

THE COMPLEXITIES OF THE DOCTORAL CANDIDATE-SUPERVISOR RELATIONSHIP: VOICES OF CANDIDATES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND

The aim of this study is to examine the complexities of the doctoral candidate–supervisor relationship within the doctoral programme at the University of Iceland through the voices of the doctoral candidates. Numerous studies suggest that doctoral candidates endure a stressful working environment and that one of the most important factors influencing this is the relationship with the supervisor. In this study we have chosen to focus on what doctoral candidates at the University of Iceland value most in communication with their supervisor and where they feel improvements can be made. Findings show that what doctoral candidates value the most is an available, encouraging and supportive supervisor who gives their candidates a sense of autonomy while still providing quality feedback on their work. Candidates who experience inactive, disorganised, dismissive and/or overly controlling supervisors indicate that these factors contribute to their dissatisfaction, anxiety and stress. These patterns are similar across all the University’s five schools. Based on these findings we suggest that doctoral candidates be allocated an ombudsman and that supervisors receive increased support and training.

Keywords: doctoral studies, supervisors, qualitative methods, working conditions in academia

INTRODUCTION

There are currently approximately 700 doctoral candidates actively pursuing their degrees at the University of Iceland. The doctoral programmes have been growing rapidly in size over the past decade; in 2009 there were 346 candidates pursuing a degree. This growth is, among other things, due to the University proclaiming it as one of its goals to graduate 70 candidates per year in their strategy for 2016–2021 (Háskóli Íslands, 2016; Miðstöð framhaldsnáms, 2015). In a programme that has been expanding so rapidly there are bound to be some growing pains. Some have already been identified and measured by the University itself in reports on candidate satisfaction¹, others emphasised by

FEDON (The University of Iceland's Association of Doctoral Candidates and Post-doctoral Researchers), for example the lack of funding for doctoral candidates. Besides, some problems have been addressed by external evaluators (Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education, 2021; Rannís, 2015). The results show that even though the majority of candidates are satisfied with their studies (67%) a large group remain indifferent or dissatisfied (33%)ⁱⁱ. The reason why such a large proportion is unhappy with their studies is somewhat unclear as research on the subject in the context of Iceland is scarce.

International studies on the experiences of doctoral candidates identify workload in the academic culture, financial worries and mental stress as common challenges of doctoral life (Bazrafkan et al., 2016; Levecque et al., 2017; Woolston, 2017) and 38.8% of PhD students report severe symptoms of burnout (Mattijssen et al., 2020). The journey of a doctoral candidate is deeply impacted by their relationship with their supervisor, with whom they share a delicate working relationship. Therefore, it is not surprising that this relationship has been thoroughly studied in international research on doctoral studies. These studies show, among other things, that candidates' mental well-being as well as their progress in the programme is highly dependent on the quality of the supervisor relationship (Cree, 2012; Löfström & Pyhältö, 2014, 2020; Sverdlík et al., 2018).

As board members of two associations of doctoral candidates at the University of Iceland the authors of this article have frequently encountered issues regarding the relationship between a doctoral candidate and supervisor, which sparked our interest in further analysing the matter. Due to lack of information on the subject in the context of Iceland, the board of FEDON decided to conduct a qualitative survey addressing how doctoral candidates at the University of Iceland experience their relationship with their supervisor. The aim of the project was to gather and analyse data on the voices of doctoral candidates regarding their relationship with their supervisors. We believe that the results of our study can be used to identify strengths and weaknesses in this regard that can serve as a stepping-stone towards improved practices across the University. Our intention is to answer the following research question: What do doctoral candidates at the University of Iceland value most in the relationship with their supervisor and where do they feel improvements can be made?

PREVIOUS STUDIES

In the context of Iceland, doctoral studies have not attracted much academic attention. A few reports on the doctoral studies programme at the University of Iceland can be found, focusing largely on the grant environment of doctoral studies as well as the overall satisfaction of candidates with the doctoral programmes. Additionally, an article on the role of supervisors regarding the doctoral students' journey was published in 2018, written by a member of UI academic staff, Atli Harðarson. The author highlights that the role of supervisor is unclear and every doctoral candidate's journey is unique making it difficult to frame the work of supervisor in general terms. He concludes that supervisors should take responsibility and organise regular meetings with their students, by which they provide both academic and personal support. They should focus on conversation, reading up

in relevant literature for meaningful feedback and keep in mind to guide their students' writing, rather than taking over the process (Harðarson, 2018).

Reports show that 25% of doctoral candidates at the UI have never received funding during their course of studies, but in those cases where a grant is received the average grant duration is generally 32.6 months (Ragnheiðardóttir et al., 2019) while in 2019 the average period of doctoral studies was 6.1 years (Miðstöð framhaldsnáms, 2019) even though according to standards the studies are expected to take 3–4 years depending on the programme (UI homepage: 180–240 ECTS (Háskóli Íslands, 2020)). The extended time of studies is a direct consequence of insufficient funding, but time to degree completion is an important marker of quality and efficiency in graduate education at doctoral level (Rannís, 2015).

In the UI's biennial report for 2020, 67% of doctoral candidates claimed they were somewhat or very satisfied with the programme, numbers dropping from 72% in 2018. When asked about satisfaction with a supervisor 83% agreed they were happy but when asked about general support only 64% of the candidates agreed they were receiving the overall support needed for their studiesⁱⁱⁱ. Clearly, doctoral candidates in Iceland suffer from lack of funding which in itself is stressful, applying for more funds and working at other jobs to provide for themselves^{iv} (Ragnheiðardóttir et al., 2019; Rannís, 2015). The Institution-Wide Review of the University of Iceland (Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education, 2021) states that there is a lack of common standards, processes and procedures of PhD studies and that the quality of supervision across the University varies considerably. Furthermore, if 67% of candidates are satisfied with their programme this means that 33% are indifferent or not happy. The same applies to supervisors, with 17% of candidates being indifferent or unhappy with their situation, a number simply too high to be ignored^v.

Doctoral candidates' satisfaction and progress have been a topic in several quantitative and qualitative international studies conducted in the past 20 years. Many of them focus on mental health. Results show that the mental health of doctoral candidates is worse than that of other highly educated groups (Levecque et al., 2017). Over one third (36%) of doctoral candidates globally have reached out for support due to mental health issues because of their studies (Woolston, 2017) while 47% have an increased risk of developing a psychiatric disorder (Mattijssen et al., 2020). These results show that doctoral students' mental health is at risk and highly impacted by their study environment. The reasons for this are multiple: workload, academic culture, social connections, finances and the relationship with their supervisor (Adkins, 2009; Löfström & Pyhältö, 2014, 2020; Mackie & Bates, 2019; Sverdlík et al., 2018). International doctoral candidates additionally struggle with language and a different academic and societal culture (Son & Park, 2015).

Their relationship with the supervisor has a high impact on doctoral candidates, especially on their mental health (Cardilini et al., 2021). There is a correlation between overall satisfaction with the doctoral studies and relationship with the supervisor, and this relationship also impacts the likelihood of completing the degree and considerations of quitting (Löfström & Pyhältö, 2014; van Rooij et al., 2019). This means that if the doctoral candidate–supervisor relationship is lacking in some way, the likelihood of the doctoral

candidate dropping out is higher. One major issue in this relationship is the availability of the supervisor (Heath, 2010; van Rooij et al., 2019). High quality support for the doctoral candidate entails regular meetings and also supervisors who are present at the office so that spontaneous and informal communication is accommodated for. In addition, personal support and support for the student to be an independent researcher is important (Heath, 2010; Hemer, 2012; Skakni, 2018; van Rooij et al., 2019). Emphasising these results, studies show that unavailability and non-responsiveness of the supervisor are found to have a negative impact on the doctoral candidate's satisfaction, well-being and progress (Bazrafkan et al., 2016; Khozaei et al., 2015; Mattijssen et al., 2020). Similarly, poor feedback and the supervisor's lack of expertise negatively affect the doctoral candidate (Bazrafkan et al., 2016; Khozaei et al., 2015). Thus, it is important for the supervisor to provide informed feedback in a respectful and efficient way (Heath, 2010; Woolderink et al., 2015).

Good communication is crucial in the doctoral candidate-supervisor relationship, but studies show that difficulties in communication and disagreement regularly occur. Bullying, harassment and a lack of trust towards the doctoral candidate negatively impact doctoral candidates' mental health. However, if the supervisor prioritises their work with the doctoral candidate, shows appreciation, respect and fairness this has a positive effect on the doctoral candidate's well-being and progress (Cardilini et al., 2021; Gunnarsson et al., 2013; Heath, 2010; Löfström & Pyhältö, 2020; Yarwood-Ross & Haigh, 2014). All of the above shows that there is a need for safe procedures for both supervisor and the candidate to address problems that rise with their relationship. In this regard it is important to note the power imbalance, as doctoral candidates feel dependent on their supervisor's endorsement (Mackie & Bates, 2019). Woolston (2017) notes that over half of doctoral students do not reach out for help as they fear consequences for their career. This is also something for the University to consider, for – as the Institution-Wide Review of the University states – there is an “inherent power imbalance between the supervisor and supervisee” (Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education, 2021, p. 24). Any amendments and improvements to doctoral working conditions need to take these power relations into consideration.

Supervisor workload is very high and there is a general lack of institutional support and recognition of supervision duties (Lindén et al., 2013; Orellana et al., 2016; Yarwood-Ross & Haigh, 2014). Studies have found that supervisor training is often inadequate and supervisors then “rely on un-reflected skill transfer traditions” (Lindén et al., 2013, p. 642) while supervision in general is seen as “an innate ability” (Skakni, 2018, p. 938). Furthermore, Lindén et al. (2013) found that oftentimes supervisors' perception of the relationship differs significantly from that of the doctoral candidate. All these factors and issues show that the doctoral candidate-supervisor relationship should be considered as a matter that needs institutional consideration in order to improve the situation and well-being of doctoral students. This study is our contribution to the matter in Iceland.

METHOD

This qualitative survey was conducted via the internet and sent out to the email list of FEDON. All enrolled doctoral candidates at the University of Iceland are on this list, a total number of 683 candidates according to the student registration office. Overall, 148 candidates, from all five schools, took part in the survey which gives us a response rate of 21%. A link to the online survey was sent for the first time on September 22nd 2020 and then reiterated twice via email; on October 1st 2020 and January 7th 2021. A link to the survey was also included in the FEDON newsletter distributed in December 2020.

Table 1. Number of participants by schools

| School ^{vi} | Number of participants | Percentage of participants | Response rate within school ^{vii} |
|----------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|--|
| Education | 23 | 15% | 52% |
| Engineering and Natural Sciences | 31 | 21% | 20% |
| Health Sciences | 26 | 17% | 20% |
| Humanities | 30 | 20% | 23% |
| Social Sciences | 29 | 19% | 27% |
| No information | 9 | 6% | – |
| Total | 148 | 100% | 21% |

Our choice of method stems from the research question. The purpose of this study is not to measure how satisfied or dissatisfied candidates are with their supervisors. The qualitative nature of the data does not allow us to judge how widespread satisfaction/dissatisfaction of PhD candidates is – qualitative studies evolve around meaning rather than numbers (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Therefore, we aim to identify which factors candidates value in the working relationship with their supervisor and what they feel could be improved. We therefore chose a qualitative method where respondents could write responses in their own words. This study thus compliments the quantitative measurements of satisfaction among doctoral candidates carried out by the University of Iceland. The findings give us clues as to what lies behind satisfaction and dissatisfaction among this group of candidates. Qualitative surveys are an effective way of gathering qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). One of the limitations of this type of data gathering, however, is that the researcher has little control over the quality, details and length of answers given and has no way of probing as one would be able to do, for example in interviews or focus groups. In the present article this shortcoming is overcome by the quantity and the quality of the answers. The qualitative survey has given us 148 answers and thus a far higher number of voices have been heard than would be viable with interviews or focus groups. This allows us as researchers to access a “wide-angle” picture of the topic in question (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Qualitative surveys are ideal for collecting sensitive data because they offer anonymity and privacy to the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013), more so than

focus groups and interviews. Therefore, we see this method as particularly suitable for collecting data on the supervisor – student relationship that can be a sensitive topic. The participants were asked to answer three questions:

1. What does your supervisor do that you feel he/she/they should continue doing?
2. What does your supervisor do that you feel he/she/they should stop doing?
3. Is there something your supervisor does not do that you feel he/she/they should be doing?

Those questions were chosen to gather information on supervision practices that the candidates value and feel are important to maintain as well as information on inactivity or unhelpful activities of supervisors. Due to the sensitive nature of the questions, we felt it was important not to ask for detailed background information about the candidates as this could affect their willingness to participate. We therefore only asked about the school at which they studied. The findings are similar across all five schools, and to further protect the participants' anonymity, we have not included information about the school after the quotations in the section on findings. Both positive and the negative comments come from all of the university's five schools. Participants could answer in Icelandic or English. For this article the Icelandic responses have been translated into English and the gendered pronouns referring to the supervisors have been replaced with the gender-neutral pronoun singular "they". The total word count of the data material is 9,022 words, but the answers vary greatly in length, from one word to 533 words in answer to a single question. We have conducted a thematic analysis of the data material. This was done in three stages, mostly following Braun and Clarke (2013). Firstly, we familiarised ourselves with the data by thoroughly reading and rereading it, noting any patterns that we came across. Secondly, the data was coded using complete coding (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Thirdly, the codes were categorised into the four themes that the findings of this article present. We conducted the thematic categorisation in such a way that it centres on the participants' experience as this method is most suitable for the nature of the research question and the survey data. Although we have thematically categorised the answers, we have allowed the data to speak for itself without, for example, carrying out a discourse analysis which would present more of a critical approach to the data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The coding was our first task after the initial data collection. Therefore, the thematic analysis was not informed by the literature review. It was only after we had completed the literature review that we realised how well our findings were supported by international studies on the matter.

We have focused on highlighting the respondents' own words and the framework of the participants' experiences is prioritised as is appropriate in a qualitative research like this one (Braun & Clarke, 2013). We want to emphasise that this is a research project on the lived experiences of PhD candidates (experiential approach (Braun & Clarke, 2013)). We believe that these lived experiences provide us with important and useful information. This study aims to thematically set forth their experiences as described in their own words and then to draw conclusions based on these experiences as well as international studies on the matter.

FINDINGS

We will now turn to the findings of this study. Through responses to the three qualitative questions, we have illustrated which qualities doctoral candidates at the University of Iceland value most in their supervisors and similarly where they feel improvements can be made. The four categories that we have identified as most important are as follows:

1. Availability of supervisor
2. Encouragement and support from supervisor
 - a. Autonomy vs. control
3. Professional organisation and practical advice
4. Quality feedback on the work of the candidate

As this is a qualitative study, the order of the themes does not indicate any order of prevalence or priority. We will now proceed to analyse each category and dive into the data from both candidates who are satisfied and those who are not.

Availability of Supervisor

One of the most mentioned factors of satisfaction on behalf of candidates was the availability of their supervisors. This availability meant that candidates could request a meeting and that these requests were promptly met with positivity; that is, when the candidates need their supervisor for any reason, the supervisor is available and approachable.

They are always willing to meet me when I ask for it but leave me to do my work in between which works well for me.

One of my supervisors is always there for me, and their doors are always open for us, doctoral candidates. We often pop by for a short chat, for getting support or to discuss some research ideas. These are often the best discussions I have regarding the research.

[My supervisor should continue to] be approachable and there for me.

[My supervisor should continue to] keep good track of the status and get regularly in contact, meet often. They are very approachable.

Availability and approachability sometimes, although not always, involves regular, scheduled meetings. Overall, we can see that availability according to the needs of the candidate is most important, and regular formal and informal meetings can in some cases help make this happen. This is in accordance with international studies that have found that the availability of the supervisor is one of the major factors contributing to candidates' satisfaction (Heath, 2010; van Rooij et al., 2019)

[My supervisor should continue] meeting weekly.

Has regular meetings with me to check on me.

We have regular meetings but it's not demanding.

For many it was important that the supervisor took the initiative to schedule a meeting and check in on the candidate. Thus, the candidate felt valued and seen by the supervisor.

My supervisor regularly checks in on me and asks how things are going.

They often initiate meetings, and they organise those meetings well.

In accordance with availability being one of the most important factors contributing to the satisfaction of candidates this was also one of the densest themes regarding candidate's dissatisfaction; that is, lack of availability and communication on behalf of supervisors is one of the areas where we have identified possibilities for improvement.

My supervisor does nothing, really.

I get no responses from them for long periods.

I only meet with my supervisor two or three times over the year, and they rarely reply to my emails. The support I get is really bad

When I send them a draft of a paper, they say they are reading it but then many months pass. When I first sent a draft, 6–7 months passed before they read it.

It would be great if they would communicate with me on a regular basis but not be silent and distant for long periods of time (do not reply to emails for weeks).

Overall, the candidates wished for their supervisors to be more available and approachable. This sometimes meant that they would like regular meetings and/or that they wished the supervisor would more often initiate the meetings.

Would like for my supervisor to take more initiative for communication and meetings.

The lack of communication and contact between supervisors and candidates seems to be emotionally laden for some of the candidates, prompting feelings of isolation and insecurity.

Does not foster positive communication or a safe relationship where matters can be discussed freely. [...] I feel disregarded.

I feel very alone in my project and would like my supervisor to respond.

We see in this section that simply being available to the candidate, responding to emails and initiating contact can contribute greatly to the candidate's satisfaction with the supervisor–candidate relationship. Similarly, lack of communication can result in a strained relationship, isolation and insecurity. Other studies have also found that such non-responsiveness on behalf of the supervisor is one of the major causes of anxiety and stress among doctoral candidates (Bazrafkan et al., 2016; Khozaei et al., 2015).

Encouragement and support from supervisor

We will now turn to the theme *encouragement and support* which addresses the content of these communications rather than their ease of frequency like the previous theme. This was another dense theme, meaning that it occurred frequently throughout the data. Encouragement and support from the supervisor were paramount to candidates' satisfaction and created feelings of security and satisfaction.

[My supervisor] is friendly and supportive. I can sense that they want the best for me, and they are supportive.

My supervisor is very supportive and provides insightful and motivating feedback on my work.

My supervisor is encouraging and very good at supervising without belittling me.

My supervisor supports me, assists and supervises very well. I can always count on them.

My supervisor is kind, understanding and positive.

My supervisor is supportive and encourages me when I feel that things are going slowly or not too well. My supervisor always points out that even if things are going in circles or developing slowly that this is normal on a PhD journey - which I like. This makes me less self-critical.

Some of the respondents mention specifically how much they appreciate the supervisors' support, not only in their studies but also regarding their personal well-being and mental health. Many candidates felt this was good and wanted their supervisors to continue this personal interest and support.

They encourage me when I am anxious and praise me for what I write.

They are attentive to possible difficulties in my studies relating to stress, my personal situation and my general well-being.

My supervisor is interested, understanding and supportive regarding my personal well-being.

Others are very appreciative of more practical support in connection with the study environment, project management and funding applications.

[My supervisor should continue to create] regular opportunities to help organise and go over the work progress, support and authentic friendship, creating space for consultation.

It was very helpful, especially in the beginning, when my supervisor helped me to see the bigger picture and encouraged me to get organised. We regularly sit down to decide the next steps.

Every term I make a plan and we go over it together and make sure we follow it.

When this general encouragement and support is lacking, sometimes to the point of mistrust between the candidate and the supervisor, it contributes greatly to the dissatisfaction of candidates. This lack of encouragement and support had several manifestations. The most common ones in our data are (not in order of prevalence):

1. General lack of encouragement and interest.
2. Lack of academic guidance
3. Supervisor adds to the marginalisation of the candidate.
4. Supervisor has a difficult communication style.

We will now take a closer look at each of these four categories.

The general lack of encouragement and interest in the topic did not sit well with the respondents.

They should support me more when I say I'm struggling with the whole doctoral project (e.g., mentally).

[I wish my supervisor would] care about me as a person.

My supervisor should be more active, take part in the project, supervise me or at least know what I am studying.

Some participants specifically mentioned that they would like their supervisor to provide more academic guidance, for example in facilitating academic networking and getting to know the field.

[I wish my supervisor would] provide some insight into the department, the protocol, the norms. Especially important for newcomers or people who are unaccustomed to academic life.

[I wish my supervisor would] talk to me about career opportunities and what I need to be a good academic. I wish they would help me make social connection in the academia for example through conferences (they have organised a conference without letting me know about it).

In some cases, the supervisor's behaviour added to the already marginal position of the doctoral candidate. That is to say, the supervisors deliberately misused their power and added directly to the power-imbalance in the relationship. We find this particularly alarming because of the candidates' dependency on the supervisors' respect and professionalism. When this is lacking the candidate has few possibilities of challenging the supervisor's behaviour as they are often dependent on the goodwill of supervisors when it comes to future career prospects and a good reputation within the academic community.

[I wish my supervisor would stop] belittling my ideas.

[I wish my supervisor would] treat me like a serious professional with years of research experience but not like an ignorant idiot.

[I wish my supervisor would] show proper respect to a doctoral candidate [and stop] trying to intimidate or humiliate his candidate privately.

They don't listen when I tell them I've already studied or learned something. They don't understand what consultation means.

When it comes to maintaining a positive relationship with the supervisor, the stakes are very high for the candidate and reports have found that, because of this, doctoral candidates are hesitant to reach out to the institution for help when they feel the communications are problematic (Woolston, 2017).

In two cases this had to do with the non-native status of the candidates and them not receiving support from their supervisors regarding their status.

[I wish my supervisor would] understand that as an immigrant, language is an issue and thus support is necessary to learn Icelandic.

I told them I was struggling with living in a new country, and they recommended that I quit.

Being an international doctoral candidate can be straining and creates difficulties that supervisors need to be aware of (Cree, 2012). Students who are less integrated in the academic community, as students new to Iceland are, also rely more on the candidate-supervisor relationship which makes quality supervision even more important (Löfström & Pyhältö, 2014). It is worrying that our data suggests instances within the University of Iceland where supervisors directly add to the marginalisation of international doctoral candidates and in one case suggest that they drop out of their studies.

The fourth manifestation of lack of encouragement and support is the supervisor's difficult communication style. This was sometimes related to an emotional imbalance of the supervisor that directly affected their communication with the candidate. As we see in the following quotes, these communication difficulties cause some candidates significant discomfort.

They should stop oversharing with me. They discuss very personal matters with me, matters that I would hesitate to discuss with my best friends. I have tried to set boundaries and been somewhat successful. They should deal with their emotional problems with a professional but not tell me about them. This causes me stress and anxiety and I have not felt safe to discuss this with anyone at the University of Iceland.

They could be making more effort to ensure their communication style is more open and not react in frustration to issues that arise. Email exchanges have created some distrust because they are too reactionary.

[I wish my supervisor] would be more reflexive about how they are acting and that if they have anxieties, they should try to solve them within themselves and not write aggressive emails to me.

Their anxiety and insecurity are slowing down my process.

[I wish my supervisor would] enhance their ability of dealing with criticism.

All in all, we see that many candidates are very happy with their supervisor being encouraging and supportive of them. When the supervisor is encouraging and supportive this diminishes insecurities, anxieties and creates necessary trust in the candidate-supervisor relationship. This also makes the studies more effective and increases the likelihood of doctoral candidates successfully completing their thesis (Heath, 2010). It is pleasant to see that many candidates enjoy a trusting, supportive and caring relation with their supervisors. On the other hand, many candidates also wish that their supervisors would be more supportive and encouraging. There are examples of supervisors showing little interest in the candidate's work or well-being or even being explicitly hostile and degrading towards the candidate. Similarly, when the supervisors bring difficulties in their personal and emotional life into the candidate-supervisor relationship the candidates suffer. This can generate anxiety and distrust and because of the inherent power-imbalance in the

relationship there seem to be few options for the candidates to resolve the matters or set boundaries.

Autonomy vs. control

One of the subfactors under the theme encouragement and support that we specifically want to point out was the satisfaction candidates felt when their supervisors trusted them to develop their own ideas regarding the research.

They give me freedom to make decisions about the research project.

They are supportive, yet not micro-managing my work.

They give me the space I need to be an independent researcher.

My supervisor is open to me trying out different methods.

They trust me on my project and give me a great deal of freedom but offer me supervision when I need it.

Similarly, too firm a control and micromanagement were factors that candidates often mentioned as something they would like their supervisor to stop. A common theme was pressure on behalf of the supervisor that the candidate should copy the research interests and/or methods of the supervisor.

My supervisor sometimes belittles my ideas [...] and gets frustrated if I have some ideas or thoughts [about the project]. Once they hit the fist on the table when I expressed my ideas.

I wish they were more open to my ideas and thoughts. They are always quick to move the discussion to theories and studies that they already know but are not willing to discuss new theories/studies. I feel this is often debilitating and would like for them to assist me in creating something new instead of constantly trying to get me to use the same approach that they have used in their own studies.

My supervisor sometimes constrains my ideas which increases my insecurity. They assume that I will be their successor.

[I wish my supervisor would stop] deliberately ignoring what I applied for and won a Rannís grant. Pressuring me to research what they are interested in instead.

I wish they would read about theories and methods I am working with, but they do not have knowledge on. They want me to do everything like they have always done and are not willing to get to know new studies and approaches that I have been applying. [They say] "Isn't it just better to do it like I have done it?"

If I decide not to follow some suggestions from my supervisor, because I do not agree with them, then they are not happy. I feel like the supervisor always wants to have the last say and they seem to forget that they are supposed to supervise me but not turn the research into their own work.

We see from the above quotations that the respondents gave lengthy explanations for the debilitating ramification of an overly controlling supervisor. This working environment increases or creates insecurity with the candidate, debilitates the candidate from learning, slows down the process and can even be threatening. Gunnarsson et al. (2013) have identified that such disagreements between doctoral candidates and supervisors are most likely to occur towards the end of the study-time where the candidate is maturing and even excelling supervisors in their knowledge of the topic. Being aware of this pattern and addressing it appropriately is essential for the candidate's progress and the quality of the studies.

Professional organisation

This theme refers to the organisation of the work; that is, whether the supervisor's work is carried out in an organised and clear manner so that the candidate can rely on it being done timely and thoroughly. While this is one of the most prevalent themes, it is also the only theme that does not show up with both satisfied and dissatisfied candidates. Rather, overwhelmingly if the work is *not* done in an organised and clear manner the candidates wish it were but at the same time few candidates who are satisfied mentioned organisational factors as contributing to their satisfaction. Therefore, this section will only dive into the words of candidates who wished that their supervisor was less overworked, had better oversight and did their work in a timelier manner.

They should stop being last minute with everything and promise to do things and then not do them. I can trust that if they say they are going to do something they will do it late, poorly or not at all.

[I wish my supervisor would stop] blaming me for their lack of structure and project management skills.

[I wish my supervisor would stop] promising to look at things (reports, manuscript drafts, applications, etc.) "soon" when it's clear they don't have time for that at all, and then forget about it altogether.

My supervisor has way too many candidates and post-docs and lacks oversight over what we are doing.

Basically, I would appreciate a supervisor who gets me, that is organised and well informed in the field I'm writing about and makes things and issues more manageable instead of just ignoring them, or even me, and let me find out everything myself, thanks!

Some of the respondents specifically mentioned that the supervisors lacked focus in the research resulting in unclear guidance and ever-changing expectations which, in turn, created frustrations with the candidate. Similar patterns of unclear communications have been documented in previous studies (Woolderink et al., 2015). A lot of precious time is also wasted in these kinds of circumstances.

If I just meet one of my supervisors and we decide on how to go about things, the two supervisors talk later about this meeting which then results in an email to me that usually changes everything and pretend like I have no idea.

[I would like for my supervisor to] maybe stop switching from an idea to idea every few days.

I wish my supervisor was able to select between relevant and irrelevant questions; stop demanding that a student should find answers to all the questions about the world during doctoral studies.

Too much time is spent on unfocused research.

Many candidates pointed out that this lack of organisation and structure to the work of the supervisors could be directly affected by other duties such as teaching. This does not come as a surprise as it has been well documented that the workload of tenured academics is very high and creates stress, dilemmas and mental health problems, and disproportionately so with women and mothers (Jacobs & Winslow, 2016; Mackie & Bates, 2019; Opstrup & Pihl-Thingvad, 2016; Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013). This high workload has been found to directly contribute to lack of communication around doctoral supervision (Yarwood-Ross & Haigh, 2014). However, studies have also revealed that doctoral candidates themselves show signs of too high a workload and burnout and that women are more likely than men to show signs of burnout during doctoral studies (Mattijssen et al., 2020). This makes the strain on the candidate-supervisor relationship even greater.

Some of their teaching and administrative duties should be lifted.

Between teaching, manuscripts, reviewing, admin, conferences, and grant applications, I don't even know where supervision of students would ever fit in. This is a systemic problem [...] the entire system is geared towards implosion. [...] I don't think that this is a problem that can be fixed on person-by-person basis. It will just spiral out of control over the years as staff is drowning.

Quality feedback

The last theme we will explore in this article is by no means the least important one. One might even argue that giving quality feedback on the work of the candidate is paramount to successful supervision. And thus it does not come as a surprise that when the candidates felt that their supervisors provided insightful, thorough and constructive comments on their work they expressed their satisfaction with this. This is similar to what previous studies have found (Heath, 2010; Woolderink et al., 2015).

[My supervisor should continue to] challenge my thinking and work by asking critical questions.

They give constructive criticism and encourage me when I am about to give up.

[My supervisor should continue] discussions about recent advances in topics of interest, discussions of published papers, their structures, uncertainties of applied scientific studies and methods.

They give great advice on what I can do better and are very experienced within the academia. They do not hesitate to change and improve my writings. I also love how good they are at praising what I do well.

What candidates valued was detailed, insightful and challenging engagement on behalf of their supervisor. We also see that constructive criticism, along with encouragement and compliments when appropriate, go a long way in establishing a healthy working relationship between the candidate and the supervisor. On the other hand, candidates who lacked this kind of interaction expressed wishes that they would get more quality feedback from their supervisor. Here again, international studies cite lack of quality feedback as one of the major stress and anxiety factors for doctoral candidates (Bazrafkan et al., 2016).

My supervisor hardly reads my work and mainly just suggests that I should cite them more often.

[I wish my supervisor would stop] not reading drafts I hand in to them. Although they are busy at least they should give me some feedback.

[I wish my supervisor would stop] taking approximately 2 months to read a draft of a paper and give very light feedback when reading is done.

[I wish my supervisor would stop] not giving feedback and not helping me.

They don't encourage creative and critical thinking which is debilitating for my learning process.

We can see that some supervisors offer no or limited feedback to their candidate's work. Those candidates long for more engagement on behalf of their supervisors in the form of detailed reading of the candidate's work and constructive criticism. Some candidates received detailed feedback from their supervisor but expressed the opinion that this was done in a non-encouraging and destructive way.

When they give me feedback it is often very harsh. They do not know how to do it constructively. They only point out the faults in my writings but never the strengths. After I read the feedback, I often feel shattered, even if the comments are helpful. This has meant that I am less eager to seek feedback from them and after receiving feedback I feel really bad, like I do nothing correctly. They need to learn how to put forth criticism in a constructive way but not merely destructively.

[I wish my supervisor would stop] tearing apart developed research in an inappropriate way.

In some cases, candidates experience lack of feedback as stemming from the supervisor's lack of knowledge on the subject or methods that the candidate is applying. This lack of knowledge results in no, inappropriate or minimal comments on the candidate's work.

[I wish my supervisor would] get to know methodology better so they can advise me on it.

They sometimes think they know everything, but they are for example not very good in [particular method] and should instruct me to get help elsewhere.

The supervisor does not give feedback on my work in spite of promises to do so. They have no knowledge of the methods I am using which is debilitating for my process. They should get to know those methods.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study provide important insights into the nature of both dissatisfaction and satisfaction among doctoral candidates with their relationship to supervisors. The most important factors contributing to candidates' satisfaction were an available, encouraging and supportive supervisor that gave candidates a sense of autonomy while still providing quality feedback on their work. We see that candidates who experience inactive, disorganised, dismissive and/or overly controlling supervisors convey that these factors contribute to their dissatisfaction, anxiety and stress. We want to emphasise once more that these patterns are similar across all of the University's five schools and also that they are very similar to international literature on the matter. Furthermore, these findings are interesting when compared to the only other Icelandic research on doctoral studies; the factors valued the most by participants are the same as recommended as best practice for supervisors. Additionally, the qualities mentioned by students whose experience is not as good are when structure or professionalism in supervision is lacking (Harðarson, 2018). Finally, based on the percentage of candidates who are not satisfied with their supervisor (17%) this means that we can estimate that around 110 doctoral candidates are currently experiencing some of the unsatisfactory conditions described in this report. As the relationship between supervisor and doctoral candidate is crucial for a successful completion of a doctoral thesis (Adkins, 2009) this is worrying.

It is important to understand the level of frustration and marginalisation of candidates who experience difficulties in their relationship with their supervisors. Candidates in such situations currently have no formal way of addressing the matter and obtaining assistance from the University in dealing with disagreement and flawed communications. The power imbalance between the candidate and the supervisor is an important factor to consider. The candidate's future in the doctoral programme is dependent upon the supervisor's satisfaction and on fruitful cooperation between the two. Should something go amiss the candidates can face difficulties in continuing their studies and the loss of their data as well as years of work. In addition, doctoral candidates face uncertain career prospects and "supervisory endorsement may be perceived as necessary for further employment" (Mackie & Bates, 2019, p. 576). This might be even more pertinent within such a small academic community as Iceland. It is, therefore, of paramount importance that the candidate and the supervisor gain access to established procedures to both deal with disagreement and difficulties in the candidate-supervisor relationship but also that there be accepted measures that diminish the likelihood of such difficulties from arising in the first place.

FEDON, the association of PhD students at the University of Iceland, has advocated for an ombudsman for doctoral candidates who could assist with issues in the candidate-supervisor relationship (FEDON, 2018, 2020, 2021). In addition, the Quality Board for

Icelandic Higher Education, in their review of the University of Iceland, highly recommends that the University establishes an ombudsman system “to allow students to file grievances, complaints and concerns to a neutral person” (Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education, 2021, p. 53). The findings from this article, support this recommendation. The findings, as well as the international literature cited in the literature review of this article show that doctoral candidates face a marginalised position within academia. This also applies to the University of Iceland as is identified by the Quality Board (Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education, 2021, p. 24). On this basis, we find it essential that the university establish a role of an ombudsman for PhD students. This holds true even if we believe that most supervisors are committed to supervising doctoral candidates with integrity and quality, because in circumstances when this is not the case the consequences for the doctoral candidate can be very serious and may even lead to a breach of academic ethical guidelines (Löfström & Pyhältö, 2014).

The Institution-Wide Review of the University of Iceland published in 2021 states that there is great variation in the quality of supervision across the University (Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education, 2021, p. 24). Support for supervisors is vital as they navigate university processes and the stresses of academic life (Löfström & Pyhältö, 2014; McCallin & Nayar, 2012). The findings of this study suggest that mandatory training courses for supervisors are needed where communication styles as well as expectations towards supervision are discussed. This is also in line with the recommendations by the Quality Board of Icelandic Higher Education, published in 2021 where they advise that a supervisor training programme should be introduced (Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education, 2021). Internationally, such training is seen as essential to ensure the quality of doctoral programmes (Cryer & Mertens, 2003; Guerin et al., 2017; Gunnarsson et al., 2013; McCallin & Nayar, 2012; van Rooij et al., 2019; Wadesango & Machingambi, 2011). At the same time the workload of faculty seems to be interfering with some supervisors’ ability to fulfil their supervisory role. Therefore, the workload needs to be addressed as a quality, equality and mental health issue within the University of Iceland.

We hope that this study serves as a stepping-stone towards the enhanced quality of doctoral studies at the University of Iceland as well as further research on the strengths and weaknesses of these programmes.

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ENDNOTES

- i The Social Science Research Institute of the University of Iceland conducts biennial reports on behalf of the university to analyse the doctoral programmes and the satisfaction of the doctoral candidates. These reports are not published publicly but as members of FEDON the authors were granted access and allowed to cite the statistics.
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- vi This information was gathered with a single-choice question where doctoral candidates could tick one of the five schools or choose not to answer. By mistake there was not an option of “interdisciplinary studies” and thus the doctoral candidates in that programme were not able to tick the appropriate option. We apologise for this mistake.
- vii We have calculated this number by dividing the number of response rate in each school with the reported number of PhD candidates in each school as documented in the University of Iceland's official numbers for October 2020, see: <https://www.hi.is/kynningarefni/nemendur>