in interdisciplinary groups, could call myself an interdisciplinary researcher guilt-free, and ultimately receive recognition in this sense from the discipline I tried so hard to belong to.

In 2024 I received the SISA (Swedish Information Systems Academy) Börje Langefors Award for the best dissertation in this discipline for that year. My award states that my work offers “a valuable contribution to the research field of Information Systems with its transparent, creative, and atypical methods”. I was humbled by the statement that atypical methods and interdisciplinary work can be recognised as important contributions even when considering the confines of one discipline. Ultimately, I entered the discipline of Information Systems with so many fears and yet I found a home which was welcoming to my background and interdisciplinary aspirations. One cannot ask for more. It was difficult because I always wanted to prepare for the worst. But not everyone builds high walls in their disciplines. Some build doors, and some are worth opening.

Lastly, I think it is very important to note that although this is the strategy that fit me best, not everyone needs to do this. Interdisciplinarity is not an excuse for casting shallow broad nets over projects, but having the curiosity to engage with different disciplines in-depth. But those who want to engage with multiple disciplines in their work, should be supported and offered tools helping them grow and develop responsibly as academics. In a manner of speaking, interdisciplinary work for doctoral students is a paradox in itself: you want to do something new, yet are expected to contribute with new knowledge within the boundaries of one discipline. You want to be innovative, yet only following a beaten path feels safe. You are expected to be curious, but not outside what is already established to be interesting. Frustrations aside,

it is at least my humble opinion that this is changing, and the disciplines' borders are becoming increasingly accommodating for those of us who want to be their mere visitors instead.

Paulina Rajkowska

Paulina Rajkowska holds a PhD in Human-Computer Interaction from Uppsala University, where she graduated in 2022. Her academic path reflects a love of interdisciplinary exploration, with a bachelor's degree in sociology and a master's in media and communication studies. This diverse background shaped her doctoral research, which focused on the treatment of human agency and power in the development of technology within the cultural heritage sector, addressing these challenges from an international perspective.

Paulina's interest in interactive media has been a recurring theme throughout her career, including published research on games that bridge her expertise in human-computer interaction with a broader curiosity about technology's role in society. During her PhD, she was also deeply involved with trade union organizations such as SULF and SACO, advocating for policies supporting PhD students' mental health and career opportunities. Currently she works full-time at SULF, the Swedish Association of University Teachers and Researchers, continuing her commitment to supporting researchers while embracing life outside of academia.

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9. Stranded at sea: Navigating crisis, responsibility, and activism in academia

Paulina Rajkowska

Being a PhD candidate often feels like being stranded at sea—adrift in uncertainty, fighting against unpredictable currents, hoping to reach solid ground. This uncertainty is part of the academic experience, but when crises strike—global, institutional, or personal—the waters become far rougher. During my doctoral years, I faced multiple storms: a global pandemic that changed academia overnight, personal struggles that tested my resilience, and an increasing responsibility in advocacy work that unexpectedly drove me towards leadership roles. These experiences made me realize that in academia, the personal and the professional are inseparably linked. The pressure of research does not pause for life’s difficulties, and personal challenges are often intensified by the intense tempo of academic life.

In this chapter I explore the intersection of these crises in my lived experience and how they shaped my life during my doctoral journey and beyond. It is my reflection on what it means to navigate academia in challenging times, the unexpected ways in which we can find support, and the responsibilities that emerge when we realize that we are not alone in our struggles.



Living with uncertainty

Uncertainty is an integral part of the PhD experience. Research rarely offers clear milestones like those we are used to in prior education, and self-doubt becomes an unwelcome companion hanging over our shoulders. Like many others, I entered my doctoral studies with a sense of purpose, but quickly realized how fragile my confidence could be. As a so-called ‘gifted child’, I had always been ahead of the class. But academia introduced me to some of the most brilliant minds I had ever encountered, turning what once felt like an advantage into an overwhelming challenge and constant sense of inferiority and failure. The pressure to be constantly productive, to publish, to prove

one's worth—these forces create an environment where self-doubt proliferates. I had assumed my personal life provided a stable foundation for taking on these challenges, but that assumption was quickly overturned just a year into my studies. In 2018, I faced a family crisis that profoundly impacted my sense of self, my support network in Sweden, and the extent of my responsibilities. The experience led to severe depression and became a lasting trauma—one I have since had to navigate through therapy and medical treatment. My response was, in hindsight, typical: I drowned myself in work, refusing to take a single day off. As part of an externally funded three-year project, my time to collect data was limited. On one hand, I feared failure or even a delayed graduation—my funding was limited to three years, and any disruption to my work could have serious consequences for the timeline of my degree. On the other hand, my colleagues had become my primary source of emotional support and stability. Taking time off would have meant isolating myself from the only consistent structure I had left. In that sense, continuing to work wasn't just a professional decision—it was a coping mechanism, a way to stay connected, needed, and anchored during a time when everything else felt like it was falling apart. Work became everything. In the absence of a stable personal life, my colleagues and supervisor became my replacement family. They were my first island in the storm, offering the kind of support that made survival possible. My workplace became more than just a research environment—it was a refuge.

I made sure to hide how self-destructive I became during this period, drowning myself in work in order to avoid having to address the turmoil inside me. I dissociated and placed my troubles in an imaginary box labelled “deal with later”. I engaged in reckless, dangerous behaviours that should have been warning signs. I knew I was walking a fine line between survival and collapse, but the only thing that seemed to matter then was keeping up the front. Most of my colleagues did not realize how bad it had gotten. To them, I was still functioning well since I showed up at work, completed tasks, and laughed at the right moments. Sometimes I cancelled commitments on short notice, such as after-works, or even work meetings and lectures, but since PhD work is considered stressful for everyone there was no surprise there. From the outside, I looked like someone who had simply chosen to dedicate themselves to their work. But underneath, I was barely holding on. The hardest part wasn't just keeping up the act—it was knowing that if I let the mask slip, I would have to admit to *myself* just how bad things really were.

Looking back, I am still not sure what finally shifted. Maybe a change was brought by sheer exhaustion, maybe because of the quiet, consistent support of those around me, or maybe simply because of time. Eventually, something

in me recognized that if I continue on that path, there wouldn't be much of me left to salvage. When the project concluded at the end of 2019, I finally let myself crash. The emotions I had suppressed for over a year surfaced all at once, demanding to be confronted. It was the roughest water I had ever experienced, but by then, I had found the strength to navigate it. Even as challenges remained, I knew that I wasn't alone anymore. My research group became more than just a workplace—it became my safe harbour, a place where I could momentarily set down my burdens and just be.

Then the COVID19 pandemic arrived, throwing another wrench into the equation. The sense of stability I had found in my work environment vanished almost overnight. What had once been a refuge was suddenly out of reach because of the orders to work from home. Research continued, but now from behind screens, in solitude. The spontaneous interactions that had once provided reassurance—stopping by a colleague's desk, sharing frustrations over lunch, bouncing ideas off each other in a seminar room—were gone. Conferences, workshops, and collaborative meetings were reduced to digital events, stripped of the human element that made them valuable. Deadlines remained, but the collegial structures that made research enjoyable collapsed. When the pandemic started, I had just had my first paper accepted to the largest conference in my field. I was excited to travel to Hawaii and meet others within my discipline. All that was immediately cancelled. I was still lucky though as unlike many other PhD candidates who had their research plans completely derailed by the pandemic, I had already gathered all my data. What I had left was writing—a stage that, in theory, should have been easier to manage remotely. But writing is not just a task to complete; it is a deeply creative and intellectual process, one that requires structure, and a sense of purpose, all of which felt impossible to achieve in the middle of a global crisis. With no clear deadlines, no immediate pressure to produce tangible results, and no colleagues around to create the usual rhythm of work, writing became an abstract task—something I knew I should be doing but could never seem to start. At the same time, it was difficult to convince myself that any of it mattered. The world was falling apart, people were dying, institutions were shutting down, and yet I was supposed to care about sentence structure and argumentation? It felt absurd. The sense of urgency that had once driven my work was gone, replaced by a lingering sense of futility. What was the point of producing research on user experience and technology when everything else felt like it was crumbling?

I had spent years dealing with personal crises by immersing myself in work, using external institutional structures and obligations to stay afloat. But now, without those structure, I was left alone with my thoughts in a way I had

never been before. The same strategies that had once kept me going—relentless work, strict deadlines, external pressure—no longer existed. I had to learn, for the first time, how to work without running from something. It wasn't just me though. As I talked to colleagues online, I realized that many PhD candidates were struggling in ways that went far beyond what was being openly acknowledged. Some had lost months, even years, of research due to lockdowns. International PhD candidates were caught in limbo, unable to visit their families abroad and uncertain about their future in Sweden.

The response of universities was mixed, but the institutional underlying message remained the same: keep going, keep producing, keep meeting expectations that no longer made sense in this new reality. Official emails acknowledged the existing difficulties but provided little concrete support. Extensions were granted in theory but came with bureaucratic hurdles. It became clear that while institutions recognized that PhD candidates were struggling, the solutions offered rarely addressed the root of the problem: academia's deep reliance on individual perseverance rather than structural support. I felt increasingly frustrated—not just with my own situation, but with how many PhD candidates were expected to simply handle these hardships alone. I needed an outlet for that frustration, a way to turn it into something productive. I felt powerless. But as I listened to other PhD candidates share their frustrations, I saw that we weren't failing as individuals; we were all navigating the same broken system. I wanted to do something beyond simply enduring the situation, so I looked for ways to become more involved, which is how I found trade union activism

Turning to activism

What started as a small attempt to engage with workplace issues quickly became something far more significant. It started by simply filling out a form on a union website expressing interest in joining a PhD Candidate Board and working with work environment issues. Things developed quickly, and I became the Vice-chair of SULF Doctoral Candidate Association. SULF (Swedish Association of University Teachers and Researchers) is a trade union for academics, representing those who work at Swedish universities. I was elected in May 2021 and I felt that I channelled my negative experiences into a new form of resilience and activism, improving my own mental health in the process. The more I engaged, the more I realized the feeling of isolation I had experienced was not unique—many PhD students were dealing with the same issues, and yet we had been conditioned to see them as personal failings rather than institutional problems. One of our initial goals was to advocate for fair solutions to the widespread study delays that PhD candidates experienced as

a result of the pandemic—delays caused by suspended fieldwork, closed laboratories, restricted access to participants, and the overall breakdown of academic routines. Alongside this, we worked to raise awareness about the growing mental health crisis among doctoral researchers, who were expected to continue producing results despite these unprecedented disruptions and without adequate institutional support. Little did we know that new legislation would soon redirect our attention to other issues.

In 2021, changes to the Swedish Aliens Act introduced stricter permanent residency requirements, significantly impacting international academics. Many PhD students and researchers, who had previously relied on their academic positions to qualify for permanent residency, found themselves in precarious situations as the new rules required proof of long-term employment—an impossible condition for most early-career scholars on temporary contracts. The uncertainty surrounding these changes led to widespread anxiety among international researchers, many of whom had spent years building their lives in Sweden, only to face the possibility of forced departure. The impact of these changes caused the chair of our board to resign which meant I had to step up and fill that role. Stepping into it was daunting. I had started as a frustrated PhD student simply wanting to contribute, but suddenly I was representing an entire group in policy discussions. The responsibility was enormous, and with it came the pressure of making sure our voices were heard—we wanted to be represented not just as statistics but as people whose lives and careers were at stake. SULF played a crucial role in advocating for affected academics. In my role within the organization, I helped in conducting research to highlight the disproportionate impact on the academic sector, engaged with policymakers to push for fairer conditions, and helped highlight personal stories of those affected to increase awareness of their situations. There was also an emotional cost to it though.

Advocacy is rarely a quick win; more often, it is a grinding process of pushing against bureaucratic systems, hoping for small shifts in policy or perception. For every success, there are countless meetings where concerns are dismissed, reports go unread and promises never materialize. The frustration of seeing the same issues resurface, year after year, can be disheartening. On top of that, all of it must be done in Swedish, which for a non-native speaker adds another layer of difficulty.

Burnout among activists is common, and academia offers little in the way of structural support for those carrying this additional burden. There were moments when it all became too much. Balancing research with advocacy meant stretching myself thin, while I still wasn't functioning at 100%. At times, my own PhD work suffered because of it. Deadlines slipped, drafts remained

unfinished longer than I had planned, and the progress I had once measured so carefully no longer followed the timeline I had envisioned. There were days when I wondered if I had taken on too much—if, in trying to help others, I had jeopardized my own path. But even during those difficult periods, I never truly regretted it. I knew that the work I was doing mattered, that it was shaping conversations and pushing institutions to acknowledge issues they had ignored for too long. And ultimately, I finished my PhD, not despite my activism, but alongside it.

Through this advocacy work, I found something academia often struggles to provide: solidarity. The connections formed through collective action were some of the safe islands during my PhD. In a system that often isolates individuals, activism provided a sense of community and shared purpose. There is a unique kind of bond that forms between people fighting for the same cause. I feel that unlike the often-transactional relationships in academic networking, where opportunities are exchanged for mutual benefit, the connections forged through advocacy are built on trust, shared struggle, and a commitment to something beyond individual success. The colleagues I worked alongside were not just fellow researchers; they became friends, allies, and, in many ways, the support system that academia itself failed to provide. This solidarity extended beyond immediate campaigns or policy fights; it created a network of people who understood the pressures of academia—not just in theory but in lived experience. We celebrated each other's successes, picked each other up after setbacks, and reminded one another that we were not alone. In an environment that often prioritizes competition over collaboration, finding a community that genuinely cared about each other's well-being was an anchor I hadn't realized I needed. More than anything, activism shifted my perspective on academia itself. It revealed the systemic issues that often go unnoticed until they directly affect us, and that change, however slow, is possible when people come together. Even in the moments when progress felt impossible, knowing that I was part of something bigger than myself provided a sense of purpose that academic work alone never quite did.



Reflections from calm waters

The challenges I faced during my PhD were not unique. The pandemic exposed and intensified long-standing issues within academia—precarity, isolation, and the expectation of endurance at all costs. Personal struggles are often dismissed as individual problems rather than symptoms of a broader system that fails to provide adequate support. If there is one lesson to take from this

experience, it is that academia must recognize the full humanity of its scholars. I argue that structural change is needed to ensure that PhD candidates are not left to navigate crises—global or personal—alone. This means addressing precarious working conditions, providing meaningful mental health support, and fostering environments where personal struggles are acknowledged rather than penalized.

For me, activism became both a necessity and a source of strength. It was a reminder that change is possible, even in rigid institutional structures, and that collective action is often the most powerful tool we have. But advocacy should not be the burden of individual PhD candidates—it should be embedded in the way academia functions. The goal should not be to simply *survive* a PhD but to create a system where scholars can *thrive*—as researchers, as activists, and as human beings.

Writing this chapter and reflecting on my own journey has helped me gain a better perspective on everything I went through. It reminds me of how much I grew, how the struggles I faced shaped me, and how they ultimately led me to where I am now. Today, I work full-time at SULF, dedicated to the very questions I burned for as a PhD candidate. I now stand outside of academia, working to improve it. I cherish my journey despite the ups and downs, and given the choice, I'd do it all over again. Looking back, I also see how each storm—personal, professional, and systemic—pushed me toward something greater than myself. I didn't just survive my PhD; I found meaning in the struggle, in the connections I made, and in the knowledge that change, however slow, is always possible.

Shruti Kashyap

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10. We, nomad: Towards an ethical mode of becoming in Swedish academia

Shruti Kashyap

*All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost;
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.*

- J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*

For international PhD students, a journey in Swedish academia is an apprenticeship of two sorts: professional and social. Swedish PhD programmes have some commonalities but also some notable differences in relation to academic environments in other places. Those of us who have no prior knowledge of or experiences in the Swedish academic system can find ourselves apprenticed to learn not only our disciplines but also the system of the academe itself. Additionally, Swedish culture, whilst sharing many surface level similarities with continental European and North American cultures, is distinct in ways that are not always readily apparent. Learning and integrating into not only professional but also social systems of interaction in the academe and beyond can present necessary (but rather unanticipated) areas of learning for many. In this chapter, I expand on my perspectives regarding what that may mean for those embarking on the Swedish academic path.



A plethora of words, a dearth of clarity

What shapes the academics we become, and how do we become the academics we want to be?

I wanted to write about this question. I had turned it over in my mind countless times, during my PhD and after. Even now. But every time I tried to carve out a crisp and clear response, the question disintegrated in my mind. It

became something messier and trickier and painfully, beautifully, more human. Writing can be hard. Writing about a topic like this felt especially so.

I couldn't separate the journey from the way it changed me. I couldn't write about the external pressures without tracing the internal shifts they triggered. I would start with specific things: Institutional culture; mentorship; the odd mix of privilege and precarity that define the life of a PhD candidate; the strange flavors of intersectionality that define the experience of a PhD candidate in Sweden who is also an "other", whether by gender, ethnicity, culture, disability, or any other mark of difference. I thought about the reasons I started my journey in academia. The ways those reasons warped and stretched and sometimes crumbled under the weight of things which I could not anticipate or control. The beacons of light and goodness, sometimes from the unlikeliest of places. The joy of little breakthroughs. The times I didn't think I could keep going. The reasons why I did. The reasons why I still do.

You see the quagmire: I'd start on solid footing, and suddenly I'd be knee-deep in something else entirely. I was used to sifting through complexity, but the complexity wasn't usually this personal. The more I thought about things, the more I despaired of finding a way to express what mattered. How could I frame something so inherently intricate in a way that would resonate with others?

Finding my voice in Community

After numerous false starts and abrupt stops, I did what I usually do when confusion arrives and does not leave: I talked it out with trusted friends. Not just any friends, but women of color who, like me, had navigated the Swedish PhD path. Over coffee and online meetings, we traced the contours of our experiences. Although our journeys were as unique as we were, common threads wove through them. As we spoke, patterns emerged.

The best way I can think of to describe our collective experiences is to depict the PhD process as an arena. In this arena, we were all subjected to events, people, and structures beyond our control. We didn't always choose what we faced, but we did choose to stay in the arena and keep moving. We learnt to build our armor and our weapons as we went along. We learnt that knowledge was not always power and power was not always knowledge, but the two were connected in an intricate dance around us and within us. In the arena, different people and events gave us courage and energy to keep on going. Different situations and actions brought us to our knees. Different forces, whether wielded by institutions or people or both, tested the limits of our strength. We had broken apart and rebuilt ourselves countless times. We had, all of us, never stopped evolving.

Not all of us completed our PhDs, and not all of us who did made the choice to stay on in academia. Yet, the process irrevocably shaped all of us. What began as a question of *what shapes the academics we become, and how do we become the academics we want to be*, unfurled into something larger through these conversations. Our PhD experiences had shaped *not just our careers but our identities*. We all emerged victorious from the arena. Yet this victory didn't always mean a degree or the decision to stay in academia beyond that. *Victory was the becoming.*

Framing the process

The common threads between our PhD journeys were quite distinct: Power and knowledge; being impacted by, but also impacting the environments we inhabited; what this mutual process of shaping meant to who we were. And, through it all, reflections on otherness and what that meant to us in Swedish academia – a place where we felt equality was largely defined by a focus on gender.

I had already been exploring how to use perspectives from bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and other intersectional feminist scholars to effectively frame my perspective. My conversations with friends raised one other voice of significant relevance: Rosi Braidotti. Her feminist work on nomadic theory, and her integration of Deluzian ethics, comprised an excellent complementary perspective for what I was trying to capture and convey.

The nomadic academic is a being of ideas, crossing territories and boundaries with the vision of movement and emergence rather than a fixed focus on destination. Such vision invites the nomad to rethink their own identity of selfhood and ego through what Braidotti calls *nomadic subjectivity* (Braidotti 2013). This subjectivity is a dynamic and socially mediated process of relating and negotiating with myriad actors and levels of social structures, allowing for an emergent and fluid *nomadic consciousness*. Such consciousness in turn, is a form of ethical resistance to dominant hegemonic structures (Braidotti 1994, p.23). Rooted in Deluzian ethics, nomadic consciousness emphasizes transformation through the negotiation of forces, desires, and values that enable an ever-continuing state of subjective emergent becoming (Braidotti 2013). In order to be a nomad one can only ever be on the continuous path to becoming.

The feminist concept of the *nomad* describes a person not seeking belonging in the traditional sense, but instead a “she”, an “other” who forges meaning through movement, adaptation, and relational encounters. She is not bound to a singular identity or ideology; her identity is constituted through continuous interaction with the worlds she inhabits. In spaces where homogeneity

underpins institutional culture, the nomadic subject constantly negotiates visibility, autonomy, and voice. This liminal space is the source from which her becoming springs forth.

The nomad engages with and within institutions without being defined by them. She resists assimilation. She maintains her integrity through transformation. Such ethical resistance allows for rebellion that is rooted in the collective vision of minority. Such a transpersonal perspective is necessary for a true transformation of dominant systems. Such transformation in turn is achieved through relational co-constructions of understanding and being within the shifting and often precarious spaces between people, institutions, and knowledge systems (Braidotti, 2013). Becoming in this way is not about wholly accepting or rejecting institutional constraints and norms, but about consistently working with, through, and beyond them to open new spaces for thought and action.

Braidotti frames this process in the context of *potestas* and *potentia*. The former can be understood as forces and spaces that uphold extant structures and systems of power, and the latter as forces and spaces that allow for collective transformation. Nomadic becoming begins by recognizing one's otherness and minority. But, inevitably, the student becomes the teacher. The apprentice becomes the master. As the nomad's roles and capacities shift, she must resist absorption into *potestas* and uphold the generativity of *potentia in order to keep becoming*. This ongoing negotiation between self and other is what moves the subject toward a transpersonal state grounded not in individual ambition but in the collective emancipation of those who are minor.

For the academic nomad, ethical becoming is not a fixed endpoint but a continual practice of repositioning oneself to resist pressures of categorization and constraint whilst still contributing meaningfully to institutions. For nomadic PhD students, this involves engaging with systems of publication, conferences, supervision, and gatekeeping, whilst remaining detached from them. Integrity lies in maintaining alignment with the nomad's own evolving values and desires amid these structures. Sometimes, preserving that integrity means stepping away. The nomad may seek alternate spaces beyond institutional walls. This is not in retreat; flourishing requires *potentia*, and at times, *potentia* is found outside academia. This too is part of the nomad's becoming.

Feminist and intersectional theories provide vital scaffolding to the above. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) reveals how race, nationality, and stigma compound gendered exclusion in Swedish academia. In settings where equality discourse does not readily include discussions of ethnicity, culture, or other factors, such connections can invariably be overlooked. Burdens of representation and stereotyping, and pressures to conform in line with *potestas*, weigh

heavily on scholars from marginalized backgrounds. These scholars are invariably expected to embody institutional norms whilst remaining excluded from networks of power within those institutions (Hollis 2022).

Feminist epistemologies also remind us that knowledge is never neutral, but always situated and embodied. Within academic landscapes, including in Sweden, women of color and other marginalized groups do not simply produce knowledge; they must also justify their presence *as* knowledge producers (Ahmed, 2012). For such nomadic subjects, *potentia* does not always lie in direct defiance, but in reshaping the contours of dominant systems to raise marginalized voices and create space for transformation. To persist in Swedish academia for women of color is not just an act of intellectual labor but an act of *ethical resistance*. The nomadic scholar moves, adapts, and creates within and despite institutional constraints. She does so not in search of fixed belonging, but in pursuit of something deeper: an academic life that is lived *on her own terms* and founded on transpersonal desires and values beyond forces of constraint.

Exploring experiences

Within our cogitation of thinkers, we each encountered structures and moments that had exerted *potestas* and provided *potentia* in our respective processes. Our becoming was shaped by both resistance and embrace. We navigated hierarchies, challenged harm, and recalibrated our expectations of mentorship, belonging, and support. Moments of clarity arrived in unexpected places, most notably through the realization that our endurance itself had become a form of knowledge and being for us. We all bent. We all broke. We all rebuilt.

At best, our work was fueled by something deep and luminous. We were in it for the joy of discovery, because ideas are alive and when we grasped something that felt just out of reach a moment before, we felt connected to the world in an indescribable wonderful way. We thrived on moments when a student or colleague's eyes lit up in understanding, or when an off-hand conversation or comment similarly sparked a new realization within us. We gave freely of our time and efforts because we felt that we were a part of something bigger than ourselves.

But the PhD process doesn't come with neat edges. It spills into the way we see the world, how we speak and write and interact with those around us. This academic arena shapes where we focus and what we are anxious about. Progressing through a PhD project influences how we understand the complexities of not only our work but the world around us. Our friends and family have to deal with our focus and commitment to work, our preoccupations and

strange mental meanderings. Although often benign and harmless, these tendencies can also lead to a weakened balance between our academic and personal identities in a way that hinders becoming. At worst, we felt trapped and disillusioned and betrayed by the system we had given so much of ourselves to.

We all shared the recognition that along the way, at some point in the PhD process, it becomes difficult to tell where the profession ends and the person begins. Because of these potentially blurred lines, the same passion that kept us in academia during the PhD process and pushed us to stay on or step away, also make us vulnerable. We all labored under the often-unspoken belief that if we did enough and contributed enough, we would find our place of belonging. Our unspoken hope was that such belonging would allow us to move between the many territories academics inhabit – the myriad pillars of academia – whilst still holding on to a secure tether to ground us as we became.

Herein is the conundrum.

Although we are often primed and expected to give endlessly of ourselves, institutions are not necessarily primed, willing or able to give back in equal measure. When we give more than we get for long enough, it can drain us. Knives of indifference or negativity towards our ideas and contributions can cut deep. When this happens, because of the often-blurred lines between professional and personal identity in academia, it can feel like we have failed ourselves. In academia, *potestas* often surfaces in the form of control or exclusion that is presented as a consequence of personal failure rather than as the structural reality of a system and a context that privileges those who most resemble its gatekeepers (Ahmed, 2012). It is easy to buy into this narrative and acquiesce to, or even reproduce ourselves, the very structures and dynamics that keep us disempowered.

The awareness of and discomfort with situations of *potestas* heralded, for many of us, the start of our becoming. What was and is important to realize is that any failure, in the sense of ethical nomadic becoming, is not an endpoint but an opportunity for *potentia*. Such *potentia* forces nomadic subjects to find alternative ways of existing within or beyond the institution. This is key to becoming.

Despite its precarity, the PhD process offers privilege in learning how to recognize *potestas* and practice *potentia*. Reshaping dominant structures from within does not always require loud defiance; it often begins with quiet, persistent acts of transformation. For nomadic PhD scholars, this might mean introducing alternative ways of knowledge generation and recognition into

academic discourse: for example, through methods and language that reflect lived experience, or through spaces of inclusion such as peer-mentorship and collaboration. It also involves knowing when to engage and when to step back, thus preserving one's integrity in systems that may not fully recognize it. Simply existing in academic spaces without conforming entirely, whilst continuing to contribute meaningfully, becomes a form of ethical resistance. In this way, the nomadic subject reshapes the institution not by force, but by presence, practice, and persistence. Connecting to the collective is helpful here. We, all of us who live in this world, are part of a journey that is riddled with unfairness and inequality. This world is unequal. This world is not always kind. However, our strength is our awareness and our ability to remain as calm as we can be in the midst of it all. Observe. Understand. Focus on what is important to you and why. Identify what you can control and what you can't. Make choices. Breathe. Try to shrug off what doesn't matter. Move onwards. And, if or when, you need to draw a line in the sand, do so with conviction. Do not compromise on the values you stand for.

On Becoming

There is a point in every academic's journey, especially those who are seen as "other", where they must decide: Do they shape themselves to fit the institution they are located in, do they try to shape the institution, or should they walk away from the institution altogether? The following personal insights may be of relevance to nomads undertaking a PhD journey:

Claim and use institutional legitimacy, but do not seek institutional validation of your own value or worth. Your titles and affiliations do not define you, but they can open doors for you. Use your title as a PhD candidate to access networks and apply for grants. Use it to legitimize the work you are already doing. Use resources such as libraries and journal subscriptions to build your knowledge, whether or not your institution fully recognizes the importance of your work. These resources are often subject to high levels of gatekeeping outside of academia, so use their value as much as you can to strengthen what you hold meaningful.

Harness institutional bureaucracy as a force for *potentia*. Join committees, initiatives, and working groups as much as you can. Use these spaces creatively to create or take advantage of opportunities to introduce meaningful new ideas and projects. Where needed, ask the uncomfortable questions. Demand transparency. Make it difficult for unsupportive institutions to ignore their own policies.

Remember that transformation happens when scholars broaden what academia sees as legitimate and accepted. By producing rigorous work rooted in

non-dominant knowledge, using inclusive language, naming power, and locating the self, nomadic academics can support quiet shifts to contour the edges of what counts. This can support systemic shifts from detached neutrality to engaged, situated inquiry in meaningful ways.

Do not hesitate to be selective in your participation and refusal, and to strategically choose when to engage and when to step back. Participating in institutional processes on one's own terms and refusing to conform when integrity is at stake are powerful forms of resistance. Such ethical refusal is not rejection or harmful rebellion. Rather, it is a way of holding space for values that dominant systems do not prioritize.

Work to find and create structures and spaces where more voices can be heard and sustained. By mentoring, forming peer groups, organizing inclusive seminars or reading groups, nomadic scholars can build community within institutions that may otherwise isolate or marginalize them. These alternative spaces can become sites of *potentia*.

Don't shy away from being visibly different or striving for more than survival. Transformation happens through being. For nomadic academics, such being may simply mean modelling a different way to exist in academia. When one refuses to compartmentalize identity, when one insists on belonging without assimilation, it challenges the institution's underlying assumptions. This can reshape the institution's view of who belongs.

Use recognition as a tool, not as your identity. If you receive an award, grant or fellowship, accept it but never mistake it for protection. Use it to build up your work and create more spaces for *potentia* for yourself and others. Use it to foster meaningful connections with people. But remember that institutions themselves are often transactional.

Do not buy into the myth of the isolated genius. More than success, fulfillment is cultivated in strong intellectual and emotional support systems. Cultivate these systems, and be careful about who you invite in. Find and cherish those who will read and support you with generosity, who will remind you of your worth when institutions fail to do so, and who will celebrate your wins without competition. Most importantly, work to ensure you are a person who can fulfil this role for others as well.



The most radical form of standing up to forces of *potestas* is to step into *potentia*. The most radical act is choosing to thrive on your own terms. Whether that means completing the journey or not, staying in academia or carving out a path elsewhere, your intellect, your voice, and your becoming are yours to shape. Protect your joy. Honor your pace. Trust that your presence transforms the spaces you move through. *Remember why you started.*

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11. Wandering through change: The role of supervisors and support networks in the doctoral journey

Niki Chatzipanagiotou

Introduction: It takes a village to raise a child

My doctoral journey as an international student in Sweden was not just an academic pursuit, but a profound personal transformation, shaped by the challenges of adjusting to a new academic system, culture, and environment. In many ways, it felt like wandering through change: a process of navigating uncertainty, adapting to shifting circumstances, and gradually finding my place in an unfamiliar landscape. Like a traveller charting a course through unknown terrain, I encountered obstacles, detours, and moments of doubt, but each step forward contributed to my growth as a researcher and individual.

In this essay, I reflect on how navigating these changes, combined with the strong support of my supervisory team and extended network, played a critical role in my academic and personal development. The transition to living and studying in Sweden involved grappling with various difficulties, including language barriers, a different educational structure, and personal adjustments to the unfamiliar climate and lifestyle. Despite these challenges, my motivation to achieve my academic goals remained steadfast. It was this inner drive, coupled with the guidance and care I received from my supervisors, that helped me succeed.

Central to my experience was the pivotal role of my supervisory team, who provided more than just academic mentorship. Their support extended beyond academic guidance, offering emotional support and constructive feedback that helped me navigate the often-overwhelming pressures of PhD studies while balancing those expectations with the need for self-care. They encouraged me to embrace my mistakes as learning opportunities, helping me shift my perspective to see challenges as essential for growth rather than obstacles to success. At the same time, they pushed me to reach my full potential while teaching me not to be overly critical of myself. This dynamic relationship created

an environment where I felt empowered to explore ideas freely, discuss concepts openly, voice uncertainties, and refine my thinking. This guidance was not limited to academic development, but my supervisors also facilitated personal growth, fostering a holistic view of success that blended intellectual achievement with emotional resilience.

My journey was shaped not only by my immediate supervisors but also by an extended supportive network of people. Just as the proverb “it takes a village to raise a child” suggests a collective effort in nurturing growth, I found that success in a PhD journey requires the support of a broad network of people - academic connections and personal relationships. This essay explores these overlapping circles of support and their impact on my doctoral experience.



Overcoming the language barrier

Among the first and most tangible challenges I encountered was the language barrier, a hurdle that revealed how even everyday experiences can shape one's academic path. Although English was the primary language of my academic work, daily life and integration into the Swedish society required a working knowledge of Swedish. My supervisors recognized this challenge, and my department offered me a Swedish language course to help me adapt. However, with so many simultaneous adjustments—a new country, different social norms, an unfamiliar work environment, and a change in my personal living arrangements—I found it overwhelming to dedicate the necessary time and energy to mastering a new language. My suggestion, based on this experience, is that international PhD students be given the opportunity to take language courses a semester before starting their studies. This proactive approach could ease the transition and provide them with a stronger foundation before diving into the rigorous demands of their research.

Offering academic guidance

Beyond providing guidance on my research, my supervisors played a crucial role in helping me integrate into the academic and social culture of Sweden. One particularly meaningful initiative was when they asked me to reflect on my experiences as an international student, focusing on the differences in educational systems and social contracts. They then suggested that I offer an induction lecture to international master's students in our department. This not only helped me process my own transition but also made me feel useful and

included within my academic community. Instead of being ‘the foreigner’ struggling to fit in, I was given an opportunity to contribute and share valuable insights with others facing similar challenges.

A significant way my supervisors facilitated my integration was by encouraging me to participate in courses from the very beginning, either as an observer or an assistant to the primary instructor. This hands-on approach helped me familiarize myself with the academic environment, observe how senior faculty taught, and prepare for my own future teaching responsibilities. These experiences gradually made me more comfortable and confident in my role within the department.

Another example of the encouragement and trust my supervisors showed me was their decision to let me start supervising theses in the first year of my PhD studies. At the time, I felt somewhat insecure, unsure whether I had the necessary knowledge and skills to guide other students. However, I now recognize that I thrive on interacting with others, that I am a caring person, and that I deeply value the dissemination of knowledge. Back then, this was not as clear to me, but perhaps it was to my supervisors, who had also worked with me during my master’s studies. Their trust and encouragement helped me develop confidence in myself. Seeing the students’ progress and the outcomes of their theses brought me great satisfaction. Today, supervising is one of the aspects of my work that I enjoy the most. It feels like a way to give back, and I aspire to become as supportive a supervisor as those I had.

From an early stage, my supervisors supported me to begin my fieldwork rather than delay data collection. Their reasoning was that actively engaging in research early on would help me develop critical insights, allowing me to refine my approach over time rather than getting stuck in the planning phase. This proactive strategy was incredibly beneficial, as it allowed me to start reflecting on my collected data and shape my dissertation progressively.

Building a supportive academic environment

Doctoral studies can be isolating, particularly for international students who lack an established social network in their new country. My supervisors recognized this and took proactive steps to create an inclusive and welcoming atmosphere. They often organized informal after-work gatherings with other PhD students and faculty members, which provided a space for open discussions about academic and personal challenges. These gatherings helped me forge friendships, gain insights from more experienced PhD students, and receive feedback on my work in a relaxed and supportive setting. These social interactions played a crucial role in alleviating feelings of loneliness and self-

doubt, making me feel more connected to both my department and the broader academic community.

Beyond the local academic community, my supervisors also encouraged me to participate in external courses, summer schools, academic meetings and international conferences. These opportunities exposed me to a wide range of academic traditions and perspectives, significantly broadening my intellectual horizons. Engaging with scholars from diverse backgrounds not only enriched my research but also boosted my confidence in contributing to complex academic conversations. I came to deeply appreciate the value of multicultural and intercultural academic spaces, which have continued to shape my work.

One particularly formative experience was attending the biannual conferences of the Swedish Research School of Management and IT (MIT). The collaborative and welcoming environment of the Research School provided a unique platform for sharing my research, exchanging ideas, and receiving constructive feedback. These interactions helped me refine my thinking while building friendships and professional relationships with both fellow doctoral students and established scholars. Many of these connections have endured beyond my PhD studies and have evolved into ongoing academic collaborations, mentorship, and friendship.

In all these ways, my supervisors played a crucial role in helping me move from isolation to integration. Their efforts fostered a sense of community and connectedness that was vital to both my academic development and personal well-being.

Nurturing emotional, personal, and professional support

While academic challenges were a major part of my PhD experience, personal struggles also surfaced along the way. The empathetic support of my supervisors made a significant difference during these difficult times. For example, when my dog fell seriously ill and, later, when I lost my dear cousin, my supervisors showed understanding and compassion. They encouraged me to take the necessary time to process my emotions and even facilitated travel arrangements to my home country when needed. This level of empathy created a sense of trust and safety, reinforcing that my well-being mattered beyond my academic output.

I have a tendency to take things very seriously, often being too hard on myself. My supervisors taught me the importance of maintaining a work-life balance in order to maintain both wellbeing and productivity. When I became overly absorbed in writing, spending days in front of my computer and losing touch with the outside world, they would check in on me. They sent messages

encouraging me to take a walk by the lake on a sunny day or to go out for a coffee. These small but meaningful gestures served as healthy distractions and reminded me to step back and recharge.

My supervisors played a guiding and supportive role, and never a controlling one. They discussed options and alternatives with me, allowing me to make my own choices. This freedom came with its own challenges - delays, mistakes, and poor decisions - but those experiences were mine to own. As I gained maturity, I came to recognize my missteps, which ultimately helped me grow and become more resilient.

As I approached the end of my PhD studies, I recall fragmented conversations and pieces of advice from my supervisors, the true significance of which I only fully appreciated later. One piece of advice that stood out was: "After completing your PhD, don't stay in the same workplace, even if it feels safe and familiar". They explained that, to the department where I had done my PhD, I would always be seen as "the PhD student". It is human nature to find it difficult to change perspectives, especially after five years in the same role. Initially, applying for positions at other universities and departments felt daunting and even unpleasant. But now, I understand that it was the best decision for my career at that stage. Although I still miss my supervisors, I have no regrets. This is a piece of advice I now pass on to current PhD candidates: *When you complete your PhD, spread your wings and explore new workplaces.*

To me, my two supervisors are like motherly figures. I have only the fondest memories of them. I admire them, trust them, and look up to them. They remain present and available, and even now, I turn to them whenever I need guidance on important work-related matters.

Experiencing the other side of supervision

While my primary supervisors provided exceptional support and guidance, I also encountered other supervisory approaches during my PhD journey, either through my interactions in conferences, workshops, meetings or through peers who shared their own experiences. In some cases, I observed supervisors who prioritized their own research agendas over fostering the independent thinking of their students. These supervisors maintained a more rigid approach, where doctoral candidates had limited autonomy in shaping their research trajectories. In contrast to my own experience, where my supervisors encouraged intellectual exploration and personal growth, I noticed that such restrictive supervision could hinder a student's ability to develop confidence in their academic voice. That said, the overall perspective of this essay remains positive

regarding the role of supervisors. My experience highlights the significant impact that supportive supervision can have on a PhD candidate's development, not only in terms of research progress but also in fostering resilience and independence. Reflecting on this contrast deepened my appreciation for the wider web of relationships that supported me beyond formal supervision.

Embracing a 'village' of guidance

A PhD journey may seem solitary, but in reality, it is shaped by an interconnected web of mentors, advisors, and peers, an extended team that provides support beyond the formal supervisory relationship. Just as a traveller benefits from many guides along the way, my own experience benefited from what I refer to as my 'extended supervisory team', which included other academics-friends, colleagues-friends, fellow PhD students-friends, and personal friends outside academia. Their supportive role cannot be overstated. They provided encouragement, empathy, and a sense of belonging throughout my journey. More than just academic allies, they helped me maintain perspective, offering a much-needed distraction from the pressures of research and reminding me to stay connected to the 'real world' beyond academia. Whether through sharing news, engaging in casual discussions, or simply sharing laughter, their presence helped me maintain a healthy work-life balance. These interactions reinforced the importance of community, shared experiences, and strong personal connections in sustaining motivation and fostering intellectual growth. I came to appreciate that guidance is not confined to structured meetings but also emerges in everyday interactions.

Looking back, I realize that completing a PhD is not just about individual perseverance but about embracing a holistic approach to mentorship, one that acknowledges the value of formal supervision, institutional networks, and personal support as overlapping circles of an extended supervisory team. It truly takes a 'village' to navigate this journey, and I am grateful for each person who, in their own way, guided me along the way.

Conclusion: The importance of support in the doctoral Journey

Reflecting on my PhD experience, I realize that success in a doctoral program is not solely about intellectual capability or academic productivity. It is equally about the support structures - supervisors, other scholars, peers, friends - that allow doctoral students to thrive amidst challenges. My journey was enriched by my supervisors' proactive efforts to integrate me into the

academic community, their encouragement to engage in academia and their empathy during personal struggles.

For both prospective PhD students and supervisors, my experience underscores the importance of fostering a supportive environment. Supervisors who actively help their students navigate academic and cultural transitions contribute not only to their students' research development but also to their overall well-being. Likewise, students who seek out and nurture their academic networks will find strength in the community they build.

To future PhD students embarking on their own journey, I offer this advice: embrace change, seek support, and allow yourself the space to grow. The doctoral path is rarely linear, it is filled with unexpected challenges and moments of self-doubt. But it is also an opportunity for transformation. Build relationships with those who uplift and challenge you, lean into discomfort as a catalyst for growth, and trust in your ability to navigate uncertainty. Ultimately, a PhD is not just about producing research; it is about developing resilience, confidence, and a sense of belonging in the academic world.

My own doctoral journey has shown me that academia is not just about research; it is also about people, relationships, and the networks that sustain us through this demanding yet transformative experience. By embracing this perspective, future PhD students can approach their own journeys with both determination and a sense of connection, making the experience not only academically enriching but personally fulfilling.

Olof Wadell and Chelsey Jo Huisman

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12. The PhD journey: An entrepreneurial perspective

Olof Wadell and Chelsey Jo Huisman

Introduction

In the autumn of 2016, we started our PhD journeys together at the Department of Business Studies at Uppsala University in Sweden. A year later, we encountered the entrepreneurship theory of effectuation (Sarasvathy, 2001) for the first time. We learned that effectuation theory is widely recognized for its ability to illustrate how entrepreneurs shape opportunities that can lead to success based on who they are, and what and whom they know. Furthermore, it focuses on how entrepreneurs act in the absence of clear goals, navigate uncertainty, and bring something into existence through their imagination.

Since defending our theses, we have gotten into the habit of reflecting together on our PhD journeys, seeking to make sense of what we experienced. In an attempt to bring our tacit knowledge to the surface, we thought it would be fun to reflect on this journey using the entrepreneurial perspective of effectuation theory. Our motivation in doing this is that during our PhD process, the scientific process was primarily presented to us as a rather linear pursuit of following pre-set steps: You start with formulating a problem and a purpose, choose a theory, design and carry out a study, analyze data, and draw conclusions. We, however, experienced something different. We believe that the entrepreneurial perspective of effectuation can complement this picture. In applying this perspective, we start to see our research process as an intellectual and creative endeavor that is filled with handling losses, collaborating with others, leveraging unknowns, and coping with what is outside our control. Subsequently, the purpose of this chapter is to bring the reader into the lived and felt experiences of our PhD journeys as we reflect on them through the lens of effectuation.

The disposition of the chapter is as follows. In the next section, we briefly introduce effectuation theory. In the third section, we share our experiences of the PhD journey by reflecting on four questions based on effectuation theory. We end the chapter with a short concluding discussion of the value and limits

with seeing our PhD journeys and the research process through the lens of effectuation.

Theory of effectuation

Traditionally, the work of entrepreneurs has been understood as a process that starts with setting a specific goal and determining the best course of action to accomplish it. In the example of planning a dinner party, you would devise a precise menu, make a detailed shopping list, visit the grocery store and gather all the items on your list, and return home to prepare all the dishes according to their recipes. This linear pursuit of having a clear goal (beef bourguignon) and a defined plan of how to achieve it is called *causation logic* (Sarasvathy, 2001). Causation can be defined as “a process that takes a particular effect as given and focuses on selecting between means to create that effect” (Sarasvathy, 2001, p. 245). This is a useful approach when things are predictable and plannable—you know precisely what you want, you know how to get there, and you follow the necessary steps.

In 2001, Sarasvathy suggested that entrepreneurship is a dynamic, creative process, and therefore complements the causation logic of entrepreneurship with an effectuation logic. Sarasvathy contrasts the example of the planned dinner party with a different approach. Instead of planning according to a specific menu, you could just open your fridge and pantry, get creative, and work with what you already have available to you. Suddenly, you have an impromptu omelette and toast party! This approach exemplifies what Sarasvathy calls *effectuation logic*: When individuals work with things already within their sphere of control to proactively shape their environments. Effectuation can be defined as a process that takes “a set of means as given and focuses on selecting between possible effects that can be created with that set of means” (Sarasvathy, 2001, p. 245). This is a valuable approach when the future is unknown and you need to embrace uncertainty, explore new terrain, and co-create opportunities with what is around you.

According to Sarasvathy (2001, p. 252), the theory of effectuation rests on four principles. Below, we address them and then formulate a corresponding question for each principle. The questions then guide the reflection on our own experiences of the PhD journey in the following section.

Affordable Loss: Experimentation Over Gains. Effectuation focuses on taking risks and making commitments in stages based on what you can afford to lose, rather than focusing on expected gains. An example is when a researcher may pursue a risky but novel experimental design, knowing that even failure can generate valuable insights. We have translated this principle into

the following question: How did we cope with the constant need to attach to and care about the development of ideas, only to then have to ‘kill our darlings’?

Co-Creation: Collaboration Over Competition. Effectuation emphasizes developing collaborative relationships rather than engaging in competition. It is about recognizing that creativity is a collective process, consisting of the skills and competences around you to reduce uncertainty and generate new knowledge. We have translated this principle into the following question: How did we leverage our relationship with senior scholars to successfully bring our theses to fruition and not engage in competitive battles?

Leveraging Contingencies: Creative Adaptation to Uncertainty. Effectuation is about seeing evolving circumstances and the uncertainty that comes with it not as an obstacle to be avoided, but a resource that needs to be embraced and leveraged. Such an example is when a researcher stays open to unexpected findings rather than discarding anomalies. We have translated this principle into the following question: How did we use what was happening to our advantage to help us move closer to finishing our theses?

Non-Predictive Control: Creating the Future Rather Than Predicting It. Effectuation focuses on creating the future by identifying what is within our control in the present. An example is when researchers realize that the current theoretical framework is not helpful in understanding reality, so they construct a new framework based on their interpretation of the empirical data. We have translated this principle into the following question: How did we cope with what was outside our control and navigate uncertainty when there were no predefined steps on how to go forward?



Our PhD journeys through the lens of effectuation

Below are our reflections in response to the four questions outlined above. Each response begins with Olof’s experience followed by Chelsey Jo’s. When discussing and writing out our answers, we recognized that we were constructing our experiences in hindsight. When you are in the thick of living through a process, it is difficult to see what you are learning. It is only by looking back into the past that we have given meaning to how we practiced effectuation in our research processes.

How did we cope with the constant need to attach to and care about the development of ideas, only to then have to ‘kill our darlings’?

Olof: I had a lot of ideas. I was perhaps more motivated in coming up with an interesting idea than turning it into reality. Consequently, my PhD journey included killing a tremendous number of ideas. It didn't help that I logically understood the critique that I received during supervision, seminars, and at conferences. The feeling was awful and exhausting. The exhaustion came from realising that the time I invested was lost and anticipating the future workload to make revisions. An example of this was writing my kappa for the four papers in my thesis. Based on feedback from my supervisors, I decided to let go of an entire version of the kappa that had taken months to write. One way I tried to handle these types of difficult situations was to take a particular point of view. It was about realizing that to come to the really good and strong ideas, a great many had to be 'killed'. By seeing the killing of ideas as a means to reach my overall goal of finishing the thesis, it sometimes became easier to mentally handle the situation. Giving myself time to detach from the ideas that no longer worked and develop new ideas was the only treatment to feel better.

Chelsey Jo: This was an ongoing challenge for me! To dig into and develop ideas, I believe you have to care about them. You have to want to make them your own so that they feel meaningful to you. Attaching yourself to an idea is essential to be able to bring it to life. I also think that developing such an attachment to an idea helps you weather the storm when there are setbacks related to the research process. And yet, you also have to be willing to detach from ideas when the time comes. I am not talking about disengaging from work the instant you receive tough feedback. Instead, it is about sitting with the difficult feeling of knowing that you explored a direction in great depth, only to later realize—after thoughtful consideration—“This does not hold.” I will give you an example of my first encounter with this tension between caring and letting go.

During the second year of my doctorate, I learned about the theory of effectuation. My supervisors encouraged me to see how it might be used as a theoretical lens to understand the change process I was studying. I read, thought, dreamed, and wrote about effectuation. All the while, my thinking and heart became more invested in seeing effectuation in the phenomenon. Seven months later, I presented my research at my first higher seminar. The feedback I received hit hard: Effectuation was not fully capturing the phenomenon. I felt devastated as the idea of abandoning effectuation and having to start over again felt overwhelming.

My supervisors were instrumental in helping me to cope with this experience and shift gears. Yes, I needed to let go of that effectuation would no longer be a part of my thesis. However, I learned that ideas are never fully

lost; instead, they become building blocks and inspiration for what comes next.

How did we leverage our relationship with senior scholars to successfully bring our theses to fruition and not engage in competitive battles?

Olof: The most central senior scholars for me as a PhD student were my supervisors. Despite this, during my PhD journey, I seldom viewed them as knowledgeable resources that I tried to leverage and use strategically. Maybe I should have done this more because they had so much knowledge that I could have absorbed. Looking back, however, I realize that I did on occasion. In particular, during the writing of the second version of my kappa, I tried to stay within the boundaries of my supervisors' knowledge. Supervisors, just like all humans, have a specific area of expertise, both theoretically and methodologically. I came to realize that if I stepped outside these boundaries, I would be on my own. It became important to stay within their knowledge boundaries so I could gain a considerable amount of help to finish my thesis.

A second way that I used my supervisors was to brainstorm and test ideas. Sometimes I just talked with them in a meeting or over coffee to see if they understood a particular idea that I was playing around with in my head. Other times, it was in more formal settings where I developed the idea in written text, they provided feedback, and we discussed it more in depth.

Finally, my supervisors were a bridge towards meeting senior scholars within my discipline. When at conferences and workshops, I found it very helpful when they introduced me to various people in the field. This led to interesting discussions, publications, as well as further collaborations.

Chelsey Jo: When starting out as a doctoral student, I felt wobbly. I didn't yet have any solid foundation to stand on, because I didn't know so much. It was during this time that I felt most dependent on my supervisors.

As I continued to learn and my knowledge base expanded, I started to develop my own scholarly voice. This gradual transition gave way to a shift in my relationship with my supervisors where I was not as dependent on them. Some doctoral students deviate from their supervisors' knowledge base completely. But I don't think this is so wise!

The real test is if you can transition from a dependent to interdependent relationship with your supervisors. The hope is that it becomes a dynamic process of learning to both trust and question your own personal judgement and that of your supervisors.

I found real synergy in the academic relationship with my supervisors. We found an interaction where they facilitated my autonomy and trusted my judgement in the development of my research and where I could recognize and build on their experience and knowledge.

How did we use what was happening to our advantage to help us move closer to finishing our theses?

Olof: In general, I tried to look at the world in terms of how various events could be useful for me to finish my PhD. I tried to see different moments and occasions as opportunities for growth. For example, conferences were excellent for not only testing ideas but also a place to meet and speak with people which often yielded information that they believed fit with my subject. I particularly remember one conference in Paris. It was my first meeting with a particular senior scholar. She recommended literature that later became important for my PhD project. Another example was that as a PhD student, you were expected to participate in some mandatory doctoral courses. Although not obvious from the outset, courses such as Philosophy of Science provided insights that I used in my thesis work. I firmly believe it was important as a PhD student to look at situations from the perspective of: *How can this situation be used to benefit my PhD project?* This mindset of seeing opportunities as pieces of the puzzle was worth gold. It kept me in forward motion!

Chelsey Jo: When you are in the thick of the process, you can take for granted and don't recognize the experiences that shape your thinking. Only in hindsight have I been able to see how there were many critical moments that were meaningful to my development as a process researcher and in the theory building process of my study. One such example was the annual Uppsala Lectures that feature the work of famous scholars in business studies. During the first year of my doctoral studies, an admired management scholar presented his model on Engaged Scholarship¹ and process research. I thought, "I want to think like him." The next month, he hosted a PhD course on Engaged Scholarship, and I made sure I was there. That was the start of my appreciation for all things process and seeing the value between theory and practice. The following year, an entrepreneurship scholar presented her work on effectuation. She operationalized effectuation so I could start to distinguish innovation and change. The third year, a highly esteemed organizational scholar shared his

¹ A collaborative research process between researchers and practitioners to tackle real-world problems and develop knowledge that is both theoretically applicable and practically useful (Van de Ven, 2007).

work on how change lives in our actions and stems from stability. He gave me the foundation to start grasping duality and a processual understanding of change, which later gave shape to my theoretical framework and contributions. In all these situations, I tried to draw specific insights that could connect to my research project.

How did we cope with what was outside our control and navigate uncertainty when there were no predefined steps on how to go forward?

Olof: I would be lying if I said that uncertainty was an easy task to deal with. Not knowing when or even if I would reach the goal created an unpleasant feeling. To live in the feeling of not knowing was really the most difficult practice that I have ever tried to learn. Sometimes I went to bed thinking that I would stop this tomorrow and instead start to work as a cashier at a grocery store, knowing that every day would be predictable. Taking some time off from work or shifting to another task, however, often gave me a refreshed perspective to find a way forward again.

I also held a strong focus on what was actually within my control and what I could influence. I made sure to have good routines: going to work and being there for the working the hours, not focusing so much on the outcome but rather on making the effort. This effort included reading, writing, and talking to other researchers. In the end, this bore fruit. Therefore, in addition to taking some time off, the best way forward for me was to keep my focus on my routines and effort.

Chelsey Jo: A big part of the research process that pushed me time and time again was the process of iteratively digging deeper into my empirical data and the literature. Oftentimes, I felt stuck, not knowing how to move forward, unable to connect the dots. These moments could feel deeply uncomfortable, to the extent that I did not feel capable and wanted to walk away. But not feeling capable put me in the position of feeling like the circumstances were beyond my control and that there was nothing I could do. And that was when my creativity shut down. As I continued to encounter these moments, I helped my mindset to shift: I needed to figure out how to wade through and leverage these experiences of uncertainty somehow. I needed to create time for my thinking to breathe. I soon got into the routine of temporarily walking away from writing for a day or even week. During this time, I commonly engaged in two practices: I called my supervisors or a close PhD student colleague to talk through my problem, and I went to the scholarly voices in the existing literature. Conversing with and reading someone else's way of seeing and

thinking would usually spark an association with my research, unlock my ‘stuckness’, and I would be back to writing!

The insights that you can take from our PhD journeys

In this chapter, we set out to elaborate on our PhD journeys using the entrepreneurial perspective of effectuation theory. Building on this, we formulated four questions that we each reflected upon. Below follows a further synthesis of how our respective answers relate to each other.² In doing so, we want to emphasize the key insights that you can take with you.

The first question related to the caring of ideas despite the need to kill several of them. The common thread running through our reflections is the need for coping strategies to grin and bear the task of killing ideas. Olof tried to see each killed idea as a necessary means to move forward. Chelsey Jo focused on the parts of the killed idea that she could carry with her as she worked to improve her research project. You need to find your own way to cope with loss.

The second question pertained to utilizing senior scholars. A common thread that we both argued for was the importance of building on the strengths of our supervisors and to stay within the boundaries of their knowledge and experience. Your supervisors are there to support and challenge you—make sure to use them!

A common thread in our answers to the third question was the importance of viewing each situation as a possible means to accomplishing the PhD project. Each experience can help us grow. As a PhD student, you need to mentally frame each situation to work to your advantage.

Finally, the fourth question related to dealing with things outside our control. A common thread in our answers was that we both reflected on the importance of having routines. Chelsey Jo emphasized the value of reaching out to close colleagues and reading scholarly literature when she felt puzzled. Whereas Olof highlighted the need to focus on the ongoing practices of writing and reading rather than on outcomes. In developing these strategies to cope with uncertainty, we were able to focus on what was within our control to actively shape our next step.

In conclusion, we believe that effectuation theory, in many ways, mirrors science as an uncertain process of discovery rather than a certain process that is predefined and linear. Cultivating an entrepreneurial mindset seems

² We shared the same supervisors where we both perceived the relationships to be supportive and collegial. This can inform to a certain extent the similarity in our experiences during our PhD journeys.

valuable because it gives doctoral researchers a means to accept and use the feelings of doubt and anxiety when navigating uncertainty. Yet, we see limits with effectuation theory, which views social human relationships as a means to an end. We, however, firmly believe that our motivations as researchers are not just about viewing our relationships as means to an end. As a doctoral student, it is about prioritizing the self and engaging in strategic thinking while being genuine and caring about your relationships with others as ends in themselves. Finding this balance is a lived practice which is a key component of a successful PhD journey.

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13. Striking the balance between independence and academic integration during PhD studies

Naghmeh Aghaee and Blerim Emruli

Doctoral education represents a significant academic and professional transition, characterized by substantial independence, intensive learning, and new professional responsibilities. The Swedish doctoral education system, known for its supportive infrastructure, salaried PhD positions, and union protections, provides a strong foundation for PhD candidates.

Despite these advantages, doctoral students frequently encounter difficulties, particularly in balancing independence with the potential risk of social isolation. Social isolation, recognized as a major factor contributing to increased dropout rates and reduced academic success (Ali & Kohun, 2006, 2007; Wollast et al., 2023), remains an area requiring greater attention within doctoral training programs.

This chapter aims to highlight these challenges by drawing on personal experiences, observations of former PhD students, and relevant literature. Specifically, it addresses four key dimensions crucial for improving doctoral education and student outcomes: the supervision process; clear expectations and sub-goals; digital tools for communication, knowledge sharing, and networking; and balancing independence with academic integration to reduce isolation.

Further complicating these challenges for some international doctoral students in Sweden are certain cultural factors, such as the country's strong emphasis on individualism and comfort with ambiguity (Booth, 2014). These aspects can differ significantly from the more collectivist values often found in other cultures. As a result, international students may experience heightened feelings of confusion, disorientation, and isolation, which can impact their academic integration and overall sense of belonging (Zhang et al., 2022) within the Swedish academic environment.

By systematically addressing these dimensions, the chapter seeks not only to identify existing gaps but also to propose practical solutions and

improvements. The ultimate goal is to strengthen the support mechanisms within the Swedish doctoral education framework, ensuring more successful, balanced, and inclusive experiences for PhD students.

The supervision process

In Sweden, the supervision of doctoral (PhD) students is governed by both national regulations and specific guidelines set by individual universities. According to the Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100), faculty board shall appoint one or more supervisors for each doctoral student. If more than one supervisor is appointed, one of them shall be appointed principal (main) supervisor. Moreover, it is not uncommon to have up to three co-supervisors, including one from the industry. The principal supervisor holds the primary responsibility for overseeing the doctoral student's education, ensuring that progress is made, and that all aspects of the doctoral process are properly managed.

The Swedish Higher Education Ordinance does not explicitly emphasize social activities and is rather goal oriented. Its primary focus is on the regulation of admissions, supervision, quality assurance, and academic conditions for doctoral studies. Issues related to social activities or community involvement are typically addressed in guidelines or policies established by individual universities rather than directly within this ordinance.

Nevertheless, the doctoral journey usually extends beyond specific guidelines, encompassing the development of foundational and advanced research skills, independence, and essential soft skills such as communication and collaboration. In the early stages of the PhD journey, unclear expectations and sporadic supervision can impede progress, leading to confusion and progress stagnation. Considering these dynamics, we highlight the critical role of structured and supportive supervision in empowering PhD candidates to develop independence without risking isolation. Building on this perspective, the authors draw on personal accounts collected from other experiences with large or EU-funded projects to highlight the common challenges and complexities faced during the early phase of PhD studies.

The initial supervision was often unsystematic, and research directions remained unclear, creating a sense of ambiguity that hindered early progress. Although initial meetings with the supervisory team were welcoming and focused on understanding the broader project context, they frequently lacked the scientific depth and structured guidance necessary to lay a strong foundation for the PhD journey. These experiences underline the importance of developing structured and supportive supervision practices—not only to promote

academic resilience but also to enable PhD candidates to advance with greater clarity and purpose.

This uncertainty surrounding the early stages of the PhD journey was further intensified by the pressure to publish scientific papers by the end of the first year—a formidable challenge without a solid grasp of the research process and expectations. In the absence of clear guidance, several months were spent on exploring an unsuitable research method without fully understanding the research content, resulting in lost time that could have been avoided. Rather than emphasizing research fundamentals early on, the focus on selecting the right methodology prematurely led to confusion and setbacks. This experience not only created unnecessary stress but also diminished confidence and fostered a sense of isolation, transforming what should have been a collaborative and supportive process into a solitary and overwhelming experience.

Personal accounts illustrate how diverse supervisory styles can support academic progress but may also, conversely, generate uncertainty. Boehe (2016) and Brodin et al. (2020) introduced a contingency framework of supervisory styles in their conceptual study. Transitioning to a structured approach—including bi-weekly meetings to provide clear guidelines, define short-term goals, and engage in collaborative brainstorming—significantly enhances research outcomes and builds confidence during this critical phase for the PhD students. In addition, the supervision method needs to evolve personally for each individual PhD student and gradually shift the process from directive guidance to a supportive and collaborative approach that nurtures self-management and independence, as the PhD student progresses (Brodin, et al., 2020).

A well-functioning supervisory team is crucial for a PhD student's academic progress, professional development, and overall well-being. Supervision relies not only on individual expertise but also on the ability of supervisors to collaborate, align expectations, and provide consistent guidance as a team. When a supervisory team lacks cohesion—whether due to conflicting feedback, differing academic perspectives, or interpersonal tensions—the consequences can be detrimental. Students may receive mixed messages, struggle to navigate competing advice or feel caught between supervisors with diverging priorities, especially in the beginning. This lack of alignment can lead to confusion, delays in research progress, and increased stress. Therefore, developing open communication, setting clear roles, and ensuring that supervisors work as a team rather than as isolated mentors is essential for creating a supportive and productive research environment. Institutions should recognize the importance of supervisory cohesion and provide mechanisms for

conflict resolution and team-building to prevent such issues from negatively impacting doctoral education.

Clear expectations and sub-goals

Clear communication between doctoral candidates and their supervisors is essential for setting realistic expectations and defining sub-goals. Ambiguity in responsibilities and deliverables, particularly in the early stages, can lead to delays, frustration, diminished confidence, and even dropout. Based on personal experience, adopting a new approach with the right supervisory team, and clear communication and expectations significantly improved the situation and enhanced performance. Structured bi-weekly check-ins, brainstorming sessions with targeted reading materials, the establishment of short-term sub-goals, and clear deliverables—ranging from simple tasks and responsibilities to more advanced research objectives—proved highly effective. Additionally, developing collaborative and clear expectations, along with assigning well-defined roles, enhanced clarity, provided research direction, and supported the development of essential research skills, enable greater independence in managing various aspects of research and innovation in the later stages.

The turning point in this experience came when expectations were communicated more clearly and supportively. The project was broken down into smaller steps with manageable milestones and assigned tasks, each aligned with specific roles and research objectives within the PhD process. Within two months, the path forward became clear, leading to a publication in a prestigious journal just a few months later. This transformation highlighted the importance of identifying communication approaches that can influence the research process positively and addressing the communication bottlenecks proactively early in the PhD process to ensure healthy and constructive interactions. Delaying such improvements can worsen challenges, hinder progress, and, in the worst case, lead to health issues or even not possessing the persistence to complete the PhD degree.

Based on personal experiences, aligning with the right supervisory team and communication approach proved highly effective. A combination of consistent and constructive feedback, clearly defined sub-goals, and a supportive environment with clear responsibilities and expectations contributed significantly to a success. These factors demonstrated the value of the PhD student's knowledge and abilities, emphasizing their role in advancing the project work as well as the research team's performance. This communication dynamic helped to gain confidence and accelerate the progress to finish the PhD studies on time. Constructive feedback sessions were not solely focused on addressing

weaknesses but also celebrated progress, which helped developing confidence and maintaining momentum and motivations. Acknowledging small achievements through providing positive feedback encouraged the PhD student and reinforced a sense of development and belonging.

Structured reading materials and step-by-step guidance at the very beginning helped focus on manageable tasks, gradually building toward larger accomplishments with growing confidence. This scaffolding approach fostered independence, affirmed that the PhD student was on the right path, and demonstrated the ability for further academic learning and development. Importantly, providing proper positive and constructive feedback helps build the student's confidence without prematurely positioning them as an established researcher — a common concern among supervisors (Flaherty, 2018). As a personal reflection, the authors found that the balance between constructive criticism and recognition of achievements was highly motivating and inspiring for further learning and skill development. While such principles are often cited in theory, their practical implementation can be challenging. Nevertheless, this case highlights the profound impact of clear expectations, feedback, and, particularly formulating sub-goals, when supported by a close and engaged research team.

Another important aspect of communication is its close link to collaboration (Ciampa & Wolfe, 2023; Poot & Austin, 2011). Reviewing and co-writing research work and publication drafts with supervisors proved invaluable for refining academic writing skills and deepening the understanding of scholarly publishing as a PhD student. The nature of collaborative research and publication, however, may benefit from further clarification of responsibilities—particularly in distinguishing co-authorship from the traditional supervisory role. In Sweden, supervisors primarily focus on guiding the research and fulfilling their formal supervisory responsibilities, which they are compensated for, and co-authorship ideally is reserved for instances where they actively contribute to writing the papers alongside the PhD student. This approach better reflects the true essence of co-authorship and collaboration. An open dialogue with the supervisors, mutual respect, trust, and co-writing can greatly enrich the learning experience while reinforcing a sense of belonging within the academic and research community.

In Sweden, PhD students have the right to publish their research independently and may choose to collaborate with scholars outside their institution and even internationally. While this strategy can result in some good individual papers, assembling a well-integrated thesis according to Swedish standards may become more challenging. Moreover, it can make it harder for students to build a sense of belonging within their home institution and research

environment, and they may miss opportunities to develop their academic writing and develop scientific reasoning.

Digital tools for online communication, knowledge sharing, and networking

Despite Sweden's advanced digital infrastructure, doctoral students often struggle to fully utilize digital tools for academic and social purposes during their PhD studies. The lack of a standardized digital infrastructure tailored to the specific needs of the PhD students create barriers to accessing and managing resources while limiting collaboration and knowledge sharing. Based on personal experiences, ten years ago there was no standardized tool or communication channel for addressing questions. PhD students often had to seek answers from supervisors, the union, or, in some cases, the department administration. However, in certain situations, none of these sources could provide the necessary information, leaving students without clear guidance.

Navigating multiple digital platforms—such as research databases, Learning Management Systems (LMS), and formal and informal communication channels like Slack, MS Teams, and Facebook groups—adds to the complexity of finding relevant information (Aghaei et al., 2016). Currently, there is no standardized digital infrastructure to streamline key aspects of doctoral studies, such as tracking educational progress, structuring access to important information, monitoring research milestones, and centralizing communication with supervisors, mentors, or peers. Departmental communication tools typically provide general information for employees rather than addressing PhD students' specific needs.

A pilot digital support system aimed at addressing these challenges was developed in 2016 at Stockholm University, integrating academic, administrative, and social aspects of PhD studies. This research-driven prototype was well-received by both PhD students and supervisors, showing promising results. Despite its promising potential and positive feedback, it was never implemented on a larger scale due to cost constraints. Such a digital platform could provide significant value by centralizing access to academic resources, streamlining course registration, and enabling networking opportunities both within the department and across institutions—features that many PhD students need today. For example, such digital system could connect PhD students working on similar research topics, facilitate interdisciplinary collaborations, and even help organize social events to reduce isolation.

At Lund University School of Economics and Management (LUSEM), a dedicated Canvas (Learning Management System) page serves as a centralized resource for PhD students, providing key information on the academic,

administrative, and well-being aspects of doctoral studies — in several ways resembling the research-driven pilot system described above. This Canvas page covers information such as the supervision process, course and credit transfers, registration in the Student Portal, salary levels, extensions of doctoral studentships, international opportunities, and other useful resources. This Canvas page addresses some of the previously-mentioned challenges by centralizing essential information and streamlining processes, demonstrating how centralized digital resources can enhance PhD student support and administration.

From the perspective of both authors of this chapter, co-developing an Individual Study Plan (Higher Education Ordinance 1993: 100, Chapter 6, Section 29) is essential for establishing a structured and transparent doctoral process. Conducting biannual reviews of the Individual Study Plan with supervisors further enhances alignment and significantly reduces the risk of misunderstandings. Such structured approaches help PhD students anticipate their responsibilities, maintain focus, and achieve key milestones more efficiently. At LUSEM, the study plan is accessible through an online portal to facilitate seamless collaboration between PhD students and their supervisors. This portal enables real-time updates, structured documentation of progress, and transparent communication, ensuring that all stakeholders remain aligned throughout the doctoral journey. Moreover, this facilitates open and transparent communication not only the academic progress but also develops trust and a productive working relationship between supervisors and PhD candidates.

Drawing on the experiences of the two authors—one a former president of the PhD students' board and mentor, and the other a co-supervisor—a perspective both endorse is a standardized digital infrastructure with purpose-built tools for communication, knowledge sharing, and networking would help improve access to essential information, support knowledge management, track students who feel isolated or unsupported, and strengthen academic networking. This kind of digital infrastructure could enhance communication, peer-to-peer interaction, and make it easier for PhD students to reach out to board members or other references for support and guidance. A standardized digital infrastructure would enable better Q&A, greater alignment with institutional resources, and help foster a stronger sense of belonging. By addressing the fragmentation of current digital tools, such digital infrastructure could transform the PhD journey into a more engaging and supportive experience.

However, while digital infrastructure and tools offer considerable advantages in centralizing communication and resources, it is essential to acknowledge the potential downsides, notably the risk of increased social isolation among PhD students. Digitalization can inadvertently discourage face-

to-face interactions, as online tools provide alternatives that diminish the need to physically attend events, seminars, or informal gatherings. The convenience of digital platforms might inadvertently reduce opportunities for spontaneous, informal interactions that are often crucial for fostering a sense of community and belonging. Therefore, institutions must consciously balance digital solutions with structured opportunities for in-person engagement. Hybrid approaches, combining robust digital infrastructure with regular physical meetings or social events, can mitigate the risk of isolation, ensuring that digitalization complements rather than replaces valuable interpersonal connections.

Balance between independence and social isolation

Balancing independence with meaningful academic integration is essential to avoiding social isolation during doctoral studies. Many institutions attempt to address this issue through purely social or narrowly academic activities, yet integration remains superficial. Based on personal experiences and observations, an intentional combination of academic and social interactions, such as structured workshops, peer-feedback sessions, and mentor-led discussions, are effective in addressing these challenges. Institutions should purposefully integrate these activities into the doctoral journey, thus creating a supportive community that enhances academic and personal success. These integrated activities can help doctoral students develop not only their research skills but also cultivate valuable personal connections and a sense of belonging within their academic community.

Peer interactions focused explicitly on shared research interests or challenges are especially effective in reducing isolation. They allow PhD students to exchange insights, collaboratively troubleshoot research issues, and validate shared experiences. Such interactions significantly improve students' mental health and academic resilience (Flaherty, 2018), foster interdisciplinary collaborations (Ciampa & Wolfe, 2023; Poot & Austin, 2011), and ultimately enhance their long-term academic success.

However, despite their potential, many institutions fail to intentionally create these integrated academic-social environments. PhD students often struggle with isolation precisely because existing structures do not sufficiently address their specific research-related socialization needs. Doctoral candidates frequently face uncertainty when encountering research problems or communication issues, lacking clearly defined spaces or communities to turn to for guidance and peer support. This absence exacerbates isolation, stress, and academic stagnation, potentially leading to burnout or dropout.

Therefore, the development of intentionally designed, integrated academic-social support structures—such as regular collaborative research

workshops paired with structured social networking components, or mentorship programs explicitly focused on both academic guidance and personal interaction—is vital. From the authors’ perspective, informed by their experiences as former PhD students, mentors, and co-supervisors, this integrated approach significantly reduces isolation, provides academic clarity, and reinforces the overall sense of community and belonging.

A well-balanced approach, integrating purposeful social engagement directly linked to academic activities, ultimately ensures PhD students are neither academically isolated nor socially disconnected. Strengthening this dimension within doctoral education programs thus represents an essential step toward healthier, more resilient, and academically successful PhD journeys.



Conclusion

While Sweden offers strong institutional support for doctoral education, occasional challenges—such as unclear supervision and periods of social isolation—persist and warrant ongoing attention and dialogue. Effectively addressing these issues requires structured and collaborative supervision, transparent and well-communicated expectations, a standardized digital infrastructure tailored to doctoral students’ specific needs, and thoughtfully integrated academic and social activities. Implementing these practical measures can foster resilience, support academic progression, and enhance the overall well-being of doctoral candidates. Ultimately, embracing the four interconnected dimensions outlined in this chapter can significantly enrich doctoral experiences, boost research productivity, reduce attrition, and contribute meaningfully to long-term academic and professional success.

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III: THE PHD ADVISORS HAVE THE WORD

Christina Keller

Q: Hello Christina! We would like to start our discussion with you telling us about your background, and the focus of your own doctoral dissertation?

Christina Keller: I started as a very young academic. I have a Bachelor's degree in Psychology from Lund University from 1983. After graduating, I realized I was quite young and needed to work, so I started a job in the county council administration and after quite a couple of years I felt like I needed to go back to academia. So, I did that and finished a one-year Master's in Informatics in 2001 at Jönköping International Business School, followed by working there as a part time teacher and project manager. And then in 2002, I became a PhD candidate in Informatics at the Jönköping International Business School and I was also financed by the Swedish Research School of Management and IT.

I defended my doctoral dissertation in 2007. It was about the acceptance of what was then called virtual learning environments, but we now we call them learning management systems, platforms such as Canvas, Studium, or Ping Pong. I studied the acceptance of those kind of systems among students and teachers in academia. After that I became an Assistant Professor in Informatics at Jönköping International Business School, and then became Docent in 2012 and Professor in 2016. In 2019, I moved from Jönköping International Business School to Lund University at the Department of Informatics, and since then I worked as a Professor at this department. And above all, since 2017 I am a dean of the national Swedish Research School of Management and IT, based at Uppsala University.

Q: Could you share more with us about your past experience as a PhD supervisor?

Christina Keller: I took the role of a PhD second supervisor quite early after my dissertation defence in 2007. I also worked part time as a project manager and researcher at the Karolinska Institute, it was a kind of postdoctoral employment financed by the Swedish Research School of Management and IT. This meant that I early got into the business of being a second or third supervisor. So, I have supervised PhD candidates at the Karolinska Institute, Stockholm University, Jönköping International Business School, and now at

Lund University. In total, past and present, I have acted as main and second supervisor to 17 PhD students.

Q: And you are also currently the director of third cycle studies at Lund University, at the department of Informatics?

Christina Keller: Yes, I am.

Q: So, you are very involved with this particular stage of higher education?

Christina Keller: Yes, I am. That is actually what mostly fills my days when I am at work.

Q: You mentioned something which we would like to return to. You said that you felt like you wanted to come back to academia after working in the council administration. Could you tell us more about what motivated you then to return and what motivates you now to remain in academia?

Christina Keller: I felt that the jobs I had then were not very fulfilling. I felt that I had the potential for academic studies and that I didn't use it. And I felt bad about that, hence why I went back to academia where I felt like I fitted in better.

Q: What is your main motivation to serve as a PhD supervisor?

Christina Keller: Seeing people grow when they try to solve different tasks and problems. When you see what people can accomplish when they get the chance to. It is fantastic. That is my main motivation.

Q: When you are involved in recruitment of PhD students or simply when you are considering collaborating with them, what qualities are you looking for and why?

Christina Keller: I would say the ability to think and analyze phenomena, data, information. Also, I think that the ability to structure information and analyze is really, really important. Life is also easier for those who are good at writing; So, I think it's very, very important that the person has some kind of talent or potential for that. I know that other colleagues sometimes think that a PhD candidate should be very outgoing, should be talkative, should be expressive in many ways. But I don't look for that in a newcomer or in a new PhD candidate because those are things which you can learn in time. I think that even very shy people, very introverted people, can be really, really good PhD candidates and even better researchers.

Q: Would you say that there are any differences between what you look for at the stage of recruitment compared to when you are assessing a PhD candidate's progression, for example, in a role as an examiner?

Christina Keller: Yes, I would say so. I am a teacher in several PhD courses and we have position papers or longer papers in all courses. And of course there are differences between the first year PhD student, the fourth year one, and the final year one in how much analysis you expect them to be able to conduct. The first-year student can get away with just working on a descriptive paper, but cannot do that really when they are progressing further. I also think, like I said before, I don't think that characteristics such as being outgoing and extroverted are necessarily needed, but PhD candidates should be good communicators. They need to fit in the research community and socialize there. For instance, if we think about the Swedish Research School for Management and IT, which has two yearly research conferences, a PhD student attending needs to be comfortable, know who they are and what they are doing, and be able to set themselves a goal for the seminars they attend and assess their own performance there. 'How was my presentation received? What happened?' They need to assess the critique received, was it useful or not?

Q: I'm very happy that we already started to discuss a little about communication. Because our next question is about the importance of learning Swedish. In this volume, this topic has been touched upon by our authors and naturally we wanted to ask you your thoughts about this. What is your take on the importance of learning Swedish?

Christina Keller: I've been working in two different contexts when it comes to this topic. I was at Jönköping International Business School for 15 years where we all spoke English all the time, everyone. So, it was not an issue at all knowing Swedish or not since we had an international community including PhD candidates, teachers, and professors. And then I arrived at a Swedish state university that has this official language, a so-called bureaucratic language, which is Swedish. There is a bureaucratic umbrella over institutions and faculties and the decisions made in all the bureaucratic levels are done in the official language, Swedish. There are sometimes also guarantees for Swedish students to be taught in Swedish. It's not so easy to suddenly switch language in a course, especially in bachelor programs where we have only Swedish students who expect to be taught in their own language. So, I think it's a dilemma because so many of our researchers and teachers in our community come from other countries these days. And they are sometimes stopped in state universities from taking part in all the activities because they cannot speak

Swedish. So, I would say learning Swedish is very important if one wants to remain in Sweden and have a career at a Swedish university in general.

Q: When it comes to your own PhD students, what do you advise them to have as a strategy regarding learning Swedish?

Christina Keller: If you want to stay in Swedish academia, take Swedish courses, and try to learn the language at least on a basic level. If you're not interested in staying in Sweden, for instance, I had a PhD candidate at the Karolinska Institute and she went back to China directly after her dissertation defense. I had another PhD candidate who went back to working in a municipality as an ICT teacher. So, perhaps not everyone is interested in continuing working in Swedish academia, but if you would like to work in a Swedish state-owned university, which is the case for the majority of universities in Sweden, you should learn the language because then you have the chance to teach courses in Swedish. You also have a chance to be part of the academic bureaucratic structure, which you need to be. If you want to develop a career like a program manager or director of studies. Also, it is important to speak Swedish in meetings, or reading Swedish documents such as governmental policy for instance.

Q: A doctoral program is spread over quite a few years and people tend to go through many life changes, some of which might not be positive. What is your view on the kind of support PhD students can expect from their supervisor or institutions when they are facing personal challenges?

Christina Keller: I think they should expect support from their director of PhD studies, of which there should be one in every department I believe. There should also be a PhD student ombudsman, which is an existent role within a departmental institutional program in case there are issues which are difficult to handle alone. Then on a more personal level, I would say that they should keep close contact with their supervisor and director of studies. If you have trust in them on a personal level, they can advise you. For instance, if you are ill in some way, you shouldn't continue to work even if you don't feel well. Take a sick leave because then you can prolong the time of your studies. There are also other aspects such as imposter syndrome or receiving negative feedback and I think those are also things that a supervisor or a director of doctoral studies can assist with. They could sit down with the student and really discuss that these things exist and why they happen. There are many types of negative feedback. Most reviewers want you to improve, they are honest when they discuss your work, and they want the best for you. But it can sometimes come out in the wrong way. There are also, unfortunately, a small

percentage of people in academia who like to put the PhD candidates into their place and they can be mean. Although I think that that is more and more uncommon, those people still exist to a certain extent. And perhaps a PhD candidate needs help to sort out what is relevant in negative feedback received and what is not. And the supervisor can also be asked about this and try to help find a solution.

When it comes to other aspects such as loss of funding, it's harder because that is dependent on bodies outside of academia. But if it is a situation like, say you are in a project which is often led by a professor, and they have lost the funding, then it is this person's responsibility to get the funding back or secure another funding. But if it is the case that the funding is over because the four or five years of PhD are over and the dissertation is not finished, then it is different. Then I would say that I would still support such a PhD candidate. Some departments don't because after the five years they don't have a supervisor that receives money for their role as a supervisor after the funding is finished. But let's say that the PhD candidate has passed their 90% progression seminar and then the five years are gone, then it's no question for many supervisors and we just continue to support them.

Q: I think most of us in academia relate to this and can think of moments when we met people who were not very good at communicating feedback, or perhaps even did it maliciously. When you personally notice this in a live setting, for example at a seminar or conference, do you react to this? Do you say something then or separately to your student? How do you experience these types of situations?

Christina Keller: Looking back to those situations I think I try to take the word then and not tell the person that they are being mean and that they need to stop, but more take the word to say something that neutralizes the situation and the things that this person has said. And then afterwards I talk with the PhD candidate about it.

Q: Do you think the boundary between personal and professional life affects how we deal with personal issues while pursuing a PhD degree?

Christina Keller: It can, because of the age span at which you usually are a PhD candidate. For many it's also the age where you want to start a family. You have a partner. You have children. You can have elderly parents that need help. So, yes, I think it can be harder because a PhD candidate is a job that has very few routine tasks. You need to be on your toes. You need to set your own routines, sit and think, communicate well with other people. It's not a job where you can do automatic routine-based tasks all day. So, it takes its toll in

a way that many other jobs perhaps do not. And then it can be harder to balance work and family.

Q: Another topic we approached in this volume is interdisciplinarity, which is becoming more and more common in doctoral projects, as well as in academia generally. It can be tricky to navigate different disciplines when being new to conducting research. Similarly, coming from a different discipline to the one in which the PhD student find themselves for their doctoral work is also increasingly common as different topics become relevant to many different disciplinary fields. What is your experience with this and how do you help PhD students navigate interdisciplinary waters?

Christina Keller: I haven't supervised anyone that was really interdisciplinary, but I've been in an interdisciplinary context myself and I have supervised people in Information Systems/Informatics, and medical management, which was very, very different. For example, in Information Systems we love theories and we have so many. When I came to medical management at the Karolinska Institute, a professor said, 'you know, we don't have theories in this discipline, we are very data oriented, we collect data and draw conclusions.' And the advice I can give to anyone who is in an interdisciplinary setting is to never believe that the other disciplines look at the world like you do. The differences are many so, instead, we should look at their practices and routines with respect because they have worked equally hard. Put all the cards on the table to show where you come from and then they will show where they come from and what are their theories, models, favourite data collection methods, how they see the research practice and topics.

Q: For many PhD students teaching becomes a significant part of their doctoral period. Could you comment on your own experience with PhD students engaging in teaching activities alongside their dissertation research topic?

Christina Keller: If you want to become an Assistant Professor in the Swedish system, I think that you still need to have one year of teaching experience. That means 20% teaching every year of your doctoral period. I would say that it's very, very important to keep in close contact with the director of research studies and the director of undergraduate studies to ensure that you are not overused for teaching. And to see that you get proper introductions from senior teachers. You should never be left alone in your first year in a big auditorium with a class of 150 students expected to give a long lecture, that's not decent. And I think you should start with supervision, or if you are in a more technical discipline, laboratories. And then you could move on to lectures in

your later years. But the most important thing of all is that people at the department don't use you as cheap replacement for the senior teachers, or put you in too many courses because your salary is lower than the other teachers. So, it's very important to make sure that you don't go over 20% and you are not assigned teaching that you cannot handle.

Q: How would you say the relationship is between the teaching and the research that the PhD students are expected to do? Is it a symbiotic one or can teaching be a hurdle?

Christina Keller: Teaching in itself is needed if you want a tenure track position. I think that supervision, for instance, of BA or MA theses, on topics similar to your own is good and it can help you. And if you are assigned very basic courses in the beginning of a BA program, for instance, perhaps it won't help your research but it gives you teaching hours and teaching experience. But it doesn't help your research as much as when your teaching is related to your own dissertation topic.

Q: Can a PhD candidate say no to teaching or does that send a negative signal to their seniors and to their faculty?

Christina Keller: I think that they can say no if they have a good reason. I said no to teaching during one semester because I had family issues and that was respected. But then it's hard because you are also thinking, 'OK, I need to say yes to everything because I need to show that I am needed and useful'. That's a feeling many have. I don't think you can say no to teaching during all your five years, I don't think it's realistic in practice. But you can do it temporarily if you have a good reason. Or if someone wants to assign you teaching which is outside your discipline or expertise. There is also sometimes an opportunity to switch teaching to administrative tasks.

Q: An expectation from PhD students is for them to develop a collaboration network which they can then access in future research activities. At the same time, there is also an expectation to become independent. What can a PhD student do to maintain balance in developing a professional and social network?

Christina Keller: It's hard if you are alone in a department where, for instance, there are only two or three people that do things similar to yours. Organizations like research schools can give you the possibility to create a network. There are also doctoral courses where many people meet from the same or other disciplines, and also from other universities. In my own university

there is a venue for “PhD Days” where candidates from different disciplines can meet outside their disciplinary boundaries and connect.

Q: What about the role of the supervisor? How much should they be socializing with their PhD students? How should they balance being a mentor and a friend to their PhD student?

Christina Keller: Every PhD student is different. As are all humans. You can get closer to some and perhaps not that close to others. A supervisor needs to be very professional and have a balanced and structured interaction and communication. They should set up meetings in a structured manner for supervision and communicate clearly. Because to be a supervisor is not the same as being a friend. But of course, you get along better with some candidates and less with others, as you do with all people. That’s something you need to balance and not show.

Q: We now have reached a point in which I would like to ask you more about a context in which we originally met, which is the Swedish Research School for Management and IT, for which you are currently the Dean of. We also heard previously that you are yourself an alumna of the research school. One point of departure for our question is our observation that the research school as an academic type of organization has become more popular. What does it mean for a PhD student to be part of a research school and how does it differ to those who are not?

Christina Keller: The difference is in how narrow the context in which PhD candidates are located in. At your department, you are at your university, and the contacts you have and the network you can build is then dependent on what is organized there such as seminars, or communications, interactions and traditions at the specific department. That can be good and sometimes it can be less so, it varies. I would say that the research school gives you an opportunity to meet people from other universities, both other PhD candidates, and senior academics who you can receive feedback from, you can discuss your work with, you can think of new angles for your papers with, and above all you can start to think in new directions outside the established way at your own home department. For me, when I was a PhD candidate, to participate in the research school’s activities was essential because there I could receive feedback from people that had other or wider perspectives than at my home department. And then the person who is not affiliated to a research school might be a bit vulnerable to the context at their home department.

Q: For those doctoral students who are not affiliated to a research school and cannot be, as this is often out of their power to decide, how can they emulate this? What would you advise them to do? Should they organize similar activities as in a research school such as seminars? Or go to more conferences? How can they access the benefits of a research school without actually being in one?

Christina Keller: They can, if the department has money, go to conferences which are more tailored for PhD students. For instance, being in Scandinavia, we have this conference for Information Systems called IRIS, which is not a career conference but a place where you can go and get your paper reviewed by others, you are placed in a working group in which you work with helping developing all the papers of those participants. Self-organization is also good. When I was at the Karolinska Institute, the PhD candidates at Medical Management, they had something that they called Writing Friday then. They would meet in a room every Friday and wrote and discussed work. You could see them sitting in the room, because it was a glass door, and I noticed that often they would comfort each other and try to help each other. So that kind of self-organization and going to conferences is a way.

Q: The role of a PhD student, but also junior researchers generally, involves living with a bit of uncertainty. On one hand there is a clear deadline for when a position ends, but there is also an inherent need to live with uncertainty between positions, or while waiting for decisions. What is your advice for how to navigate this aspect of academic work?

Christina Keller: I would say try to plan, if possible, the things that you can plan ahead. Do that, try to look forward in the courses you take and the thesis work. In one of the courses which I am involved in we have one module in which PhD candidates have a task to plan their five doctoral years, and think about what to do each year. To have a good plan is essential. Then there will always be things that you cannot control. But the things you *can* control, try to plan them. And also, take one day at a time because something that is difficult one day can be solved some other day. Circumstances can change around you. So, plan the things you can control and then observe the risky things and then try to take it easy as you cannot control everything anyway and it's a loss of energy to worry too much about those things.

Q: Earlier you mentioned that life is easier for those PhD students who are good at writing and enjoy it. This writing process is a central activity to the PhD progress and, as you can imagine, is the main topic of several of our

chapters in this volume. What are your trusted habits and routines which you would like to share with present and future doctoral students?

Christina Keller: Also, here everyone is different. I would say that you should be structured and don't think that in the beginning of your first years you can write an article in one week. That is not possible. And to always start with a structure, just with writing the headings and then trying to fill them in a little bit every day. Write the content as you gain knowledge, as you reach your results. Write down your thoughts also, for instance if you were writing a theory chapter. Even if you are not sure that you will use the theory that you are reading about right now, you can still reflect about it. And write those things that you already know, because some things that need to be included in an article or in the kappa you can already write from the start. Then there are other things for which you have to wait for to write until after data collection, or results from data analysis. I think you need time to think about your research results, which can be stressful but you need to let it take time.

Q: Another very important topic we approached in this volume is that of equal opportunities in academia and what can we do to improve representation. More specifically, have you supervised, for example, women and have you encountered such issues?

Christina Keller: Many of my PhD students have been women. My experience is that women are more cautious to do a good job and finish on time because they know that they are observed more. They feel like they have to be a bit better sometimes than the male students, unfortunately. When it comes to gender, the only difference I can see is that women plan and foresee things more and men tend to take more chances. A pattern which I could see when I started as a PhD candidate myself in 2002 was that the attitude from the senior researchers of that time was slightly more positive towards the male students.

Q: Do you think that this has changed now?

Christina Keller: I think so, yes, for the better. That's a slight difference, so not very big, it was a gut feeling that you had back then. When it comes to international academics the big hurdle is still that you need to speak Swedish in order to have further access to an academic career that is based on that bureaucracy. I just heard in recent years that the number of Swedish applicants to PhD positions has been quite low. The majority come from different countries and we would never be able to manage academia here without people from other countries who come to Sweden.

Q: Knowing that these challenges are ahead of them, what is your advice for your international PhD students, especially those who are at the beginning of their work?

Christina Keller: I try to support them so that they know that irrespective of gender or what country they come from they are valuable, they are good. We want to work with them.

Q: As a last question, we want to ask you how do you prepare your PhD students for life after the PhD defense, if you do? And do you know what kind of careers your former PhD students have continued in?

Christina Keller: They work in academic teaching, in municipalities, in research. I would say 70% remained in academia. They are in Sweden, in Norway, in Argentina, in China.

I think this is the weak point of many PhD programs. We often prepare PhD students for a career in academia, but not outside of it. We had PhD surveys at Lund University and the weak point that the PhD candidates mentioned was that they are not prepared for a career outside of academia. At a faculty level, not department level, there have been organized “PhD Candidates Days” with alumni from working places outside of academia. And I think that with the digitalization of society, there should be more and more opportunities for research schools like the Swedish Research School for Management and IT’s alumni to go to places outside of academia. For instance, the Swedish regions and Swedish society in general have big challenges regarding digitalization and information security.

Q: Any last remarks you would like to make on the topic of PhD studies in Sweden?

Christina Keller: Yes, that the PhD supervisors who are new in this role can also fall into the trap of overwhelming their students through both excitement and expectations, forgetting that it is important to follow and support them according to their actual process. Education is important for both the PhD students and their respective supervisors!

Thomas Taro Lennerfors

Q: Hello Thomas! Could you introduce yourself in regard to your background and what your own PhD dissertation was about?

Thomas Taro Lennerfors: I studied a five year industrial engineering and management program at KTH, the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm. I was quite interested in the mainstream of that subject and wanted to be a management consultant or a manager, which was the career aspiration of most students in that program. Then I went on a one-year exchange to Spain and that was a turning point. I started to get interested in other things that I had not been interested in before, for example philosophy. That also changed my career, what I wanted to do with my life. Previous aspirations of working at McKinsey did not feel interesting anymore. I thought that maybe the best would be to just drop my industrial engineering and management studies entirely and start studying philosophy. But that is not how I am. I try to fix things that I already have in action. Therefore, I felt that, maybe I could write a master's thesis in philosophy of technology, which I did. Then I thought that a PhD could be where I could nurture these new interests that I had, but without throwing out my previous studies. That was the reason I started the PhD, also at KTH, about corruption in public procurement. My supervisor Claes Gustafsson was interested in philosophy and ethics and he proposed that I should study how procurement professionals deal with the potential risk of being corrupted by salespeople or suppliers, who want their products to be bought even though they might not be the best ones.

Q: Since then, you've assumed the role of a supervisor of PhD students. Could you talk to us a little bit about that?

Thomas Taro Lennerfors: I'm not a very experienced supervisor. I was co-supervising Christian Jansson at Gothenburg University when I was working there as a postdoc. And then at Uppsala University, where I have been working since 2011, I was, or am, the main supervisor to Per Fors, Jolanda van Rooijen, Mia Ljungblom, and Paul Plummer, and assistant supervisor to Matthew Davis, Thomas Schmitt, Alex Ljung, and Peter Birch.

Q: What would you say motivates you as a PhD supervisor?

Thomas Taro Lennerfors: I think I start from my own experience and positive memories of my own PhD. Of course, there are ups and downs that I had as well, but compared to other jobs, I've never thought of this as a job even. As a PhD, it was more like a vocation. I suppose that when I recruit, or when I have the possibility to supervise someone, I want them to experience that which I had back in the day, to be able to nurture their thinking, and experience some autonomy in formulating their projects and be able to learn. I learn a lot from my PhD students because supervision is a way to nurture my own thinking. It's also important to say that in the Swedish institutional system, there are demands to have PhD students to become a full professor.

Q: In the recruitment of PhD students, what is it that you are looking for, and why?

Thomas Taro Lennerfors: I try to find people who are really interested in PhD studies. It's of course impossible to judge after an interview, but they should be interested in the task that they are applying for, not do it just for external purposes; for example: 'I want the PhD because then I can do a really good industrial career' or 'everybody in my family has a PhD'. But be interested in learning things, be curious and open to new perspectives. I've been in interview situations where some candidates seem like they know everything already, they have perfect answers to all the questions and there are no gaps remaining. They have already figured everything out. To me that is not the ideal candidate because I want someone who does not know exactly what the end result of the process would be. Then I think it's important that they express some form of commitment to work. Before I started a PhD myself, I thought that this is for people who are smart or so. But it's so much about doing the effort to try stuff and to have grit to continue working. I think it's easier to work if you're interested in what you're doing.

Q: What about in a role as an examiner, what kind of qualities would you be looking for?

Thomas Taro Lennerfors: I look for creativity and a willingness to learn and explore something that is new. I also see it as central to use the strengths that you have and the interest that you have. If I see a PhD thesis that is extremely rigid and everything is perfect, but I don't think it mirrors the PhD student at all, I will of course not fail it or anything like that. It's still an excellent PhD. But I always think, is this really what you could have performed? Maybe you want to play the game in the perfect way and you discipline yourself to produce a thesis that does not represent what you want to do. Some

people can do that. But I also feel so happy when I see that someone has actually tried to do something that is breaking the norms or trying to do something different. To maybe nurture that little bit would be something that I look for during the PhD process as well. Then again, maybe some don't want the PhD to consume their entire existence, which is perfectly fine and maybe that is healthier as well. So maybe for that reason, they write a thesis which feels like work: 'this is my job; I do it and then I go home; now I produced something that is going to be legitimate from a variety of perspectives. You don't have to worry that someone sees this as strange or anything like that'. My personal opinion is that I don't like that so much. But it's not for me to decide. The PhD students should do exactly what they want. I always respect if they say that this is exactly what they want to do.

Q: What is your take on the importance of learning Swedish?

Thomas Taro Lennerfors: Difficult question. Myself, I'm a bit like a language nerd and I always felt that if I go somewhere, then I will be able to understand more of that context if I learn the language and for me, it has been a pleasure. I love, or loved, learning languages. While I have lost this interest a little bit, for a long time that was part of my identity. I never had that problem in Sweden, of course, because I'm born here, so I know Swedish. But I think that it is a good idea to learn Swedish for your research purposes. We are connected to actors in society, and many of them, while they can speak English, they prefer to speak Swedish, and they speak much better Swedish even though they are fluent in English. Also, we speak a lot of English at the department, but also a lot of Swedish. So, I suppose you miss out on some things if you don't speak Swedish. Also, it matters for career possibilities in academia. We are in a system where Swedish is still the main language. To take on many administrative positions or even teaching positions, it is important to know Swedish. So there's an instrumental reason to learn Swedish. There are also social reasons to learn Swedish so that you can understand what is going on better. And then the question is, of course, how can we support this? Often with all academic jobs, including the PhD, the trade-offs are never acknowledged: what should I remove from my job tasks if I, as a PhD student, study Swedish two hours a day? Well, nothing, just do that as well. Should I be an excellent teacher or excellent researcher? Well, why not be both? I think this is usually the case with many of the issues that we're faced with, that we don't acknowledge any trade-offs; rather, maybe you can go to a Swedish course in the evening. Unfortunately, that is a little bit how it is. I have thought about how to get out of this, but I don't know really.

Q: In your experience, is there any sort of support from the department, division, or the university to help manage these trade-offs?

Thomas Taro Lennerfors: I think you get support from supervisors, and you can have discussions with the managers. I think that helps, but in the end it becomes a question for the PhD student because it's so personal how you want to compartmentalize, whether you see learning Swedish as an investment: 'it's going to be a bit difficult now this year because I'm learning this, but then I can maybe, get something back from knowing Swedish in the rest of my career'. I think if you always want to keep the perfect balance at every point in time, then a PhD might be a bit difficult. I hope that it can be done, but I think it's more difficult than other jobs. You might read a research related book in the evening because you are genuinely interested but you will also be helped by that later. I think there's an incentive to work more, as a PhD student, which could be a major problem for health. I think the Swedish language goes into that box as well, unfortunately.

Q: What kind of support do you think, PhD students should expect from their supervisors or from the department?

Thomas Taro Lennerfors: The PhD programs last over quite a few years and over this amount of time it's possible that people go through different life changes. Life happens and some of these things, unfortunately, are negative experiences. The supervisor, manager, and the head of department should always support the PhD student if something happens that is affecting the work. And even if it's not affecting the work, supervisors should have a caring approach towards the PhD students. From a supervisor perspective, it's good if the PhD student tells us so we know what is going on. That of course depends on the supervisory relationship. It's not obvious that the student and the supervisor can speak freely about everything. But I hope that the PhD students are exposed to a range of different people at the division so that they don't have a direct relationship only with the supervisor; maybe they can also have other PhD students, co-supervisor, managers, or other colleagues as a support system. This is a little bit what I've tried to institute with the research school of industrial engineering and management. That research education is not a relationship just between you and your supervisor but there are always other people around who the PhD student has relationships with by being at the office, at seminars, and teaching together with colleagues. Depending on the issue, I think what is necessary is to talk about it and to listen to the PhD student. Then the question is: What can we do? If someone cannot work full time, for example, then it's important that we discuss that. If the person is still working full time formally but cannot work full time, then that will have

consequences. Rather than only hoping for everything to solve itself, we could talk through some options, about what can be done, for example can we do 50% work for a while so that the PhD time does not expire? We also have the issue of fairness. You should combine the individual caring approach and seeing the PhD student, with the more justice approach of treating everybody in a similar way. I think those can be connected through a dialogue with supervisor and other people as well so you don't end up in a situation where a person has not been able to do anything for quite a long time and that leads to a lot of problems later and no one has ever had this kind of discussion. I'm not saying that it should be a harsh discussion, rather an explorative discussion. It's not a nice topic but it needs to be discussed. But it can of course be very sensitive. I would say that just listening and maybe not trying to solve everything as a supervisor, but trying to see what can we do together?

Q: Our following question is related to something you mentioned before and focuses on interdisciplinarity. You shared that you became interested in ethics and how this was a turning point for you in your early career. You also said that your own PhD supervisor was also interested in ethics, which I assume reinforced your decision to implement this more in your doctoral work. At this intersection of industrial engineering and management and ethics and philosophy- how do you view interdisciplinarity? And here I mean how do you view it generally but also more specifically when your own PhD students or those you are examining or interact with in different capacities engage in interdisciplinary work. Especially when they perhaps come from more technical backgrounds and decide to incorporate elements from social science and/or humanities, since at the end we become Doctors in one specific discipline.

Thomas Taro Lennerfors: I am very happy when I see academics go in interdisciplinary directions. But then again, I also wonder if I'm equally open to all forms of interdisciplinarity. For example, if a PhD student who starts out in a qualitative project wants to do a quantification of their results and move in that direction, then I wonder if I would be equally open to that. It has not happened yet, but I fear that I might not be equally open to all kinds of interdisciplinarity. Nevertheless, in general, I'm very open to it. I always say that industrial engineering and management is already an interdisciplinary topic. If a PhD student, for example, says that 'I'm approaching this industrial engineering and management topic, and I am also very interested in sociology'. Then I would say that that's great and has already been done by a lot of people who borrow from sociology to enrich how we think about work organizations, for example. So, then I would also recommend them to look into those connections that have already been made since they don't have to think that they

are the first ones to attempt that, and there are so many other interdisciplinary scholars out there. Usually there already are many ongoing interdisciplinary discussions which can be relevant. So, I don't find it strange at all that interdisciplinarity is existent in our subject field. And I would say that there is support and value from connecting with people who are also doing similar work. I myself often publish in journals that are connected to our field, and I think that it is still good to sometimes publish in venues that have a connection to the domain in which you're supposed to defend your dissertation.

I read an article about food sociologists who were interested in food studies, and many of them choose either to go to a department of food studies, or a department of sociology where they could study food. So I think that when I have a PhD student, or a colleague who is interested in this kind of interdisciplinary aspects, then I usually also speak to them about the possibilities and consequences of different choices. For example, if you see yourself or start positioning yourself as a food expert who knows a lot about food and food systems, then I suppose your future career will be inclined towards that direction and you will be able to work in many different departments interested in that topic. But then if you want a job within industrial engineering and management, then it's also a good idea to be closer to such topics and theories even if you are also interested in food. For research purposes that doesn't matter so much, I think, but for integration into teaching and administration and strategy, it's easier if you know about and are interested in the domain. I think that there is a kind of a scale. I support interdisciplinary work but also think one should be mindful of its consequences since universities might still be organized in departments in the future. But at the same time, there are so many new interdisciplinary centers and initiatives that are emerging, and academics who have many disciplinary belongings can be much more attractive to those spaces.

Q: You just mentioned teaching, which is also an important part of the PhD experiences reflected in this volume. How have your PhD students incorporated teaching in their doctoral time?

Thomas Taro Lennerfors: I think that there exists a story that teaching is unnecessary and that it is hindering your research, taking a lot of time and not being instrumental for your career. And I know that that kind of discourse exists, but I never hear it directly from anyone. I only hear about its existence, and I very much dislike it. And it's absolutely untrue, at least in the subjects where I'm active. I think that this story is unhealthy. I try to tell the PhD students that teaching is important because if you're going to work within industrial engineering and management, it is a very teaching oriented environment.

If you look at different institutions or universities, I would say that it is very different from, for example, materials science or electricity in the sense that the budget and the need for teaching is much higher than in many other subjects.

And that means that I too was told when I was a PhD student that it is good to have an associate professor or lecturer position, and with that very stable position, you can apply for grants and if it is successful then you get more research time. If you don't get a grant then you get no or very little research, basically only the research time that the union has negotiated with the universities. So if that is true, then you cannot see something like 70% of teaching in your position as a necessary evil. So I think there is a need to be more interested in teaching. So, in our in our domain, I would say that teaching is quite fundamental to get a stable position and usually what many engineering programs like from us are the basic courses. For example, courses such as project management, industrial management, or innovation management. Specialized courses are good for our own programs where we have maybe 100 students per year. But the rest of the programs have maybe 1000 students per year, and they might be interested in basic courses. I experience that fewer are interested in teaching on the undergraduate level because it's not seen as interesting enough. They want to explore more advanced topics, but I think that many basic courses are as interesting as the advanced courses.

In any case, it is important to develop your teaching portfolio as a PhD student. Hopefully by the end of your PhD studies, you can eventually take roles that are very close to an examiner even if you cannot formally be one. So what I tried to say to our PhD students is that they should gradually take more responsibility in teaching.

I have also evaluated candidates for teaching positions and if a person who recently got her PhD has had course responsibility, then I know that this person can organize courses. It's not a high risk to assign that person as course responsible. In teaching, we have a direct impact on the students so that they can learn more about a topic and become critically reflexive. Also, teaching has a social aspect that you can get much pleasure from actually. It is so interesting to see how students think even in basic level courses.

But I think as a PhD student it can be difficult to teach sometimes. I remember just the week after I graduated from the PhD, the difference in my own self-confidence was huge. I experienced that I was more respected in the classroom when I had my PhD than when I was a PhD student. And if you do not feel fully respected from students as a PhD student, it can lead to a situation where you need to prove yourself in relation to the students. And then it becomes even worse, when they see that you're trying to overcompensate.

Q: Many of chapters in this book reflect on the process of writing, which is a common experience for all doctoral projects no matter the discipline and institution. What do you advise your students in regards to healthy writing habits and developing their texts?

Thomas Taro Lennerfors: I always say that you should always be writing. You should always be writing and usually it's easier to read something if you're also writing. You can plan as you read, whether what you read can be part of this or that chapter in your monograph, this or that paper or the kappa. And then I'm also intellectually very much in favor of the approach to simply take a book, go offline, sit in a chair and simply read it for absolutely no instrumental purposes whatsoever. That is really nice and I try to do it once in a while. But I think it is just easier if you write constantly. And then you should know, of course, that the text cannot be used in the form that you're first writing it in, but it's one stage of the process. In discussions with my PhD students I say that you think through writing and by trying to write down things you can realize what you think yourself. I still believe in that.

What I mean here is a critique to an attitude in which you believe that you must think things through first and then when you feel ready, you write everything down. Most people fail to do that because ideas, for me at least, come in a muddled form and then you realize when you write them down that perhaps they were not so good. But I think that there's a balance to be had there. I think that sometimes it's good to not be writing all the time as well, and you can take it too far by writing all the time. So for me it's good to have a break in writing in which I just read and see what happens.

It's also easier to edit something that exists than something that does not, so better to have a lot of unfinished text which will become better with time.

Q: As a head of division, what do you see as existent support for PhD students?

Thomas Taro Lennerfors: When I was a PhD student, I think there was no formal requirements for any progression seminars. Similar to other institutions, we have checkpoints in the form of progression seminars. In these seminars the PhD students are required to discuss their projects in a public setting at three intervals: a research proposal, midterm, and final seminar. These come before and in preparation of the final opposition. I think that is helping to evaluate how the work looks like when half the time has passed and be made aware of if something needs to be done or changed. So that is one way of support, and then of course the supervisors always support the PhD students and if there are any conflicts or anything like that, then of course the head of research

education, and study director, helps by discussing with the PhD students and their supervisors. But much is in the hands of the PhD student who have a lot of responsibility.

And then the question is also how much should everyone be involved because sometimes I feel that it can become a bit claustrophobic when there are supervisory meetings all the time. Say that you have biweekly meetings – then maybe not so much has happened during these two weeks and maybe there is kind of an implicit demand that something should have happened. So even if the student should report on progress, that doesn't automatically mean that there is a guaranteed real insight. I remember that I was always complaining that my supervisors back in the day only spoke to me something like every six months or maybe I'm exaggerating. But then on the other hand, that gave me a lot of freedom to be able to develop some things independently. And of course, there's a lot of risk in that as well in that maybe I completely go off a tangent that is not beneficial for my study. But maybe that risk is worth taking actually?

Q: As a last question we kept perhaps the most important one. We often discuss representation and equal opportunities in academia, especially among PhD students and early career researchers. You are close to both supervising these groups, as well as in their recruiting. Do you think we can improve this?

Thomas Taro Lennerfors: It is difficult. At least at our division we do not have an equal representation of women and men, for example. Since we have a majority of men and since we have no women professors at the moment. And this is an issue at all levels because there should be women who are professors who are in positions of power. We do not have that, and this is an issue that we are constantly working with. Since some positions are restricted to those who are professors, the first step is then to increase the number of women professors. To have women professors and women in management, which we do have, is important because then the PhD students can see that this is possible and that women can reach these positions. And we also have good examples of current and recently graduated PhD students who are women and whom we have, for example, interviewed and highlighted on our home page, representing the cohort of current PhD students. When we talked about future careers with PhD students and invite speakers to our seminars, we invite women, so that we do not show only a lot of men who are doing interesting work.

Still, our division has a majority of men. When we recruit PhD students the responsibility for this lies with supervisors together with those in managerial positions including me. As a head of division, I check that the ad is written in

the right way and that the requirements are correct, so that we do not recruit someone who has not fulfilled the requirements for the position. But, of course, if the prospective PhD students know that they are coming into an organization where there are more men, including in positions of power, then of course it might not be an attractive workplace for female applicants. And for some, the subject of industrial engineering and management might feel male-dominated. For me personally, I don't see it as a 'male subject' or anything like that, but maybe this is a feeling in society to think of it with masculine connotations, and this could also lead to fewer women applicants.

And then again, I have also seen examples of situations where the top candidates for a PhD position include both men and women, but in the end the decision is to hire a man. I think on the whole we need to think about this very intentionally because we all have a responsibility in common and everyone in this recruitment process needs to think about this more.

Q: Do you have any final reflections which you would like to share?

Thomas Taro Lennerfors: Yes. I have a probably unhealthy point of view, but I still think that there is a kind of privilege related to our work. It is probably not true if you look at it objectively, because maybe we are under more pressure than other professions. So maybe this is my own protection mechanism, but I think that it is quite unbelievable that we can be doing this as a job – to be able to learn new things and teach students, and be able to do research. If we look at an engineer who goes into a PhD education and one who works at a company, academia cannot compete from a financial perspective. But what academia can compete with is to provide a space where we can nurture thinking, personal development, and contribute to society. Once again, this is connected to what motivates me for doing this kind of work; I think it can offer a lot of value for someone who is interested in these aspects. And for me, I think that the academic sector is still a very good one to be a part of and I hope that we can continue to do good together.

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The doctoral period is often described as a linear path, omitting the human dimensions of becoming a scholar. In this volume, the imaginary of the PhD education in Sweden is expanded through the metaphor of the PhD wanderer—an early-career academic venturing into unknown terrains, sometimes becoming lost, at other times finding exciting directions, committing to new routes, and encountering new travelers along the way.

In this collection of essays, academics who have defended their doctoral dissertations and earned their PhDs at Swedish universities reflect on their past experiences. Through these essays, as well as interviews with two senior academics, the contributors show that there is no single path to a PhD, as each process is filled with exploration, vulnerability, adaptability, and human connection. This collection invites prospective, current, and former PhD students—and those who guide them—to appreciate the stories woven into the very first steps of an academic life.

