

WHY PHD STUDENTS AT A PRIVATE UNIVERSITY THAILAND DELAY COMPLETING THEIR DOCTORAL DISSERTATION OR DROP OUT

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Abstract: *As a faculty member at a private university in Thailand, it is noticeable that the majority of doctoral students substantially delay writing their dissertation or drop out. It is to be emphasized that the program under discussion is a part-time program for students who work full-time with completion of their doctoral program scheduled over 3 to 5 years (i.e. semesters 6 to 10). Discussions with colleagues and friends from other doctoral programs both in Thailand and abroad, reveal that it is common for such programs to have slow or a low completion rate .(Mournier and Tangchuang,2010). A review of the literature confirms that low completion rates (30%) are also common locally and internationally. (Dunn, 2014, Marshall and Green 2007, Phillips and Pugh, 2000, Atkinson and Parry, 1997). The purpose of this study is to identify (through a review of the literature and through anecdotal evidence) the nature of the problem; the impacts on the several parties involved and to propose an educational management solution to the problems of drop-out or delay completion of a PhD.*

Key words: *Completion of PhD dissertations.*

The Scope of the Problem:

Many doctoral programs involve students studying full-time however, such is not the case under discussion here; where students work full-time and study their PhD on a part-time basis.

All doctoral students undertake substantial research over a significant portion of their lives ultimately for the benefit of the country and many to teach Master's students the process of research. (Mournier and Tangchuang, 2010).

When money is invested in doctoral students and the many delay completing or drop-out; there is an additional cost to society i.e. they will likely cease to contribute to research and to teach aspiring Master's level researchers. (Marshall and Green 2007, Phillips and Pugh, 2000, Atkinson and Parry, 1997)

A secondary additional cost, occurs when students either delay completion or drop-out, because the time spent by teachers and supervisors, will also have been wasted and cannot be recovered. (Mournier and Tangchuang, 2010, Thomas and Brubaker,2001)

A study in 2014 conducted by The Council of Graduate Studies in the UK found that of 9,000 PhD students enrolled in PhD programs between 1990 to 2014, 57% took up to 10 years to complete and 30% dropped out within 2 years of commencing. Of those continuing with the program 80% said that financial support was a major contributor; 65% said that mentoring and advising was key, whilst 57% said family support was critical to their continuing with the program. (Allum and Okahana,2014)

It is estimated by this author based on involvement in five yearly intakes with a combined total of 36 students that 70% of the investment is lost i.e.

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Students who have graduated within 5 years = 1 or 3%

Students who have graduated in 6 years i.e. one year beyond the limit = 2 = .6.%

Students who demonstrated activity within the last year 7 students.= 21.%

Students who have likely dropped out 10 = 30% (which is in-line with the UK study cited above).

Students continuing and showing progress 16 = 45%

Let us now consider key factors influencing these outcomes.

To better understand the scope and nature of student's late or non-completion of their doctoral dissertation, this writer firstly explains what evidence indicates to be the underlying difficulties. He then explores the causes and implications and finally suggests educational management approaches for each party i.e. the student, the supervisor, family support, the program management team, in order to minimize, if not mitigate, the problem.

The doctoral dissertation is a combination of people (faculty- both teaching and supervising, student and management staff and family support) and process, both components are either facilitated or constrained by the rewards (money and status).

The Underlying Difficulties:

A Doctoral degree involves study over a substantial period of time in the life of the student and teachers, typically 3 to 10 years. During that period difficulties are likely to arise. The longer the period to complete the degree, the more likely those difficulties may arise, (Dunn, 2014). Some of those difficulties have serious implications for the student, their families and their supervisors in terms of

life- choices, health and financial impacts. (Philips and Pugh, 2000)

Life-choices: may involve decisions to delay starting or enlarging a family or starting a family in spite of engaging in doctoral studies. Delaying acceptance of, or seeking or acceptance of a career promotion, because of involvement in a doctoral program. A decision that after-all, an academic career, is not what the candidate now wants for themselves.

Health issues: Onset of a physical or mental illness or injury, whether personal or within the family, or indeed, the supervisor or their family, may delay or curtail progress with doctoral studies. (Marshall and Green, 2007)

Finance: Access to adequate finance to commence, progress and complete doctoral studies at any stage of the program. (Dunn, 2014). At the outset, finances may have been deemed adequate, but then a change in life-choices such as getting married or divorced or a decision to enlarge the family or to change jobs or careers, may mean that it will likely take longer than planned to complete doctoral studies which may put student and/or finances under pressure. (Allum and Okahana, 2014)

The People:

Students: This local PhD, was the first of its type offered in Thailand. It attracted a combination of academics, qualified at the Master's level, many of whom who were teaching at the bachelor's level and who wanted to progress to teaching at the Master's level and/or progress to researching at the Doctoral level. The Department of Education strongly felt the need to establish local Doctoral programs in Thailand as part of Educational Development in Thailand to provide a pathway for students to gain doctoral

qualifications locally and to stimulate doctoral research and publication within the Kingdom. (Mournier and Tangchuan, 2010)

According to Mournier and Tangchuan, (2010) 85% of students undertaking all doctoral studies in Thailand are government employees. (NSO 2003-2004 as cited by Oudin, 2010, p.177 in Mournier and Tangchuan 2010). Government employees comprise an overall 50% of 36 enrolled students in the HTM PhD program however, their numbers have reduced substantially in percentage and gross terms in recent intakes 5 and 6 due to a reduction in students seeking doctoral studies at the present time.

Four students (11%) entering the program were from families who had businesses in the Hospitality or Tourism areas. Those students already had Master's level qualifications in those fields obtained either locally or overseas however, they wanted to progress to the doctoral level to more deeply understand the theory behind their practice. Several students in this category also expressed an interest in engaging in teaching later in their careers. The availability of this particular PhD program locally, meant that students thought they could study, whilst maintaining involvement with their family's local business interests.

Yet another group of 7 students (20%) students, were young business professionals, employed in hospitality or tourism in the private or public sector, who are progressing their professional careers and believed that having a doctoral degree, would boost their professional standing and their medium to longer-term income. In the academic literature such students are often categorized as suffering from *The Diploma Disease or Credentialism*, (Tangchuan, 2010. pp.217-238, Dore, 1976). These students may have no interest in conducting serious academic

research for the benefit of Thailand (seen as a prerequisite goal by CHE for undertaking doctoral studies. (Tangchuan, 2010).

Faculty: are drawn both from local and overseas universities, to deliver the theory modules and to possibly supervise a small number of students (not more than five at any one time 2-3 students over all intakes is the norm). According to regulations set by The Thai Commission for Higher Education (CHE) faculty supervising doctoral students are required to be both teaching the subject and researching and publishing in that subject, in top-quality, peer-reviewed, academic journals (level1) Thai Citations Index or SCOPUS, in order to best facilitate the students research.

As with students, faculty members are also likely progressing their professional careers, perhaps face family difficulty, face one or more life-choices and face directly or indirectly health issues of a terminal or serious nature. And like students, they too, may take on more than they can handle. One visiting professor has reluctantly decided to withdraw from the program, because of relocation to another university and taken on much greater teaching and supervisory roles at the doctoral level as well as involvement with a professional organization.

Family support: When a PhD student engages with the program, some radical changes are required of the student, in terms of their allocation of time amongst others, i.e. wife/husband/children, parents, friends and work colleagues.

The PhD student may well be single-minded in their purpose however, without sympathetic understanding and support of those other people over a sustained number of years, success is unlikely to follow and collateral damage, perhaps of a serious nature will

likely result. In the case of this author, I had the full support of a loving wife who inspired by my efforts, also engaged in further tertiary studies, so we then supported each other. Others were less fortunate;

Anecdote #1 In one case within the program a very motivated and hard-working student, became very stressed when the spouse became lonely and became involved with another person. That spouse refused to provide child-maintenance support and in so doing added to the students' financial and emotional burden.

Management Team: comprises the Office of Student Admissions, The Office of the University Registrar, Program Co-ordinator, the Program Director, Faculty members and staff of the Office of Graduate Studies (OGS) as periodically seconded; the Executive Dean, and the Dean.

It is a *fact-of-life*, that staff move on, and when they do, if sufficient succession planning has not been made or implemented, difficulties for other staff members, faculty and students may occur. Such has not been the case with the local program.

The Existing PhD Process:

Stage 1: Preselection Interview:

Students seeking entry into the program, must initially lodge copies of their Master's level transcripts, a recent IELTS or TOEFL, TOEIC English proficiency test certificate, and a current resume' with the Students Admission Office, and a letter from their employer or other sponsor testifying to their suitability to engage with a doctoral program.

After checking by the Student Admission staff, suitable applicants are

then scheduled for interview by the Program Director and nominee, who verify the applicant's knowledge, commitment and reasons for seeking entry into the program.

Stage 2 Admission to the Program:

Students passing the admission interview, are advised of their acceptance and must open an account at the bank on campus for the first of two semester fees covering the theory modules.

When payment is received by the Office of the University Registrar, students are issued a student identification number and are then provided with a study schedule and teaching materials for the first module in order to read them prior to attending class.

Stage 3: Engaging with the Seven Taught Modules

Each taught module comprises of eight days consisting of two consecutive weekends each of 12 hour's duration with two week evenings each of three hour's duration comprising a mixture of class and out-of-class activities plus one month to complete the major assignment for that module. Total duration of this stage of seven modules is 42-47 weeks. This schedule seems to be attractive to young working professionals and those with families. (The nature of delivery of the program is highly structured for the student and lecturer).

Stage 4: A Comprehensive Written Qualifying Exam:

Presentation of research topic to a committee; appointment of supervisor/s to each student. Duration of 2-3 months. (The nature of the delivery remains highly structured for both the student and the lecturer).

Stage 5: Working with a supervisor

Comprises Preparation of Dissertation Proposal Chapters 1-3 and Proposal Defense Duration: 1-1 1/2 years suggested.

(Currently delivery and monitoring is loosely structured). The student and supervisor have traditionally worked together on an *ad hoc* basis. Some parties copy the program director on most communications whilst others prefer not to do so. Experience to-date informs us that those who do not tend to make little or no-progress on their dissertation.

Fees there-after, are paid on a semester basis as students' progress their dissertation. If students lapse during this stage, there is currently a small student maintenance fee. Only when student resumes actively progressing their dissertation, will their usual semester fees resume. Again this is a point of change, which ought to be reviewed.

Doctoral programs elsewhere, require semester based fees to be paid whether a student progresses or not. The purpose being, to encourage the student to maintain steady progress in order to reduce time and cost to completion.

Preparations for Dissertation Final Defense Chapters 4,5,6

Duration: 1-1 1/2 years suggested (Currently delivery and monitoring is loosely structured).

Fieldwork; data collection and processing; Writing a final dissertation and presenting it to the defense committee Duration 1-1 1/2 years suggested (currently this stage is structured but not highly so. There is considerable freedom for either the student and the supervisor unless they implement and maintain a structured schedule)

Writing either a peer-reviewed, academic journal article or writing and delivering a paper at an approved international conference. Duration 1/2-1 year is suggested. (Currently delivery is highly structured because the student can see completion within sight and because journal publishers are strict on scheduling delivery of work to meet publication deadlines).

The suggested durations above are for students who work full-time and study part-time concurrently.

In other doctoral programs, students who study full-time and who usually receive close supervision, may complete earlier (say within three years) after completing stage 1 over one year and two years with a supervisor and publishing an academic paper or approved international conference paper. It is stressed again that the current program is a part-time program and that the degree of supervision provided by the supervisor varies markedly across all cohorts.

Reviewing the above, one can see that when working with a supervisor, the process becomes less or at the least, loosely-structured compared with Stage 1. It is this researcher's experience and from the UK Council of Graduate Studies survey of 2014 that many students tend to slow-down or drop-out from this point. This author proposes this to be (amongst other reasons) because students, no-longer undertake a tightly structured schedule and because external pressures, such as financial and those at work, family or wider social pressures, begin to take precedence after having been pushed aside during stage 1.

Recommendations to Improve Student Completion of the Program on Schedule:

1. It is believed by this researcher, that if the research writing and fieldwork

process became structured or highly-structured, much as do full-time programs, rather than remaining as a less-structured delivery (as at present); then students would likely retain their momentum and progress steadily to completion. Thomas and Brubaker, 2001, 2008; Glatthorn and Joyner 2005; Finn, 2005, Marshall and Green 2007)

2. Currently doctoral students (within this particular program) and working in the private sector are progressing their professional careers through one or more career development moves, each step of which, results in higher income and status. Several of the students in the program, are self-funded and see that their strategy of *job-hopping* involving regular and steady increases in their income, where-as; they see little personal cost in delaying completion of their dissertation, as fees are levied largely when progress is demonstrated, (except for small student maintenance component). This student activity may be considered by some as a form of *instant gratification* (Baumeister and Bushman, 2010, p. 49) rather than delayed gratification (Kahneman, 2003), a trait regarded as common in successful PhD students.
- 2 Currently, several doctoral students within the program, (working in the public sector), are most often engaged in teaching at the undergraduate level in state run universities. Most of these students have accepted full or partial scholarships from their university, to cover or partially cover the cost of their doctoral studies. Some of these students were encouraged by their universities to engage with the PhD program, in order to comply with OHEC and ONESQA increased quality requirements for their institutions, perhaps rather than because

of the student's own ambition to have a PhD.

- 3 In point-of-fact, those teachers with or without scholarship support, must teach many sections per week (often with large student numbers per class) in order to reach a livable wage. If that is not permitted, or if they succumb to *instant gratification* they may surreptitiously *moon-light* elsewhere, either in a teaching or coaching capacity. Doctoral students who succumb to this temptation, find that although they currently make a livable income; however, the longer-term burden of the scholarship magnifies i.e. repayment of the scholarship is a multiple (often 4:1) of the actual scholarship amount. The duration on their scholarships steadily increases, often to the point where the student scholarship holder gives up.
- 4 Doctoral supervisor incentives also come in two forms i.e. a supervising fee when the student completes and secondly the ability of the supervisor, to then take on another doctoral supervisee (in order to remain with the limit of five supervisees) as set by CHE. The schedule of supervisor remuneration is set by the university.

Both of these components for supervisors are thus currently long-term in nature (i.e. delayed gratification). This researcher proposes to convert the supervisor fee from a single, long-term payment to two or more short-term components by paying the supervision fee on a pro-rata basis, either in two payments one on completion of the proposal and the second on completion of the final defense with corrections completed. Alternatively, the supervisor could be paid on a chapter-by-chapter basis, within the dissertation with the final payment made after completion of corrections by the student.

Either of these payment scheduling methods shortens the

period between activity and reward. Continuous reinforcement is a proven motivator in the wider workplace. (Flora, 2004) and like students, delayed versus instantaneous reward is likely an influential factor in performance.

Having identified the difficulties, the people and the process, it is now incumbent for this researcher to identify for the reader, the likely causes for students either completing slowly or dropping out.

Specific Identified Causes of Students Delay in completing their PhD Program:

The specific causes of students delay in students completing their PhD dissertation are as follows:

1. Undertaking the PhD at the behest of others e.g. parents or employers (there is little or no self-motivation here) rather than through personal initiative. Estimated at 4 students or 20% of entrants of whom 20% actually complete; (Phillips and Pugh, 2000, Rugg and Petre, 2008).
Anecdote #2 Three students reported this to me.
2. Reliance on scholarships or partial scholarships sometimes with onerous payback conditions i.e. 4:1 payback (students will likely brood on this and become discouraged when they see their peers who are not engaged in doctoral studies, being promoted and receiving increasing salaries in the process); around 18 students or 50% of whom 25% will complete.
Anecdote #3 Six students reported this to me.
3. Distractions from research, as a result of demands on time due to employment, long working hours; interruptions outside of working hours; career moves and promotions; demands by the family; an addiction to social media; the latter estimated at 4 students or 20% of whom 10% will likely complete.
Anecdote #4 Supervisors observation of their student's social media activity.
4. Procrastination in commencing reading, writing or commencing fieldwork estimated at 4 students or 10% of whom 50% will likely complete; (Phillips and Pugh 2000; Sternberg, 1981; Swales and Feak, 2004).
Anecdote #5 personal observation of students over the past 6 years.
5. Inability or difficulty in obtaining access to respondents for collecting fieldwork data (often indicated by the committee during initial interview); estimated at 4 students or 10% of whom 50% will likely complete.
Anecdote #6 from personal discussions with students.
6. Unfamiliar data analysis related processes and fear of learning those processes; 20% of which 50% will likely complete.
Anecdote #7 from personal discussions with students.
7. Lack of confidence and sufficient practice of the dissertation Academic English writing process; (Swales and Feak, 2004). 100% of which 70% will likely complete.
Anecdote #8 from personal discussions with students
8. Personal relationship qualities of students and supervisors' personal i.e. "body or personality chemistry." (Ho, Wong and Wong, 2010; Phillips and Pugh 2000, Bolker, 1998).

2 students or 6% of which 50% will likely complete.
Anecdote #9 from personal discussions with students.

9. Changing the direction of research focus; 8 students or 20% of which 30% will likely complete.

Anecdote #10
from personal discussions with students

10. Financial difficulties; 12 or 30% of which 20% will likely complete. (Anon, 2013). Anecdote #11 from personal discussions with students

11. Changing employment or location by student or spouse, necessitating transfer to another doctoral program (I student working for a global organization was asked to change country of employment 14% five others 70% have changed employment 1-3 times during the course of their study), moderate chance will complete.
Anecdote #11 from personal discussions with students

Additionally, this writer's experience with PhD students at this particular private university, (Anecdotes 12 to 17 as follows) indicates some additional factors which may cause delay or cessation of completing the program; such as:

12. Death of a close family relative; (1 student) likely to complete.
13. Birth of a child to the student or their spouse; (2 students) very likely to complete.
14. Marital stress/divorce; (1 student) 3% very likely to complete
15. Serious mental or physical illness requiring prolonged hospital admission; (1 student) 3% unsure depends on recovery.

16. Unwillingness to curtail or reduce social life in order to gain required study time. (estimated at six students, based on observed behavior on social media by supervisors). 6 students or 17% of whom 50% are unlikely to complete.

17. Seeking or being offered, seemingly lucrative career promotions or career changes during the course of study (4 students) 11%.

A Suggested Managerial Seven Point Solution to Student Late Completion

1. Add rigor and detail to the dissertation process by enhancing the current loose schedule of completing the dissertation Proposal and defending the dissertation within semester four and the complete defense of the dissertation Proposal within semester six.
2. Regulate the required delivery of dissertation on a chapter by chapter basis i.e. a colleague from another state university, recently suggested that each chapter in the dissertation be scheduled and examined by the committee separately; rather than being examined only at the Proposal and Final stages. Such a structure would certainly add considerable emphasis to both student and supervisor to complete each chapter of the PhD dissertation to a mutually agreed schedule, by providing more regular feedback, thus minimizing their course duration costs and reducing the time to receive monetary and status rewards by both student and supervisor. One colleague has informed me that in their doctoral program faculty meet students weekly to ensure that progress is being steadily made and to answer students queries in a timely manner.
3. Follow a similar, mutually agreed schedule to conduct fieldwork, process data, write up results and defend the final dissertation within semester eight.

4. Immediately after defending the final dissertation and making any required changes the student writes and has published, an approved academic journal paper or an approved international conference paper by the end of semester nine.

The supervisor and supervisee seek and decide on a suitable and approved peer-reviewed, academic-journal or approved international conference (recognized by Thai Citations Index (TCI) in which to publish. A quality journal or conference paper is completed by the student supervisee under the guidance of their supervisor.

The approved journal or conference paper must be published before the student can apply to graduate. Letters of Acceptance by journals or conference organizers of student papers is no longer sufficient evidence for graduation to be approved by OHEC and ONESQA. (Rugg and Petre, 2008, Phillips and Pugh, 2000, Bolker, 1998).

5. Cement the Dissertation schedule with a Written Agreement between supervisor and supervisee. Anecdote 18 emanated from discussion with a senior colleague involved with a similar doctoral program who said that:
such an agreement be made on the basis that each student will have unique circumstances and constraints, which will encourage or inhibit their progress from time to time. As full time working and part-time students work and career will often take precedence over study and that the agreement must be designed on that basis.

Experience to-date, shows that a gentleman's (verbal) agreement or handshake, does not work between a supervisor and a supervisee. (Rugg and

Petre, 2008, Delamont, Atkinson and Parry, 2008).

Surveying the internet, one can find that many universities in U.S.A, UK and Australia have a protocol or Supervisor/supervisee Written Agreement for Doctoral level students undertaking a dissertation at their universities, because verbal agreements have been found not to work.

It is suggested that an agreement be drafted and signed by both the supervisor and supervisee, when entering into their respective inter-dependent dissertation roles in order to set the necessary tone and commitment by both parties. A copy to be kept by the Program Co-ordinator.

The Supervisor/Supervisee Dissertation Agreement should become the frontispiece of the Supervisors and Supervisee's Dissertation file for that student and be examined each time that they meet, to remind and ensure that they are both honoring their agreement.

6. Modify the fee structure in the Dissertation writing and supervision stage to apply the semester fee to be payable each semester whether the student progresses or not in order to encourage study progress by both the student and the supervisor who will be paid when each chapter is completed to the satisfaction of the committee.
7. Establish an English Language Academic Writing Centre to support both doctoral students, faculty and supervisors in order to assist students not to procrastinate about reading and then not writing. The Writing Centre should be a profit-centre within the graduate School of Business; seeking initially, to break-even and perhaps later make a profit from proof-reading and editing for students seeking publication in academic journals or

accredited national or international conferences at the Doctoral level or perhaps also at the Master's level. The details of such writing centres are admirably detailed in *Working with Student Writers: Essays on Tutoring and Teaching*, (Podis, L and Podis, J, eds., 2010, and by Swales and Feak, 2004).

We Are Not Alone - What Other Universities Are Doing to Manage These Problems:

A review of the Web (elicits the following useful information: Penn State University Graduate Student Policy at <http://www.gradschool.psu.edu/current-students/student/> accessed 25 July 2016 Yale University available at <http://www.yale.edu/printer/bulletin/htmlfiles/grad/policies-and-regulations.html> accessed 25 July 2016. Similar sites can found at major universities in Europe. UK, Australia and New Zealand

1.Many universities provide Academic Writing Centres for dissertation students, where they receive additional counseling and tutoring in the Academic English writing process, which is foreign to most non-native English-speaking students. (Podis. L., and Podis, J.(eds.), 2010, Swales and Feak, 2004)

2. Some universities provide optional dissertation process workshops (at additional cost) where students are counseled in the process of managing their reading, writing, research time; family, social and work-time. (Phillips and Pugh, 2000, Delamont, Atkinson and Parry, 1997)

3. Many universities have an established formal written agreement between dissertation supervisors and supervisees to add a measure of gravity and structure to the supervisor and supervisee's professional relationship, in which the expectations, responsibilities and

scheduling of both parties are clearly defined, monitored and where required action is taken. (Berkeley University of California, 2016, Penn State University, 2016, Yale, University, 2016).

The Decision is Ours's to Make:

The Message is clear - if we do not change and manage the process in order to achieve a timelier outcome, then we will have to manage the consequences and problems of low completion or high drop-out rates if changes are not made.

We have to decide whether to be open and responsive to pressures on doctoral students and to take a more structured approach, particularly in the dissertation supervision process, where rewards should be tied more regularly to student progress and that progress to be more structured, than is currently the case.

A closing remark here, is that the comments and suggestions made are those of the author and in no way is meant as a criticism of others. I seek to learn from my experiences and those of others in order to bring about more timely completion of PhD dissertations by a greater number of students.

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