

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Should I Stay or Should I Go? – A further exploration of Swedish Doctoral Researchers’ “Heavenly Hell”

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**Research Domain:** Postgraduate Scholarship and Practice (PGSP)

**Abstract:** Swedish doctoral researchers are predominantly employed at their university, and their work is regulated under the Work Environment Act. Their situation has been described as “heavenly hell” (Ilar, 2017). On the one hand they feel privileged, performing creative work vital to the development of students and modern societies (Källhammer, 2008). On the other their working conditions are often characterised by: high or very high stress levels and demands; unpredictable goals; unclear or tacit expectations; and lack of recognition and support (Källhammer, 2008; Swedish Higher Education Authority, 2016). Conditions which can lead to depression and fatigue syndrome, especially if they are individualised and normalized (Holmström, 2018). 31% have not completed their doctorate 8 years after being registered to a 4-5-year doctoral programme (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, 2014).

This paper explores how Swedish universities can improve their doctoral researchers’ working conditions in order to not only minimize work-related illness and drop-out, but also to stimulate creativity and passion as well as flexibility to cope with the rigours inherent in research (Denicolo, 2018).

**Paper:** The Swedish universities educate future researchers and teachers, as well as leaders for companies and public sector organisations. The quality of the doctoral programs and the doctoral researchers prevailing working conditions are therefore crucial not only for the individual researcher

but also for the society.

Swedish research education is free of charge and the doctoral researchers must primarily be *employed* as doctoral candidates - or be awarded study grants which are later converted to doctoral candidate positions (The Swedish Higher Education Ordinance, SFS 1993:100). Their working conditions are regulated under the Work Environment Act (SFS 1977:1160) with the purpose to prevent occupational illness and accidents, and to otherwise ensure a good work environment.

The majority of the Swedish doctoral researchers are satisfied with their education. They often feel privileged and associate their work with freedom, autonomy, creativity, inspiration, good career possibilities and the development of modern societies (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, 2008; Higher Education Authority, 2016; Källhammer, 2008). This “heavenly” dimension of the doctoral experience is illustrated by the two quotes below (Österlind & Denicolo, 2018):

*“Those were the best days of my life! I spent all my time doing research on what interested me most!”*  
(professor, male 50)

*“I had a very good time. Everything was fine.”* (PhD, female 30)

However, there is also a darker dimension which can, if uncontrolled, can lead to “hell”. The doctoral researchers often experience poor working conditions: high or very high stress levels and demands; unclear or contradictive goals and expectations; and lack of recognition and support from supervisors and others (Källhammer, 2008; Swedish Higher Education Authority, 2016); high work load; fragmented work tasks and time shortage (Holmström, 2018). Working under such conditions can lead to negative consequences and illness such as depression and fatigue syndrome, especially if they are individualised and normalized (ibid; *Swedish Agency For Health Technology Assessment And Assessment Of Social Services*, 2014).

Female doctoral researchers often experience a particularly difficult situation reporting: poorer working conditions; higher stress levels; lower degree of wellbeing; higher degree of discrimination (Swedish Higher Education Authority, 2016). They are also overrepresented in long-term sick leave (Källhammer, 2008). Those who work alone, and does not belong to a research group or team, are less satisfied than those who do. Female doctorate students more than male (Holmström, 2018). The legislated right to parental leave of absence to care for children (18 months) is not always appreciated by supervisors, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy and poor work-life-balance as shown in the two quotes below (Österlind & Denicolo, 2018).

*“Every day has 24 hours!”* (Male professor to female doctoral researcher back from parental leave)

*“I’m highly stressed! One of my supervisors is very dissatisfied with my progress. He doesn’t take into account that I have been on parental leave.”* (Female doctoral researcher, mother of twins)

The supervisor is the single most important person during the doctoral program, and the core of the doctoral education programs. The supervisor(s) support should help the doctoral researcher to develop into an independent researcher. According to the Swedish Higher Education Authority (2016) this is not always the case. 20% of the doctoral researchers state that their supervisor has taken little

interest in their studies. While 27% claim that the supervision was so insufficient that it was hindering for the progress of their research. Almost 20% claim that they have been in a bothersome dependence situation. And more than 25% state that their results have been used by someone else without reference or credit (Ibid.)

According to the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education 31% of the Swedish doctoral researchers had not completed their doctorate eight years after being registered to their doctoral program. (These programs run for four to five years depending on if the doctoral researcher is teaching undergraduate students or not during the period.) Some of them will complete their doctorate eventually, but the overall attrition rate is estimated to over 25% (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, 2014). Unsatisfying as this may be for society, university, supervisor and doctoral researcher, in some cases this might be the best (or only) way to avoid (or cure) work related illness such as depression and fatigue syndrome.

This paper discusses the complexity experienced and handled by Swedish doctoral researchers from a workplace perspective. We deliberate over how the situation, described as “Heavenly Hell” by the chair of the Association of Doctoral Candidates (Ilar, 2017) can be improved in order to stimulate creativity and passion as well as flexibility to cope with the rigours inherent in research (Denicolo, 2018). And further more how the doctoral researchers’ working conditions can be improved in order to minimize work-related illness and attrition allowing for the doctoral researcher to stay, rather than go.

In this project we draw on Kompf & Brown’s (2005) theories of teachers’ personal and professional ideas about practice as superordinate constructs. We explore the core identity (Denicolo, Long and Bradley-Cole 2016) of academic researcher-staff and doctoral researchers as it relates to the experience of being a good researcher in the current politico-economic context of higher education. A context in which both supervisors and doctoral researchers find themselves in tension between reforms based on managerial logic from the business world and professional academic logic (Pettersen, 2015). Where management-by-results is in conflict with the academic staff members’ intrinsic motivation and the essence of the expert work performed (Kallio & Kallio, 2014). The spread of performance management being a catalyst for changes in the very ethos of being an academic, performing academic work (Kallio et al, 2016).

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